

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

STATE

MARCH 2009

Office of the
Geographer is

On The Map



Office of the Month

Map Quest

OFFICE OF THE GEOGRAPHER
MAKES INFORMATION VISUAL

BY DR. LOWRY TAYLOR

G

eography has come a long way from memorizing locations and place names. That's also true for the Office of the Geographer and Global Issues in the Bureau of Intelligence and

Research. The geographer of today is a mix of social scientist, field worker, graphic artist and technology wizard, and is at ease in the office environment and remote corners of the world. Add diplomat to the mix and you have today's geographers at the State Department.

The office has undergone numerous transformations since its origins in the aftermath of World War I, when the Department's earliest geographers grappled with a growing map collection, rapidly changing international boundaries, immigration quotas and the standardization of foreign geographic names. The office's analysts now provide intelligence support to a wide range of functional policy bureaus and write assessments focused on transnational themes.

Its Geographic Information Unit employs cartographers, boundary specialists and imagery analysts who use cutting-edge software and technology to fulfill the office's statutory authority to ensure that the boundaries on all U.S. government maps reflect foreign policy standards and are accurate. They also use computerized Geographic Information Systems to do digital mapping analysis that shows spatial trends that give depth to intelligence analysis.

At the negotiation table, the office's staff work with their counterparts in other agencies to provide real-time, portable visualization tools that can help resolve territorial conflicts. These tools include satellite

imagery from classified sources—and Google Earth.

The office's maps and comprehensive boundary files, now nearly all digitized, are on the Diplomaps site on the classified network and in the Boundaries and Sovereignty Encyclopedia on the OpenNet at <http://base.us-state.osis.gov/>.

Importance Grows

Though the Office of the Geographer was created in 1921, its size and importance

increased dramatically in the run-up to World War II as the Department recognized its relevance to the war effort. At the time, its staff members churned out maps and geographical analyses for the government's top policymakers.

Today, the office continues that tradition, but long gone are the days of pen and ink. Now, the cartographic process is fully computerized, and maps are disseminated electronically, sometimes even directly to the mass media. The office's analysts are increasingly being called upon by the Department's press spokesperson to provide the context and design for a map or an image, such as that of declassified troop movements, illegal logging or mass graves. When NBC's Ann Curry in 2007 interviewed Sudan's president, she confronted him with a map produced by the office's Humanitarian Information Unit and posted on the Department's Web site only the day before. The map, based on high-resolution satellite images, documented more than 1,600 burned and damaged villages as evidence of the genocide in Darfur.

The bureau's offices are organized in a way that supports the Department's policymaking bureaus, but in the mid-1980s, the Office of the Geographer expanded to address problems that did not neatly fit the diplomatic needs of the Department's regional bureaus—matters such as refugees, human rights, democratization and international environmental concerns. The office also deals with such global issues as peacekeeping, transnational and sub-national ethnic conflicts, war crimes, natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies.

Climate Change Analyst Roy Whitehurst, left, and Energy and Environment Analyst Ray Lester assess an image.





Gathered at the Humanitarian Information Unit's office are, from left, the author, Dr. Lowry Taylor; Department of Defense Civil Affairs Military Liaison Lieutenant Colonel Lynda M. Granfield; Unit Chief Jeffrey N. Bakken; and Humanitarian Affairs Analyst Dennis King.

Mapping It Out

Divisions of the Geographers Office cover how geographic information is used to address issues—such as food, peacekeeping, refugees and war crimes—that are often transnational and also to reflect the Office's role as a source for maps, imagery-based products and geographic analysis.

Multinational and Transnational Issues Division

- Provides intelligence support to the Office of the Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs and the bureaus of Population, Refugees and Migration; Oceans, Environment and Science; International Organization Affairs; and the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization.
- Produces intelligence analysis on peacekeeping, refugees, food security and other issues.
- Conducts field work internationally during complex emergencies and is sometimes co-deployed with the U.N.

War Crimes, Atrocities and Democracy Analysis Division

- Provides intelligence support and analysis to the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and the Office of the Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues.
- Serves as executive agent for U.S. information sharing with international war crimes tribunals.
- Plays a leading role in the Department's interagency efforts on early warnings of atrocities and their prevention, and co-sponsors an annual Genocide Prevention Forum.

Geographic Information Unit

- U.S. government's authority on international boundaries and territorial sovereignty.
- Department's principal producer of geospatial products, such as maps, imagery-based products and geographic information systems analysis.
- Department representative to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names.

