**County Names Database review instructions**

What is the Country Names Database?

Our website has a tremendous amount of information on countries around the world. However, it can be difficult to find information on countries which have changed their name over time. For example, Upper Volta changed its name to Burkina Faso in 1984. To find all the information about this country on our website, a user would have to search under both names. To improve our website’s search functionality, we need to be able to link these names together, so that a search for “Burkina Faso” will also yield the “Upper Volta” results, since there is a very good chance that the average user will be interested in both.

In order to solve this problem, we employed Virtual Student Foreign Service interns from 2012 to 2015 to create a “country names database,” tracing the history of country names worldwide from 1776 to the present. (Prior to starting, we consulted with the Office of the Geographer and also searched for a similar single dataset which would solve this need; since we were unable to find one we decided to create it ourselves.) We took as our starting point INR’s list of “Independent States in the World” ([state.gov/s/inr/rls/4250.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/4250.htm)) and “Dependencies and Areas of Special Sovereignty” ([state.gov/s/inr/rls/10543.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/10543.htm)). For the historical dimension, we modeled our efforts on those of the U.N.’s “Geopolitical Ontology” project ([fao.org/countryprofiles/geoinfo/en/](http://www.fao.org/countryprofiles/geoinfo/en/)). This project accounted for the changes on the map since 1985 by introducing the notion of “predecessor” and “successor” countries, with each country having “years of validity”. (In the above example, independent Burkina Faso (1960–present) is the “successor” to the self-governing French Union colony, Republic of Upper Volta (1958–1960), which itself was the “successor” to the former French colony of Upper Volta (1947–1958). Likewise, both these incarnations of Upper Volta are “predecessors” of Burkina Faso.) Our idea was to apply this approach to countries throughout the span of U.S. diplomatic history, and to use this database to knit together the disparately named resources for each country in the online editions of our publications and datasets on history.state.gov.

With the interns’ help, we now have a comprehensive database of country names for this period, which we hope will let us not only improve the search capabilities of our website, but also serve as an analytical tool for researchers. The dataset will be posted on our website for public use once the project is complete.

Why do we need your help?

Our interns have built the dataset, but we do not want to deploy it on the website (or release it to the public) without some rigorous checking first. We are asking that each of you, based on your area-specific and general historical expertise, review no more than 15 individual countries on today’s map and their lineage of predecessor countries (see the attached list of assignments). Your evaluation of the interns’ work will be the last stage in checking this material prior to our deploying it on the website. Therefore, we would be grateful if you could carefully examine the interns’ work, and supply any corrections as necessary.

What should you be looking for?

In this review, you will principally be doing two things. First, you will be checking the information provided by the interns to make sure it is accurate. The interns provided links to their sources on each country, which will allow you to retrace their steps. Second, you will be characterizing the reason for each significant change in the history of a country. Our interns limited their characterization to the most general, chronologically-oriented terms: “predecessor” and “successor.” But we have realized that this is too general, name changes can happen for a variety of reasons. Therefore, for each name change, we would like you to add a piece of information that is not there now: a “relationship” descriptor for the reason for the change. We have started out with the following predefined descriptors:

1. Split: A territory splits into two or more territories (e.g., Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic in 1993)
2. Merger: Two or more territories merge to form one territory (e.g., Egypt and Syria joined to become the United Arab Republic in 1958)
3. Incorporation: A territory is incorporated into an independent state (e.g., the U.S. territory of Hawai’i entered as the 50th state)
4. Independence: A dependency or a region within a larger territory declares or achieves independence (i.e., the U.S. colony of the Philippines became independent in 1946, South Sudan seceded and gained independence from Sudan in 2011)

There can be a fine historiographical and political line between independence and secession, and between dependence and merger. In the case of a dispute, we err on the side of the contemporary or later diplomatic recognition of an event by the U.S. Luckily, we have a notes field for capturing the finer points of these otherwise blunt characterizations.

There may be additional reasons for changes than these six; if you find one that does not fit, please describe it as best you can in your notes, and we will consider making it an official category.

Please note that a simple change of a country’s name without an accompanying change of political status (i.e., any of those actions listed above) is captured as a “name variant” on the existing country record. For example, in 1984, the government of Upper Volta (independent since 1960) announced that it would henceforth be known as Burkina Faso. To account for this change in our database, we would change the name of the country’s main entry from “Upper Volta” to “Burkina Faso,” and we would move the old name into a “name variant” field, relevant for the years 1960–1984.

