Articles

"Academic War Over the Field of Geography": The Elimination of Geography at Harvard, 1947–1951

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Abstract. After modest but optimistic expansion in the 1940s, the geography program at Harvard University was suddenly terminated in 1948, touching off a widely publicized "academic war over the field of geography." It was a severe blow to the discipline, not only because of Harvard's position in American education but because in the course of the closure the President of Harvard University suggested that geography was not an appropriate university subject. The disciplinary history of the Harvard episode is dominated by oral accounts and discussions of personalities, but a more detached archival reconstruction of events is necessary today, if only to reclaim what actually occurred and thereby to allow us to understand it less defensively. For whatever the role of specific personalities, and Isaiah Bowman appears to have been more instrumental than is generally realized, there is a larger question concerning the vulnerability of geography, at Harvard and elsewhere. In the course of the termination and reconsideration of geography at Harvard, several key issues emerged concerning the efficacy of the discipline, and these are still relevant today. While this is mainly a historical reconstruction, therefore, it also touches on themes of contemporary relevance. For it may be that today as well as in Harvard in 1948, the discipline itself bears some responsibility for the failures that occur.

Key Words: Harvard, geography, Isaiah Bowman, Derwent Whittlesey, social science, human geography, physical geography, synthesis.

Many geographers must share the sentiment of Jean Gottmann that the closing of the Harvard geography department in 1948 was "a terrible blow... to American geography" and one from which "it has never completely recovered." The blow was all the more severe because the decision to eliminate geography at one of America's leading universities was justified at the time by the suggestion that geography may not be an appropriate university subject. In short, there was a sustained "academic war over the field of geography," as the Harvard Crimson called it ("Off the map" 1951), and even today many scholars remember that fight or are familiar with its outcome. Within the discipline, this episode is generally treated with undue defensiveness; little is said openly and almost nothing written, with the result that rumors and legends dominate our understanding of events. This defensiveness is a disservice to the discipline; it encourages a number of myths about why geography departments are closed — then and now — at a time when it is particularly urgent that geographers confront squarely the problems as well as the potential of academic geography. Especially in the United States where several departments have recently been closed and others are threatened, the present crisis of academic geography reveals many of the same symptoms that characterized the Harvard affair. The present essay is not just a case study of a particularly important event in the history of American geography, therefore, but an opportunity for reflection and an invitation to learn from history and to apply these lessons to the present.

Oral accounts of the Harvard affair, have centered almost exclusively on the character and actions of several key individuals. It has been widely asserted that Derwent Whittlesey, who led geography at Harvard in the 1930s and 1940s, was gay and that this was the pivotal issue in the elimi-
nation of the geography department. Alexander Hamilton Rice, a scoundrel by various accounts, who funded and headed the university's Institute for Geographical Exploration, has also been widely implicated, as has Paul Buck, Provost of Harvard in 1948, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and the administrator most directly responsible for deciding against geography. The case against Buck as well as that against James Conant (President of Harvard) fit neatly the "hostile dean" theory of why geography is a target; this argument persists strongly today as an "explanation" for contemporary attacks on the discipline. Finally, considerable speculation centers on the role of Isaiah Bowman. He is variously held to have assisted in the elimination of geography or to have been deeply disappointed by its loss, about which he could do nothing. Perhaps around Bowman — an eminent geographer, President of The Johns Hopkins University, and by that time a well-known public figure — the rumors, legends, and anecdotes are least helpful in reconstructing the history of the elimination of geography at Harvard.

The conventional wisdom focuses on personalities and the personal aspects of the controversy. This is characteristic of a discipline's collective understanding of its own recent history, wherein the participants themselves establish the earliest version of events and make the first discrimination of heroes from villains. Personal familiarity is a mixed blessing, however. Participants help to keep the history alive in later years, but being so close to the events they inevitably paint a highly personal picture; the larger meaning and significance of events often only become clear in hindsight once they can be viewed in wider context. Thus it is incumbent on every discipline to distill personal versions of the recent past into history proper. This can and has been done defensively as hagiography, presenting history as little more than a "pantheon of heroes" (Buttimer 1978). But it can also be done more realistically, admitting to criticism the warts and errors of the discipline and its practitioners, and offering a more dispassionate assessment of geography and geographers. Above all the events and individuals have to be placed in a broader societal and historical context. Defensive history admits of no lessons from the past, no sense of where the present is leading, and no understanding of how we ourselves might help to fashion the future.

The purpose of this essay is to make a start toward reclaiming the history of the Harvard debacle. There are two immediate goals. The first and most basic is to provide a clear archival reconstruction of events such that troubling discrepancies and contradictions in the oral wisdom can be resolved or at least placed in proper perspective. Paramount among these is the contradictory roles attributed to Isaiah Bowman (indeed a principal in the affair), who is variously described as the failed hero or the successful villain. To accomplish this reconstruction it will be necessary to immerse ourselves in the specific events and actions of the individuals involved, and this itself makes for an interesting story. But implicit throughout is a larger concern than who did what to whom. The archival account suggests that whatever the culpability of various individuals in the elimination of geography, the institutional weakness of the discipline as a whole contributed to the outcome at Harvard. Geography was certainly weak inside Harvard, but it was also weakened by the ambiguity of its own self-conception. The second goal, then, is to begin to see the Harvard affair not as an isolated event but as part of a broader history. We can only begin this process here and so make no claims to providing a definitive account of the significance of the Harvard affair. Rather, the hope is that by reconstructing the history from the inside out, the details of the affair can be rescued from a heavy surrounding fog of mythology and can become grist for subsequent, less defensive and more general histories of American geography. In other words, if the following account dwells disproportionately on the actions of specific individuals, this should not be taken as an unwitting perpetuation of the anecdotal tradition but as an unavoidable evil. The intent is to clear the ground for a broader, more critical, and more profound soul searching about the value of the discipline to the larger society — an intellectual investigation rather than a defensive reaction. This, after all, was the central question provoked by the Harvard affair. It was publicly voiced by Harvard's President in 1948 when he cast doubt on the appropriateness of geography as a university subject. Despite the efforts made since then, the contemporary vulnerability of the discipline suggests that a satisfactory answer has not yet been found.