Humanitarian Information Unit

- Identifies, collects, analyzes and disseminates unclassified information critical to U.S. decisionmakers and partners regarding humanitarian emergencies.
- Promotes best practices for humanitarian information use in crisis-response management.
- Provides primarily unclassified graphic analysis on breaking humanitarian emergencies to the U.S. Agency for International Development and units of the Department.

Therefore, its workforce must have skills in spatial and political analysis, and be able to collaborate across agencies and with remote regions of the world.

War Crimes

The office's War Crimes Unit is the U.S. government's executive agent for information sharing with international criminal tribunals, such as those set up for the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. In this role, it provides documents, imagery and witnesses to the prosecution and defense to support the effort to bring indicted war criminals to justice. For example, in the recent conviction of Bosnian Serb General Radislav Krstić, declassified satellite imagery helped tie the general to the 1995 Srebrenica massacre. The images made it possible to identify the number of original mass grave sites and the secondary sites used by Bosnian Serb authorities to hide evidence of the killings.

The office is now at its largest size since just after World War II, with around 35 full-time staff, including a number of contractors and detailees from such agencies as the Department of Defense, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Department's Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator. The office also regularly relies on visiting science and technology fellows to add breadth to its support for science-policy priority issues.

The Humanitarian Information Unit, which focuses on complex emergency response and interagency coordination, has since its inception in 2002 relied heavily on detailees from other agencies. Unit analysts' foremost task is to aid

The plethora of new technologies, such as cell phones with GPS and the availability of services like Google Earth, bring geography closer to young people, who are exposed to these devices every day.



One staffer recently was in the Democratic Republic of the Congo looking into conflict-resolution options. Another was in North Korea on a mission regarding the United Nation’s World Food Programme monitoring.

in the construction and use of geographic information systems and information management applications for mapping emergencies, but they have also provided technical expertise on survey methodologies, assessment and evaluation tools and database design and management.

The office’s chief interagency relationship, however, is with the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, whose Support Team, detailed to the Department, primarily resides in the Geographer’s Office to provide geographic intelligence analysts and tools. This helps the Department leverage the agency’s enormous amounts of geospatial data and analysis, and aids in acquiring and interpreting imagery gained over crisis areas.

On Assignment

Office staff members are often deployed on temporary assignments overseas, usually in crisis-stricken regions plagued by conflict or chronic emergencies. One staffer recently was in the Democratic Republic of the Congo looking into conflict-resolution options. Another was in North Korea on a mission regarding the United Nation’s World Food Programme monitoring. A third was detailed to the U.S. Embassy in

Beijing, investigating environmental issues. Another was in Norfolk, Va., discussing strategic planning and information coordination for emergency response with Defense representatives.

The office’s analysts are often even embedded with the U.N. or nongovernmental organizations. Examples of such deployments include a joint U.N.-Centers for Disease Control and Prevention country-wide mortality survey in Afghanistan and the first Darfur-wide nutrition and mortality survey, which was being conducted in Sudan with the World Food Program. Analysts have also participated in a U.N. interagency assessment of the food crisis in Niger and a World Health Organization assessment of emergency programs in the northern Caucasus.

Map-Focused

Office director and State Department Geographer Lee Schwartz—the official geographer of the United States—said that “at the end of the day, we really are, in large part, still about making maps.” Behind every effective map, he said, is a creative and hardworking team of analysts skilled in their fields of expertise.

Left: Gathered at the Geographer’s Office are, from left, Karen Milliken, Jean Dorsey and State Department Geographer Lee Schwartz. **Right:** At the War Crimes Unit are, from left, Michael D. Morin, Kelly L. Razzouk and Division Chief Alexander Margulies.

The Department, he said, remains memo-focused, but, “I hope to help change that and move toward interactive, visual and creative use of maps to impart information and knowledge to better inform decisionmaking.”

Schwartz is also working with universities and other agencies and organizations to promote the global development of what he calls “participatory mapping,” which will provide simple tools for local peoples to map themselves, rather than being mapped by others.

Speaking more generally, he said such jargon as “common operating picture” and “situational awareness” are just other words for maps that display information over time and space.

“It’s just that the tools and means we have to make these maps are now more sophisticated, accurate, immediate, transportable and interactive,” he said. He also said he feels the plethora of new technologies—such as cell phones that use Global Positioning System satellites and the availability of services like Google Earth—bring geography closer to young people, who are exposed to these devices every day. Thus, he hopes those who are growing up without being taught geography will nevertheless be able to find their way. ■

The author is deputy chief of the Humanitarian Information Unit.