What are the steps in the review?

1. Go to the project homepage at <https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.history.state.gov/temp/review/index.html>, click on Assignments, and find your name.
2. Click on each of your assigned countries and print them out (a downloadable PDF is available for each). You may find it useful to consult the web page, since it lets you follow links to sources. Please complete your assessments on the printout. If you propose additions to Notes or Sources for any entries, please type these in an email or Word document and submit this as a supplement to the printed worksheets.
3. Using the checkboxes on these printouts to record your assessments, review the information provided about the country and its ancestors—the country’s “lineage.”
4. Consider these questions as you complete your assessment:
   1. Are all the ancestors listed in the lineage summary correct? Should any other ancestors be added to or removed from the lineage? (The lineage summary contains two columns: the country’s current list of ancestors, and a list of other countries that list any of the ancestors as their own predecessor or successor. Confirm whether any of these should be “promoted” to ancestor of the country. If any should be promoted, please print their records out too and submit this with your work.)
   2. Check the full records of the country and its ancestors in the lineage. Are the names, dates, and successor and predecessor relationships in the lineage correct? Are there any significant events in the country’s history that are not captured?
   3. For each ancestor in the lineage, assign a “relationship” descriptor based on the list above to characterize what happened to the country.
5. Give your completed assessments to Joe, Aaron, or Amanda. Once your changes are entered, we will regenerate the report and provide it to you to look over to make sure you like the final form.

When is this due?

We would be grateful if you could complete your assignment by Friday, February 17.

Thank you!

We respect that you are busy with your other assignments and so we are grateful to you for taking the time to help move this long-standing project over the finish line. The database will improve all portions of the website and will be a useful tool, we hope, for scholars worldwide.

If you have additional questions, please speak to Aaron, Joe, or Amanda.

Addendum: Editorial introduction

*To help you and in preparation for a public release of this database, we have included the draft introduction to the resource. It includes the principles of inclusion and editorial practices.*

This database aims to capture major changes in the names and statuses of countries during the span existence of the United States, that is, the period 1776–present. The purpose is to enable the automated reference and lookup of countries past and present using historically accurate, temporally specific names. This database allows users to associate countries on today’s map with earlier incarnations (e.g., Vietnam and Indochina) and track changes in names and status, among other kinds of changes.  
  
Even though we call this the “historical country names database,” the project actually uses a somewhat broader term than “country” to refer to the basic unit: “territories.” This concept encompasses independent states, dependencies, and areas of special sovereignty. We borrow these distinctions from the Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), which publishes tables of “Independent States in the World” and “Dependencies and Areas of Special Sovereignty.” (See these respective lists at <http://www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/4250.htm> and <http://www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/10543.htm>.)   
  
This database tracks INR’s current lists, which capture today’s map, and introduces a historical component, inspired by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Office’s “Geopolitical Ontology.” (See [www.fao.org/countryprofiles/geoinfo/en/](http://www.fao.org/countryprofiles/geoinfo/en/).) Specifically, we track when each territory began and its immediate “predecessor,” or previous incarnation. For each predecessor, we track its dates of validity, and its own immediate predecessors and successors. Thus, for each “territory” in this database, we track the following items:  
  
1. **Name:** We borrow INR’s distinction between a territory’s “short-form name” and “long-form name.” For example, in the case of Afghanistan, “Afghanistan” is the short-form name, and “Islamic Republic of Afghanistan” is the long-form name. For today’s map, we follow INR’s lists. Not all territories have long-form names different from the short-form name (e.g., Canada), which we indicate by supplying “-” for the long-form name. A simple name change (without any accompanying change of political status, as listed in “predecessors and successors” below, is tracked in the existing entry as a “name variant with dates of relevance.” For example, when the Czech Republic officially declared Czechia to be its short-form name in 2016, we revised the short-form name for the existing entry to be Czechia, entering “Czech Republic” in as a variant short-form name for the period 1993–2016. We also show a “display name,” a shorthand for referring to the country that takes the form, [short-form name] + [years of validity in parentheses]; e.g., “Czechia (1993–present)”.  
  