From Geology to Geography

As in so many other institutions in the U.S., geography at Harvard emerged from the study of geology. The teaching of geography per se can
probably be traced to Nathaniel Shaler, "a geologist by profession" but "a geographer by inclination" (Livingston, forthcoming). In 1878, after two years as assistant with Shaler, a young William Morris Davis was appointed instructor in physical geography. He was appointed Professor of Physical Geography in 1890 and Sturgis-Hooper Professor of Geology in 1898. Throughout, he taught courses in physical geography (Bryan 1935) and was instrumental in making Harvard one of the major centers of geographic training by the late 1890s. A long list of geographers studied with Davis, the most prominent of whom included A.P. Brigham, Richard Dodge, Mark Jefferson, Ellsworth Huntington, Isaiah Bowman, and Robert DeCourcy Ward who taught at Harvard until 1931 (Morris 1962). At this stage, geography was taught as part of geology, and the emphasis was very much upon geomorphology and physiography. With the steady demise of environmental determinism and the emergence of the human side of the field in the U.S., a stronger case could be made for separating geography and geography. With a view toward making this separation, the French geographer Raoul Blanchard was given a half-time appointment in 1928 (he held it for eight years), and in the same year Derwent Whittlesey was appointed to a full-time position in human geography in the Department of Geology and Geography, the major department within the Division of Geological Sciences (James 1972, 410).

Whittlesey's appointment also represented a re-emphasis on scholarly research. With the death of Shaler in 1906 and the retirement of Davis six years later, the expansion of geography came to a temporary halt. Further, Harvard College re-oriented its program away from research and toward providing a liberal arts undergraduate education, and by World War I, geography was conceived as the provider of primarily military cartographic needs and expertise rather than of scientific research. In 1926, however, Kirk Bryan was appointed with the intention of strengthening the department's research capabilities in geomorphology and oceanography. Two years later with the Blanchard and Whittlesey appointments, the human part of the program was bolstered and a further commitment made by Harvard to developing geography as a separate field of scientific research.²

Over the next two decades, Whittlesey came increasingly to the fore in efforts to build the geography side of the department. In 1930 Harold Kemp joined the department as an instructor, but for the promise of real expansion Whittlesey had to wait until after World War II when a great demand for geographical education was anticipated as a result of postwar plans for internal economic re-organization and a vastly expanded American role in world affairs. A wartime report on geography at Harvard (Committee on Post-War Plans n.d.) argued that there had been a dearth of geographers during the war and that in the government, private research organizations, and universities, there was now a widely recognized need for trained geographers. The committee recommended that geography be expanded and made a separate department.

By 1947 appointments as assistant professor had been given to Edward Ackerman, who received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1939, and to Edward Ullman, who graduated from the prestigious Chicago department in 1942. They were two of the brightest and most promising geographers of what seemed at the time to be a new generation, and along with the expansion in the number of instructorships in the immediate postwar period, their arrival at Harvard inspired an air of optimism about the future of geography. Expansion between 1945 and 1947 occurred despite the overall fiscal problems that faced most university administrations, including Harvard in this period. Whittlesey had now achieved considerable autonomy for the small geography section within the Division of Geological Sciences, particularly in regard to course content, although a number of decisions, especially concerning appointments and promotions, remained severely circumscribed by the power of the Geological parent. Ironically, it was this success — as much the result of circumstances as of the efforts of Whittlesey and Bryan — that provoked the attack on geography.

The Crisis

"We seemed to be just at the point of consolidating the slow gains of 20 years," wrote Whittlesey in April, 1948. "To have it all knocked out from under us is hard to take." Yet this is precisely what happened. In May 1947 the Department of Geology and Geography was permitted to consider the promotion of Edward Ackerman to Associate Professor. At a meeting on May 29, 1947, the senior faculty voted in favor of the promotion by a vote of seven to four, and the recommendation was duly sent to Provost Paul Buck on June 6 by Marland Billings, professor of Geology and Chairman of the Division of Geological
Sciences. Billings, however, was disgruntled by what he saw as the loss of a half position in geology, since Ackerman's original position was viewed as half geology and half geography, yet the promotion was to Associate Professor of Geography. Billings had never endorsed the expansion of geography, especially if it would adversely affect geology, and chose the question of Ackerman's promotion for his assault on the subject. Although the mythology has somehow endowed him with a spotless record, Marland P. Billings was the one who initiated the attack on the geography program at Harvard.4

A geologist who strongly supported geography, Kirtley Mather led the opposing argument that contrary to Geology losing half a position, it would gain half a position because Ackerman's original slot would revert to them. But the supporters of geography — geologists and geographers alike — were completely outmaneuvered by Billings. Noting that the Ackerman appointment would be one exclusively in human geography, Billings, with the tacit support of some of the other senior geology faculty, insisted to the Provost that the "orientation of geography differs so markedly from geology" that the two should be made administratively separate. Within the division the vote for autonomy was unanimous. Whittlesey, Bryan, and Kirtley Mather presumably felt that in supporting autonomy they were championing the cause of an emerging Department of Geography. The financial constraints within the university were becoming increasingly evident, however, and the administration was already looking with a keen eye for potential savings. In this context, Billings seems to have seen the vote as a tactical means for casting geography adrift and then taking immediate aim at the question of its legitimacy.

