

Geographic Literacy for all North Americans

A speech by cartographer David Imus; given in Madison, Wisconsin on October 12, 2011 to the North American Cartographic Information Society (NACIS).

I believe Madison, Wisconsin is the perfect venue for this year's gathering of North American cartographers. It was here that Arthur Robinson established cartography as a discipline, a subject worthy of higher learning. Here in Madison, we have an opportunity to significantly advance our discipline, to move it out of the basement and place it among the world's great disciplines of history and architecture and the like. We will do this if we fully embrace the art of map design and dedicate our art to the cause of bringing geographic literacy to all North Americans.

Design is the theme of this conference, and what is design? Map design is "the art of cartography." Art matters to our discipline because cartography is a form of communication and communication is an art. To borrow a few words from the late Steve Jobs, communication requires artistic subtlety that science can't capture. Like a writer analyzing every word from the point of view of her reader, the cartographer must analyze every detail on her map through the eyes of her audience. Analyzing one's work through the eyes of other human beings is an art that cannot be assigned to a machine.

We have work to do with our art. As cartographers, we create what educators recognize as geography's most basic educational tool, the map; yet in Canada, Mexico, and the US geographic illiteracy is epidemic. In the United States half our young adults cannot locate New York City on a US map, and 60% cannot locate the state of Ohio. One study showed that 25% of Dallas, Texas high school seniors couldn't name the country that borders the United States to the south. In the last few weeks I learned that some American adults think Alaska is an island. I hope you will join me in believing that these things mean cartographers have work to do.

Our most foundational tool for doing this work is the type of map Arthur Robinson called the "general map," what I call the "essential geography map;" maps that express the intricate tapestry of basic geographic elements and allow readers to form mental images of the basic configuration of part of the world. In North America the true general map is rare. In fact I hold in my hand what I believe is the only one, the *Essential Geography of the United States of America*.

The Essential Geography is a general map, and who needs those anymore? We all need them. In fact I propose we coordinate our efforts to make a new wave of general maps of each North American province, state and country to be placed in appropriate pairs on the wall of every social studies classroom on this continent; general maps made to the highest standard of cartographic expression so they will inspire interest in the world; general maps that will lend spatial context to current events and to the fragmented images of the other media; general maps that will serve as rich new sources of information upon which educators can base geography curricula that will coax students into geographic ways of thinking. Imagine school children captivated by maps that illuminate their surroundings with such depth and clarity that they can see what an amazing place their world is. If our students are ever going to have these maps, we are the one who will have to make them.

This new wave of general maps designed to advance geographic literacy had to start somewhere. That's why I made the *Essential Geography of the United States of America*. I'm fortunate to have this chance to express my vision and to join with NACIS in presenting 200 copies of the Essential Geography to the Madison Public Schools. We present these maps so that Madison students can muse over them and become interested in their country, and so Madison educators can begin to create a new generation of curricula which will lead to universal literacy in geography in our lifetime.

North Americans are embarrassed by geographic illiteracy, and it will never occur to them that they could come to us looking for help. So if we want the people of this continent to enjoy, as cartographers do, the benefits of geographic literacy, the process of making that happen must begin with us, the makers of basic tool.

So let's rise to the occasion and take our discipline to a higher level. Let's embrace the art of our discipline and let's dedicate our discipline to the cause of universal literacy in geography, literacy which will enrich lives and make all North Americans better informed citizens of the world.

Thank you.