2. **Type of territory:** As noted above, we borrow INR’s distinction between “independent states” and “dependencies and areas of special sovereignty.” (In contrast, the U.N. distinguishes between “self-governing,” “non-self-governing,” “disputed,” and “other.”) In INR’s list of independent states, it says, “In this listing, the term ‘independent state’ refers to a people politically organized into a sovereign state with a definite territory recognized as independent by the US.” Implicitly, all other areas in the world therefore belong in the category “dependencies or areas of special sovereignty.” While we are guided by INR’s definition for the today’s map, we may not always have information on U.S. recognition for all areas of the world during the periods we examine, so for earlier periods, we do not emphasize the condition of U.S. recognition to assess independence. Thus, our broader criteria for “independent state,” based on the Westphalian model of state formation, include an independent, sovereign government and a stable territory, well-defined borders, and population. In contrast, a “dependency” is a colony or territorial possession of an independent states, and an “area of special sovereignty” is an area whose sovereignty is disputed, indeterminate, or where the U.S. does not recognize claims. (In fact, today’s disputes are summarized in the footnotes of INR’s lists, and we should capture this information in the Notes field of each dependency.) Whereas INR tracks the state possessing sovereignty over a dependency, we have opted not to systematically track this; instead, if we know information about sovereignty, we can use the Notes field to indicate this. When a territory’s type changes, we create a new entry to reflect the change. For example, we have four records for Korea in the period 1910–50. In the first record, Korea is a dependency (of the Japanese Empire) from 1910–45; in the second record, Korea is an area of special sovereignty (administered by a U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission) from 1945–48; and lastly, starting in 1948, Korea splits into two independent states, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South.  
  
3. **Years of validity:** The year that a territory, as named and typed above, starts and ends. If we know more precisely when a transition occurred (i.e., the month, or month and day), use the Notes field to indicate this. In cases where we are unable to determine a precise year for a country’s start or end year, we can use the “±” (‘plus or minus’ sign) to indicate the level of precision. For example, if a country’s start year can only be described as “1750–1800”, we would say “1775 ± 25 years.”  
  
4. **Predecessors and successors:** The terms “predecessor and successor” are used in a general, judgement-free sense. They indicate simply that some significant political event happened, such as a change of “type,” as described in the discussion of these items above. To supplement this general information, we characterize each historical change regarding a territory using the following typology:

1. Split: A territory splits into two or more territories (e.g., Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic in 1993)
2. Merger: Two or more territories merge to form one territory (e.g., Egypt and Syria joined to become the United Arab Republic in 1958)
3. Incorporation: A territory is incorporated into an independent state (e.g., the U.S. territory of Hawai’i entered as the 50th state)
4. Independence: A dependency or a region within a larger territory declares or achieves independence (i.e., the U.S. colony of the Philippines became independent in 1946, South Sudan seceded and gained independence from Sudan in 2011)

There can be a fine historiographical and political line between some of these categories. In the case of a dispute, we err on the side of the contemporary or later diplomatic recognition of an event by the U.S. (see “Point of view” below). We use the notes field to capture the finer points of these otherwise blunt characterizations.

Principles of Inclusion

In deciding which territories to include in the database, we used the following principles, in order of most to least important:

* (Must include) All territories on INR’s list today; we also follow it for changes in today’s map.
* (Must include) All territories where U.S. has had diplomatic posts. (It will undergird the Consular Cards project and the in-progress redesign of the Chiefs of Mission database.)
* (Must include) All countries with which the U.S. had diplomatic relations. (It will undergird the Recognitions and Relations project.)
* (Must include) All territories covered in FRUS, the Travels of the President and Secretary, and Visits of Foreign Leaders and Heads of State. (It will undergird the taxonomy used to tag FRUS volumes, and eventually, compilations and documents; and it will undergird the reorganization of Travels & Visits.)
* (Should include) All other territories on the map during the period 1776–present, regardless of U.S. diplomatic relations. For countries already on the map entering this period, we try but may not always be able to supply a start date.

Point of view

Most information here is non-controversial and reflects scholarly consensus on major changes in the map. But no dataset covering political change over the course of over 200 years could characterize these changes without political judgements, often sensitive ones with consequences for present day concerns and relations. This dataset explicitly does not reflect the view of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Government. It is just a basic reference work, created by the Office of the Historian to serve as a tool for analysis of the history of U.S. foreign relations and the linking of its online datasets and publications. Thus, the principles of inclusion and point of view err on the side of a U.S.-centric view of international history during the period covered. We invite others to create their own databases using a similar organization (or propose improvements in ours) based on their own scholarly or national perspective. These databases could be released as linked open data and compared or combined for even richer analysis.