Thus on the same day that he submitted to Provost Buck the faculty's recommendation that Ackerman be promoted, Billings sent not one letter but three, two of which he labeled "supplementary." In the first of these supplementary letters, as Chairman of the Division, he argued very condescendingly that his geology colleagues were simply confused and had approved the Ackerman promotion in the mistaken belief that geology would gain a half position. In the second supplementary letter, in a purely individual capacity, Billings wrote of his personal objections to the Ackerman promotion. Taking care not to impugn Ackerman's abilities, he argued that geology very much needed the half position it was supposedly losing, that any new appointments would be "of more value in geology than in Human Geography," and that in any case he entertained a "profound skepticism concerning the importance" of human geography. He concluded with a not-too-subtle suggestion that Buck should let the status quo "run its course" and let "certain requirements" (the eventual retirement of Whittlesey and Bryan) dictate the course of geography at Harvard. And he tucked on the implicit threat that, should the administration see fit to promote Ackerman, he sincerely hoped that "critics of Harvard throughout the country will be silenced."5

Buck was already concerned about how to deal with geography; the question had arisen periodically throughout his tenure as Dean and Provost. But it is not clear whether Buck simply accepted the lead offered by Billings in his three missives or used the latter as a pretext for a course of action he already had in mind. Certainly Billings pushed his case personally with Buck.6 And at this juncture Buck was probably the most important figure in the administration concerning the fate of geography. He did much of the day-to-day running of Harvard while President James Conant devoted much of his time to government business. Whittlesey, too, bombarded Buck with paper; he attempted to defend Ackerman's promotion by having a number of prominent scholars (from within Harvard as well as from without) write to Buck on Ackerman's behalf. Apart from Whittlesey himself, a number of other geographers wrote to Buck. They included J.K. Wright, then Director of the American Geographical Society, who praised Ackerman's originality, and Richard Hartshorne, Ackerman's immediate superior in his wartime job with the Office of Strategic Services, who suggested that Ackerman was one of the two brightest geographers of his generation. In his own letter, Whittlesey emphasized Ackerman's work for the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the war and noted that he had received job offers from the universities of Chicago, Illinois, Wisconsin, UCLA, and Northwestern. Among others who wrote Buck in support of Ackerman was Lieutenant Colonel Hubert G. Schenck of Allied General Headquarters, whose praise was effusive concerning Ackerman's postwar performance in the Natural Resources Section of the Far East Supreme Command.7 Among those at Harvard who supported his appointment were an anthropologist, an economist, and a forester as well as those geologists already on his side.

The procedure for making permanent appointments, such as the one proposed for Ackerman, involved the convening of an ad hoc committee,
and this Buck did for Geography in the autumn of 1947. The Ad Hoc Committee on Geography included outsiders, among whom were J. K. Wright, Director of the American Geographical Society, and Isaiah Bowman. In early 1948 they recommended to the Provost and President that Ackerman was indeed one of the top human geographers and that he should be promoted. The committee’s deliberations also involved Buck and Conant, the President of Harvard, whom Bowman knew personally from government work on science mobilization during the war and work on science policy during the 1930s. Bowman clearly felt he could influence Conant on the future of geography at Harvard, and sensing that broader questions of the nature and function of geography and the constitution of a geography department were up for discussion, he took the opportunity of expressing his own vision of the discipline. This he did both in the committee session at Harvard and privately with Conant, at whose home he stayed while he was in Cambridge. Upon his return to Baltimore, Bowman put some of his ideas in writing and sent Conant and Buck a copy of his *Geography in Relation to the Social Sciences* (Bowman 1934), directing their attention to the concluding chapter, which even then must have seemed rather thin and apologetic. If Bowman had any indication at this time that geography might be subject to attack from the administration, he made no mention of it. As so often in his career, he was the demanor of a crusader for geography.

No sooner was the report submitted, strongly recommending Ackerman’s promotion, than rumors began circulating in Cambridge that geography would be cut. In the eight months following Billings’s first objections in June 1947, Buck (with Conant’s support) clearly became convinced that geography should be eliminated. When it came at the end of February 1948, the decision was swift and hard; it apparently came as a complete surprise to Whittlesey and the others who had expected a positive endorsement of the findings of the Ad Hoc Committee and the consequent building of a geography department. In the last week of February 1948, Buck refused to reappoint Richard Logan, an instructor teaching several of the basic courses in the department, and using this as a pretext Billings deleted Ullman’s seminar “in view of the fact that a tapering off in Geography is taking place.” With Whittlesey out of town in the following days (ironically, he was in Chicago to receive the Chicago Geographical Society’s Culver Medal for his distinguished contribution to political geography), Ackerman attempted to appeal this decision but was unsuccessful. The sophomore class was duly informed that there would be insufficient courses for them to obtain a concentration in geography. Whittlesey was to be the only remaining geographer; Ackerman and Ullman were to be fired.

Neither the administration nor the Division of Geological Sciences officially accepted responsibility for the decision, each implicating the other. But it was Provost Buck, with Conant’s support, who made the final decision. It was they who were the official recipients of the Ad Hoc Committee report. The decision was apparently made with one eye on the university’s financial predicament and the other on the anatomy of geography at Harvard. Whittlesey summed up the administration’s position when he wrote:

The decision to abandon geography at Harvard was made by the President and the Provost on the ground that Harvard can not support every field and that financial support at present available does not promise to keep Harvard in the forefront of geographic departments . . . . [With our small group, we] would be inadequate to compete with other large graduate schools of geography.

