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COMMENTARY

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EDITORIAL

Nation location: U.S. ranks low on geography comprehension

Ambrose Bierce, the 19th and 20th century satirist, wrote that "War is God's way of teaching Americans geography." But, much to Bierce's would-be dismay, it seems that recent military conflicts haven't prompted much in the way of American education. In any case, in deference to National Geography Awareness Week, we see fit to devote this space to failings in American geographical literacy, and the importance of individual awareness of the world as it stands today.

In November 2002, the National Geographic Society surveyed people ages 18-24 in nine countries, including America (as well as American 25- to 34-year-olds), testing their geographical mettle.

And young America fared abysmally, answering correctly, on average, only 23 of the 56 worldwide survey questions. (By contrast, Swedish youth averaged 40 correct answers; young American adults barely edged out their Mexican counterparts, who averaged 21.) How many could find Iraq on a map? Thirteen percent. The figures for Iran and Israel are about the same. Twice as many — 34 percent — could determine that the island used in a season of "Survivor" is in the South Pacific.

Americans seem to have gaping holes in knowledge about their homeland, too: About a third of Americans grossly overestimated the U.S. population, placing it above 1 billion people (the real figure is less than 300 million). And only 30 percent could locate New Jersey. And in a coup d'ignorance, 11 percent can't find America on a world map.

Media attention seems to figure heavily in what people know, too. Most (58 percent) of young Americans knew that al-Qaida and the Taliban were based in Afghanistan, but they still fared worse than young adults in every other surveyed country. Worse, only 17 percent of those Americans could actually find the nation on a world map.

In the modern world of the cosmopolitan and the superconnected, geographical awareness is more important than ever, making the average American's ignorance of simple geographic facts all the more distressing, and the need to reform all the more pressing.

Fortunately, the survey itself hints at possible remedies for the situation. Among young American adults, those with at least some college education averaged 30 correct responses (those with less education averaged only 21). Exposure to other cultures is correlated, too: U.S. respondents who had traveled outside the country in the past three years averaged nine points higher than those who hadn't.

One of the most interesting and starkest discrepancies was between the Net-savvy (a U.S. average of 28 correct answers) and those who aren't (only 17).

What's the key here? It may be redundant, but education — self-education in particular — is key to geographical knowledge, and therefore for a solid foundation for digesting the complexities of a contemporary, interconnected world.

EDITORIAL POLICY

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Wasted Energy

We spectators in the curiosity known as American democracy get to watch a doozie unfold this week. Overshadowed by a new Medicare bill is an energy bill introduced this week to the sideshow known as the full Congress. Again, we'll sit on the sidelines as politicians and industry analysts decide our interests and futures.

The congressional GOP human-body-snatchers, after 10 weeks of closed-door meetings, finalized their plans for the first major overhaul of energy policy in over a decade.

If you love deregulation and corporate welfare as much as the next red-blooded American, you'll love this contentious piece of crap. It does little to wean the country from the petrochemical teat of fossil fuels, to protect against more blackouts, to defend the environment or to emphasize conservation over consumption.

Representatives Pete Domenici, R-N.M., and the insanely pro-business Billy Tauzin, R-La., announced the completion of the Energy Policy Act of 2003 late last Friday.

"This is, in essence, a pro-jobs bill," Tauzin proclaimed. He and his fellow party members say the bill will create one million jobs. But, from the standpoint of a penniless young American who is watching his country slowly fall to pieces, the "jobs" most guaranteed in this 1,700-page legislation are those of business-friendly politicians and their financial contributors. The big losers again are taxpayers and the sorry saps who will inherit the environmental mess that was our domestic energy policy.

The president of the National Environmental Trust, Philip Clapp, called the act a step in the wrong direction.

"Below the water line is up to \$100 billion in new national debt to provide tax breaks to the oil, gas, coal and utility industries," he said in a press release.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, energy companies have poured almost \$70 million into political donations with almost 75 cents of every dollar going to Republicans.

This current legislation very much appears to be a kickback to powerful energy corporations for their faithful and altru-

istic participation in our perfected democratic processes.

While the draft does offer some faint glimmers of pragmatic and progressive



Joseph Bechard
 Cultural obstetrician

thinking, the bulk of the bill is enough to make anyone with a soul ask what life is really about.

One of the most questionable inclusions is some \$20 billion in tax incentives to coal, oil, gas and nuclear energy companies.

Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden, quoted in The Oregonian Saturday, said: "What it sounds like is being served up is a tribute to yesteryear, a hodgepodge of subsidies to well-connected industries."

One of the most appalling features comes in the bill's repeal of the New Deal-era Public Utility Holding Company Act. By doing away with this 68-year-old provision, Republicans would remove restrictions on the ownership of utilities and set up perfect conditions for a rash of mergers similar to those seen in the communications industry after the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

Also to the delight of utility companies, the bill will delay for three years plans to create a national grid with regional managers. Many experts believe the disjointed and unregulated grid system currently in use is partly at fault for the mid-August blackout in the north-eastern United States and parts of Canada. A national grid would have encouraged more sharing between regions of the grid.

Another particularly unsettling stipulation would exempt producers of MTBE — an additive used as an oxygenate in gasoline to make it burn more cleanly — from product liability lawsuits filed after Sept.

5. This would essentially terminate hundreds of millions of dollars in lawsuits related to the pollution of groundwater supplies by neglectful companies.

The bill would also relax some environmental laws and hasten permit-granting procedures in order to facilitate energy production on public lands.

On a slightly more positive note, the act would require production of ethanol, a corn-based gasoline oxygenate, to double by 2012. And by 2015, MTBE would be phased out completely as a gasoline additive.

But the Republicans' inclusion of the ethanol rule and their decision to stay out of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge were seen as concessions made to Democrats in order to speed the act's passing. These minor Republican compromises might be enough to butter some Democrats' environmental bread, but the bill offers little to get really excited about.

The Washington Post reported Sunday that, until 2020, the conservation measures in the bill would be roughly equal to three months of national energy consumption.

The legislation is expected to cruise through the House but meet some resistance in the Senate. Spineless Democrats could filibuster, but their lack of passion and guts could be enough to give the bill's authors just what they wanted.

This new Republican scheme fails to remedy many of the current problems in our energy policy, and we should all hang our heads in shame if it passes.

It fails to increase automobile emission standards, it fails to secure the energy grid, it gives companies little incentive to explore renewable resources and it gives no regulatory muscle to protect against what one Associated Press writer called "Enron-style market manipulation."

Not only would this bill be a huge payoff for some less-than-reputable companies, it would cost taxpayers billions of dollars in times of economic uncertainty, and it would point our energy policy down the wrong road for years to come.

Contact the columnist at joebechard@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.