Saying less than he implied, Cornelius Hurlbert, Professor of Geology, explained it this way in his announcement to sophomores: “Harvard can’t hope to have strong departments in everything” (“College Dooms Major . . . ” 1948). Ackerman and Ullman were quickly given a stay of execution and granted a year’s extension, but this would prove to be only a temporary reprieve for Geography.

In the weeks that followed, the reaction among Harvard geographers was generally one of shell shock. It was a “crushing blow,” Whittlesey admitted, and throughout the spring semester, no one was able to work effectively. On the campus, however, there was mobilization of support among students and sympathetic faculty members, especially once Conant himself issued a directive indicating not only that geography could not be sustained at Harvard but that “geography is not a university subject.” Several sympathetic articles appeared in the *Harvard Crimson*, which called the decision “anachronous,” blaming “a minority of the professors of Geology” for crippling geography (“College dooms major . . . ” 1948; “Geography . . . ” 1948; “Geography loss . . . ” 1948). A Student Council Report also condemned the decision, and several professors, including Kirtley Mather of geology, came out in public defense of geography (“Council report . . . ” 1948).
Protests and letters of concern from many prominent geographers inundated Buck and Conant, and there was a widespread feeling that the decision could be reversed or at least moderated but in any case should not pass without protest. In the words of Peter Roll, a student who helped organize the fight against geography's elimination and whose roommate conveniently was managing editor of the Crimson: "The whole thing is a damned shame but if I can get Bowman and a couple of others to open their mouths a whole chorus might jump in."\(^{13}\)

The Role of Isaiah Bowman

Bowman's role in the elimination of geography at Harvard is a curious affair. Officially, he was on the Ad Hoc Committee formed to consider Ackerman's promotion and during this period was elected to the Board of Overseers of Harvard. And he was a university president himself. Unofficially, he counted "Jim" Conant among his good friends in American science. Along with such figures as the physicist Karl Compton and Nobel Prize Winner Robert Millikan, Bowman and Conant were in the forefront of New Deal attempts at the mobilization of science for public purposes. As Chairman of the National Research Council and Director of the less salubrious and short-lived Science Advisory Board from 1933 to 1935, Bowman's focus was largely but not exclusively on the civilian uses of science. Conant, on the other hand, was a veteran of the World War mobilization of science during which he had helped produce chemical weapons for the U.S. army, and even after his appointment to Harvard in 1933, he remained an active specialist on the military uses of science. As one historian of science would later write, Conant "saw no difference between poisoning a soldier and blowing him to bits" (Kevles 1979, 288). During World War II, he earned a higher political profile alongside Vannevar Bush and Compton on the National Defense Research Committee and eventually in the Office of Scientific Research and Development (Conant 1970). These were the major independent governmental organizations devoted to the coordination and encouragement of military research and development projects, including the Manhattan Project.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Bowman and Conant had intermittent contact. It was then a predominantly working relationship, but toward the end of the war, greater contact encouraged a closer friendship. Both had been asked by President Truman to take prominent roles on the fledgling Atomic Energy Commission in 1946, and both refused. Both played major roles in drafting a postwar program for scientific research and in the fight that led by 1950 to the establishment of the National Science Foundation (Bush 1945; England 1982). And in 1949 both were members of a Top Secret Defense Department Committee, code named "The Fishing Trip," which was charged with determining whether and to what extent information on weapons research (the atomic bomb, biological, chemical, and radiological warfare) should be released to the public. Other members of "The Fishing Trip" included Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles.\(^{14}\) In short, Bowman and Conant had been through a lot together. Because of their friendship, because of his position as one of the most prominent geographers in the country, and because he had been for more than two decades a respected public figure in his own right, Bowman was well placed to play a crucial role in the Harvard affair. He was the natural focus around which a successful protest might be organized. But in March 1948, it would have been difficult for anyone to predict the course that Bowman was actually to follow.

Publicly the decision over geography at Harvard involved three issues. First, there were fiscal problems that Harvard shared with other universities in the immediate postwar period; the adverse financial situation was widely acknowledged as contributing to the decision, but in fact it was little discussed. It was an important backdrop to events if hardly a basic cause. Second, there was the question of the efficacy of geography at Harvard. Third was the question of whether geography in general should even be a university discipline. Like others who came to the defense of Harvard Geography, Bowman focused on the second and third issues, but unlike them Bowman attempted to separate these issues: geography at Harvard was one thing, geography in general quite a separate issue. In fact, he privately condemned geography at Harvard while supporting geography as a vital university discipline. At least in terms of geography, this was, as we shall see, a naive political error on Bowman's part. And his defense of geography as a university discipline was so weak that it compounded rather than counteracted his criticism of geography at Harvard.

Bowman's vision of the geography program at Harvard was intensely personal. It focused on two personalities, Alexander Hamilton Rice and Der-
went Whittlesey. The first he saw, perhaps not unreasonably, as a charlatan; to the second, he could never accommodate himself, partly on account of Whittlesey’s alleged homosexuality. Bowman was in the habit of depositing memos on various subjects in his files — partly for his own use, partly for the use of those historians who, he thought, would naturally sift through his papers at a later date — and one of these memos provides the first few installments of the Alexander Hamilton Rice saga. Rice was an explorer who was elected to the Council of the American Geographical Society (AGS) soon after Bowman was appointed Director in 1915. He was also awarded an AGS medal. Rice’s wife, formerly Eleanor Elkins, was a rich society figure who in 1915 donated the Widener Library to Harvard in memory of her son who went down with her husband on the Titanic. According to Bowman, she was responsible for promoting Rice, her second husband, quite indelicately, not just for the Society medal but as a candidate for the Presidency of the AGS; the Rices offered a million or more dollars to the AGS during the financially tight years of the early Depression but made it contingent on Rice’s election and the ouster of Bowman. When the offer was curtly declined by the AGS Council, the Rices turned their attention to Harvard and agreed with President Lowell to erect, equip and maintain an Institute of Geographical Exploration with Alexander Hamilton Rice as its Professor. Bowman and others evidently felt that Rice had merely purchased a Harvard professorship, and from the Institute’s inception in 1931, Whittlesey, Bryan and others in the Division of Geological Sciences minimized their contact with Rice and tried to impress upon the administration their dissociation from the Institute. Rice, of course, was trying to move in the opposite direction, and at one point a Division committee even recommended integration of the Institute within a separate geography department (Committee on Post-War Plans n.d., 5). The reason for this recommendation is unclear, but it could well have been an earlier attempt by some of the geologists to provide geography with just enough rope to hang itself.

Although few of the details are now available, there is little doubt that Rice was a troublesome presence at Harvard. The Institute was not respected, either within Harvard or outside, and relations were difficult between the Institute and the Division of Geological Sciences. Certainly Bowman believed that the ‘‘Hamilton Rice aspect’’ had ‘‘given Conant a great deal of trouble and to deal with a man like Rice must have given him a very low opinion of the profession.’’ Likewise, a Harvard-based observer concluded in retrospect that the Institute was ‘‘less than beneficial’’ since ‘‘it represented growth in a direction which added little to scholarship and research in geography’’ (Morris 1962, 243).

If Rice was a distinct handicap and colored the administration’s view of the discipline, Bowman felt this was unfortunate but could hardly be blamed on the geography personnel. About Whittlesey, he felt otherwise. In 1930, two years after Whittlesey was appointed, Harold Kemp was made an Instructor in geography. Whittlesey and Kemp shared an apartment in Cambridge, and it is probably not too extreme to say that, with his puritanical religious and moral background (Martin 1980, 2), Bowman was revolted by their relationship. Kemp was an easy target. Even by Whittlesey’s implicit testimony, he was a mediocre scholar who survived at Harvard partly because of his relationship with Whittlesey. When in 1937 Whittlesey asked Bowman to support Kemp’s reappointment, Bowman stalled him, asking for Kemp’s publications, which were few. He clearly felt uncomfortable, and it seems that Kemp won reappointment without Bowman’s support. He promised to write if he were contacted by the administration: ‘‘I want to do everything I can to help your Department,’’ wrote Bowman in 1937.

Although Kemp was no longer teaching geography at Harvard in 1948, Bowman’s perception of Whittlesey was not thereby altered. His first response upon hearing the news of geography’s demise at Harvard was one of detached scorn: ‘‘The essential fact,’’ he wrote to J. K. Wright, ‘‘is that Whittlesey has not won respect for his subject and I think from what we heard at Cambridge last summer that he did not help matters by insisting upon his association with Kemp.’’ Soon afterward, when a laconic Kirk Bryan concluded that Conant ‘‘didn’t like any of us anyway,’’ Bowman repeated the lament to Wright, commenting that this ‘‘could hardly refer to table manners. Conant has a keen mind,’’ Bowman continued, ‘‘and they could not make him see anything in geography.’’ The point here is not so much that a personal antagonism existed between Bowman and Whittlesey or that Bowman was simply wrong; personal antagonisms are a fact of life, and Whittlesey’s retention of a weak Kemp in the vulnerable geography program was a mistake. Rather the point is that Bowman’s response to the elimination of geography at Harvard was so clouded by his personal feelings that
he not only blamed the situation on Whittlesey himself, but refused to "open his mouth" at all in defense of geography at Harvard.

Bowman's distaste for Whittlesey was long-standing. In 1921, thinking his work "first rate," Bowman sought to have the recently graduated Whittlesey adapt Bowman's *The New World* into an elementary high school textbook, requested by the publisher. Whittlesey evidently had other plans, and Bowman's approbations became distinctly cooler. Two years after Whittlesey assumed the editorship of the *Annals*, Bowman undertook to send him a brusque, lecturing letter on his editorial policy, and the correspondence that followed set the pattern for the remainder of their relationship; Bowman became simultaneously insistent and condescending while Whittlesey was determined not to take him too seriously at all. At a later date Bowman would complain to Rahe Platt and Gladys Wrigley at the AGS about Whittlesey's "ignorance" and the "superficial and childish" caliber of his scholarship. Whittlesey, for his part, was suspicious of Bowman; in 1943, when both were working for the War Department, Whittlesey feared that Bowman would attempt to hog all the credit for their work.21

An intellectual antipathy was closely intertwined with Bowman's personal reaction to Whittlesey. Perhaps Bowman's strongest belief about geography was that it represented a synthesis of physical and human elements. Throughout his life, and certainly long after he relinquished active research for administrative positions, Bowman was an ardent advocate of physical geography as the vital foundation of the discipline. While eschewing an early penchant for environmental determinism, Bowman never abandoned the Davisian paradigm in which he was trained. Advising John Orchard on the direction of the fledgling Columbia department, he repeated his common lament that the Chicago department had made "a serious mistake in omitting physiography." Human geography, divorced from physical geography, had no ground to stand on, "no established body of principles," no scientific basis, but instead tended to "skim off the top of the other sciences." Whittlesey of course was an earlier product of the University of Chicago, a human geographer with training in history rather than physiography, and heavily influenced by the social perspective of the French school. Unlike Bowman, he believed that there could indeed be an established set of intellectual principles providing a social foundation for human geography, and much of his work in political, historical, and regional geography comprised a search for those evolutionary and other processes from which such a foundation might be constructed. Bowman had little respect for this view of geography; in direct reference to the Harvard affair, he asserted that human geography could never be any more than "descriptive, fragmentary and 'easy.'" Whittlesey's 'Earth and State' has a lot of good material in it, good points, but on the whole it is a mess."22 This represented a deeply held conviction, and while it served to indict Whittlesey on intellectual grounds, Bowman's insistence on a synthesis of the physical and human was of much broader political significance in the Harvard affair, and we shall return to it below.

Bowman's role in the Harvard matter has been the subject of considerable speculation, but on at least one occasion he freely claimed that he "had been decisive in the decision to do away with geography at Harvard." In June of 1948, Bowman sailed to Britain where he would receive an honorary doctorate of science from Oxford University and would give an address to the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) upon his receipt of their Patron's Medal. On board the Queen Mary, he chanced to meet Jean Gottmann. Bowman had personally brought Gottmann to Johns Hopkins in 1943 as he began to build a geography department there, but five years later, only weeks before both embarked on the Queen Mary, he had fired Gottmann, apparently at the behest of George Carter, Chairman of the young department, Carter felt that Gottmann did not spend enough time in Baltimore on the Hopkins campus, and Bowman agreed to fire him. On the Queen Mary, however, Bowman was friendly and perhaps lonely, and he eventually convinced a reluctant Gottmann to visit him in his luxury cabin on the sun deck. "The subject naturally got around to the Harvard department" and Gottmann remarked "what a terrible blow this was to American geography." Bowman not only admitted what he saw as his own role in the decision but went on to make "accusations of 'vice, nepotism and pederasty,'" insisting also that their scholarship was questionable. "Their Ph.D.'s were worthless," he claimed, and "their program was an intellectual kindergarten. 'Kindergarten,' that is the word he used." Bowman felt that the department was "a bad advertisement for geography," and that they were "a bad bunch of men" but insisted to Gottmann there on the Queen Mary that he had included in his RGS address a para-
The archival evidence supports this view of Bowman’s involvement. When he heard the news from J. K. Wright, Bowman counseled him that no action should be taken and that specifically Gilbert White’s idea of a joint letter of protest from prominent geographers was inappropriate given the “background” concerning Whittlesey. In the following weeks, a number of geographers and others appealed to Bowman to intercede and to throw his position and influence behind a defense of Harvard geography. At the same time as he deflected these appeals, he sent an uncharacteristic note to Dean Buck, who was now Provost of Harvard. In a tone simultaneously acquisitive and haughty, he wrote: “From time to time I am in receipt of a letter from hither and yon to the effect that Harvard has dropped geography and why don’t I do something about it. Let me say that my general reply is to the effect that I propose to mind my own business.” In October of the same year, little more than six months after the decision to end geography, Bowman sat on his first Board of Overseers meeting, and the question of what to do with geography — still unresolved after widespread appeals — was on the agenda. Bowman deliberately remained silent. Two days later, Bowman had a chance to talk informally with Conant, and when the subject came up, the following exchange took place, according to Bowman’s own memo:

Bowman: “But you must have noticed that I was silent, and guessed the reason.”
Conant: “I shall be grateful to my dying day for that silence. I think it was a remarkable piece of self-restraint, and I shall never forget it.”

Bowman was due to attend another Board of Overseers meeting in May 1949, and by this time the geographers at Harvard had regrouped somewhat. Edward Ullman especially attempted to organize a defense and reinstatement of geography, and he wrote Bowman asking him to participate as a featured speaker in the New England Geographical Conference, which happened to meet just prior to the Board of Overseers meeting. The invitation, Ullman said quite frankly, was “an opportunity to do something toward reviving geography at Harvard” since the conference would attract wide academic as well as media attention. Again, Bowman balked, citing a generally crowded calendar, but he went on to add that he believed “the future of geography at Harvard to be secure when another round of discussion takes place.” Further, he used his membership of the Board of Overseers as an excuse for making no public statement and concluded by saying, “I think matters can be worked out more quietly.”

Clearly, however, Bowman was doing little to work matters out, quietly or otherwise. He did not “open his mouth,” as had been hoped but tried to dampen the chorus of protest rather than guide it. At every turn he refused to act and strongly encouraged others to do likewise. On the face of it, this is difficult to reconcile with much of his past career; building geography was one of his primary and most vigorously pursued ambitions. Previously and elsewhere, he was far less inhibited in his crusade for the discipline. He was a booster of geography in the State Department and the White House as much as at Johns Hopkins University and the National Academy of Sciences. From positions of far less power and with much less to work with, he had often pushed geography at people and maneuvered it through bureaucratic doors. Bowman’s abstention from the Harvard fight was crippling.

Yet Bowman did not abstain completely, and his comments to Ullman and Gottmann begin to give us a sense of what he himself thought he was doing. To Gottmann he claimed to be decisive in the initial decision; to Ullman nearly a year later he seemed to believe that if things could only be worked out quietly, geography would have a secure future at Harvard. These are hardly the comments of a man who has simply abstained; and given the political astuteness on which Bowman’s career was built, they can hardly be dismissed as the boastful rationalizations of a man seeking to disguise his own irrelevance. Bowman did feel himself to be a decisive force. His essential predicament is best revealed in his response to the news that Conant had not only eliminated geography at Harvard but had impugned the discipline’s very existence. On the one hand he was clearly surprised, and understood that this struck “at the roots” of expanded academic geographical research. To his confidant Wright, he retorted, “I do not see how Conant can say that this is not a university subject of study while at the same time harboring the Harvard School of Business Administration.” Not that this shook his loyalty to Conant or forced him to reconsider his opinion of Whittlesey or his own strategy. Rather, in words implying his own culpability, he wrote in the same letter to Wright: “I can see that I have one more
job to do, which is to attempt a defense of geography as a university subject and see that it is scattered widely throughout the country as an offset to the action at Harvard, because the Harvard leadership in education is so well established along many other lines.26

The most plausible explanation for Bowman’s complete separation of the situation of Harvard geography from geography in general, and his willingness to jettison the former while boosting the latter, involves his relationship to Conant. Throughout the affair, Bowman approached Conant as if his influence upon him would be paramount. This was not as unreasonable as it might initially sound. Conant, after all, in his 1945 Congressional testimony supporting the establishment of a National Science Foundation, had listed geography as one of the sciences that should be covered by any new legislation, and this was almost certainly a product of Bowman’s influence (U.S. Congress 1945, 980). If he exaggerated his own influence, Bowman can at least be excused for considering Conant sympathetic as they entered the deliberations of late 1947 and early 1948. From his role on the ad hoc committee, it seems that Bowman was prepared to support the formation and expansion of a geography department at Harvard as long as it was unassuming. But as soon as it became a public issue and the various personalities came under scrutiny, he retrenched.

He clearly came to feel that he could condone and even support the excision of geography at Harvard, as a “bad advertisement for the discipline,” while promoting, even strengthening, geography as a whole. Thus Bowman proposed none too subtly to Conant that he consider his Hopkins model wherein “we were able to make a start unencumbered by inherited personnel.”27

The fulcrum on which this political contortion would rest was Bowman’s influence over Conant, but Conant himself was an ambitious man whose allegiance could withstand only so much pressure from the ambitions of others. Bowman’s attempt to defend geography as a university discipline backfired completely; Conant proved only too well that he was “his own man,” and the fulcrum of Bowman’s political strategy collapsed. If he ever began to understand what happened, it was more than a year after the decision and only a few months before he died, when he admitted to Ullman that perhaps geography could and should be rescued at Harvard, albeit by quieter means.

There may be a further personal dimension to Bowman’s abstention. Martin (1980, 13–14) has suggested that during his undergraduate years at Harvard, Bowman felt himself to be an outsider, daunted by the wealth and elitism that permeated Harvard Yard. It is possible that despite his own auspicious career and graduation into the elite, Bowman never quite relinquished his sense of intimidation by Harvard. This would certainly help explain the hint of subservience in his uncharacteristic note to Buck informing the latter that he intended to mind his own business. It may also have accentuated the conflict that Bowman must have felt between his role on the ad hoc committee, where he was essentially an advocate of geography at Harvard, and his role on the Board of Overseers, where he was meant to sanction the decisions and policies implemented by the administration.

The untenability of Bowman’s defense of geography as a university discipline highlights not only his personal foibles and political misjudgments, but more importantly it points to substantive questions concerning the function and substance of geography. In particular, it illuminates a series of intellectual booby traps that exploded in Bowman’s face but that still litter the administrative and intellectual landscapes geographers are forced to negotiate today. We shall examine these issues in the following section.

Geography as a University Discipline

Bowman’s first defense of geography as a whole, following the Harvard decision, came in his address to the Royal Geographical Society in June, 1948. It was from the text of this address that Bowman read to Jean Gottmann on the sundock of the Queen Mary. In an unmistakable reference to Harvard, Bowman introduced the subject of the evening to his distinguished British audience with the following assurance:

Geography today, with few exceptions, is also included in American university curricula. I regard the exceptions as unimportant because they seem to rest on the unacceptability of persons representing geography rather than on the inherent importance of the subject as a discipline with established and significant principles.28

This was certainly wishful thinking that the demise of Harvard geography was unimportant, whatever the putative reasons. More extraordinary is that a man of Bowman’s political skill and experience could have deluded himself into believing that such pretension, along with the pompous
Cold War polemic in which it was embedded, would convince Conant or anyone else of the potential of and the necessity for geography. Whether Bowman came to realize that such an expectation was unrealistic, even pathetic, is not clear. But when he did eventually come to the rescue, his intellectual defense compounded rather than counteracted his attack on Harvard geography.

From his first involvement in the Harvard affair, Bowman was adamant that a Department of Human Geography should not be established, but rather a Department of Geography. This particular question arose because what seemed to separate Whittlesey, Ackerman, and Ullman from the geologists was their focus on the human rather than the physical side of geography. As we have seen in relation to Whittlesey, Bowman objected strenuously to this separation; after his first meeting at Harvard in 1947 and in the letter accompanying a copy of his Geography in Relation to the Social Sciences, he wrote to Conant:

I would not favor the establishment of a Department of 'Human Geography.' The departments that have reduced or eliminated systematic work in physiography have suffered greatly. Their Ph.D. product is, for the most part, neither well-grounded in the physical principles that underlie the phenomena of physiography and climatology, nor systematically trained in the principles of economics and political science, let us say. They seem to me to be suspended between earth and heaven and to offer neither good discipline nor particularly useful knowledge. What is needed, in my opinion, is a Department of Geography.²⁹

Bowman believed that a separate human geography could hardly be more than "descriptive, fragmentary, and 'easy,'" and directly impugned Whittlesey's work in this regard. "It is systematic geography that is lacking in all of the younger generation of geographers," he insisted. "By that I mean to include at least the elementary aspects of those sciences that contribute to the geographer's equipment." The geographer's task is difficult. "He has to handle physics, chemistry, biology, meteorology, climatology and geology. Why not?"³⁰

Such an expansive claim must have been difficult for Conant to take seriously. While earnestly seeking to locate geography among the "hard sciences," this view of the discipline did little or nothing to delineate the actual terrain of geography. The only coherence Bowman conveys is the integrative, synthetic function claimed for geography, and indeed in the course of the Harvard affair he would claim geography to be not just a synthesis of but the academic progenitor of "hydrology, oceanography, meteorology, geology. The geographer in the face of this incessant splintering of fields of specialized knowledge is the one professional synthesizer" (Bowman 1949, 8). So untenable, even pretentious, must these claims have seemed to Conant the chemist, that the abiding message of Bowman's testimony was undoubtedly his attack on human geography; he repeated it many times. "The trouble with modern geographers," he wrote Gladys Wrigley, "is that they are 'human' geographers and there is no established body of principles, scientific in character, reasonably agreed to by the profession, that give human geography by itself a demonstrated place in the curriculum."³¹

Even in the later stages of the affair when, arguably, Bowman became somewhat more aware of the seriousness of the Harvard action, he kept up his attack on human geography and his advocacy of the geographer as the "one professional synthesizer." A committee formed in 1949 to reconsider the situation of geography at Harvard was unimpressed by Bowman's position. Frederick Merk, a Harvard professor of history, was delegated the task of evaluating Geography in Relation to the Social Sciences for the committee, and he reported that the book was not at all what its title suggested nor what was expected by its sponsors (a Commission of the American Historical Association). It did not fit geography into the social sciences. "It is a half philosophical, half discursive account of geography," Merk noted, calling it "difficult to follow ... digressive and diffuse and disjointed." Bowman claimed too much for geography, Merk concluded.³² At a later meeting, Bowman presented his paper on "Geography as a University Discipline" which was rambling at best, offering defensive assertions of the importance of geography and discordant and obtuse illustrations of what geography might be but providing none of the "established and significant scientific principles" about which earlier he had been so effusive (Bowman 1949). His statements struck many of the committee as all rhetoric, little substance.

Himself a graduate of Harvard where he had worked with William Morris Davis, Bowman's most important contributions to the discipline were physical treatises. Paramount was perhaps his Forest Physiography: along with the U.S. Geological Survey monograph on "Well-Drilling Methods" published in the same year, it was probably his most enduring work (Bowman 1911a, 1911b). Throughout his life Bowman never questioned the methodological primacy of the physical
side of the discipline. He was also a political advocate of the natural sciences over the social sciences, despite the fact that his own career had involved him increasingly in policy questions and the social applications of science. Thus in the New Deal struggle over science, Bowman sided with the natural scientists over the social scientists; the latter provided the central brain trust in the early Roosevelt years and this was one of the main reasons for Bowman's ambivalence toward the New Deal.

If this emphasis on the physical is characteristic, the single-mindedness with which he expressed it is not. Bowman seems not to have anticipated at all the trap he walked into: by castigating human geography as merely descriptive and nonscientific — a question over which there was certainly debate within the discipline — he provided Conant and others with ammunition for declaring that geography was not a university subject. It is possible to understand this grievous political error only in the context of the period.

Roosevelt's death, the end of the war, and the hardening of political and military lines especially in Europe ushered in the Cold War. By 1947 the CIA had begun its internal purge of socialists and communists; the testimony of Louis Budenz was inciting a new anticommunism that fanned the flames of a broader nationalism and anti-Soviet hatred in the U.S.; and in August 1948 the Alger Hiss case broke spectacularly onto the front pages of every newspaper in the land. Joseph McCarthy began his ascendancy in 1950. Far from being ivory towers, university campuses found themselves embroiled in these issues (Schrecker 1986) and indeed Bowman's own fledgling School of Geography would become one of the more prominent casualties in the wake of McCarthy's charge that Owen Lattimore of Johns Hopkins, a close personal friend of Bowman's, was the "top Soviet spy" in the State Department (Harvey 1983; Newman 1983).

Homophobia also played a part in this rising right-wing hysteria. Homosexuality was deemed every bit as un-American as communism and indeed the Truman administration had a policy of barring or dismissing known or suspected gays from sensitive positions on the grounds that they were security risks. If Bowman shared this vision linking homosexuality and communism, his homophobia and anticommunism found separate targets in the Harvard affair. The former was aimed squarely at Whittlesey while the latter was aimed at the social sciences and human geography. Like many conservatives at the time, Bowman viewed the social sciences as a domain of left-wing radicals; social science was seen as a cover for political advocacy. In a series of addresses at universities around the country, Bowman in 1947 embarked on his own campaign to warn the American public of the menacing "evils" of Soviet communism, and in a range of contexts he endorsed the conservative suspicion of the social sciences. His remarks on social science were most explicit in Congressional hearings on the establishment of a National Science Foundation.

In an intense political fight, spanning the years 1945 to 1948, Bowman led a large number of scientists — known as the Bowman Committee (of which Conant was a member) — against several key aspects of the proposed NSF legislation. One of his concerns was the inclusion of the social sciences under the auspices of the NSF. Officially Bowman maintained that the social sciences should be catered for under separate legislation. The study of social phenomena involved "so much of human prejudice . . . and social philosophy," he told the Congressional committee, that the "widest divergence of opinion" exists concerning what is and what is not scientific truth in these fields (Lomask n.d., 205). More forthrightly he wrote to the Harvard astronomer Harlow Shapley, one of those he deemed a dubious radical:

Personally, I believe that a fight for the inclusion of the social sciences will endanger if not wreck the whole business. . . . If there is equal need for the federal financing of research in the social sciences (and I would argue for this if it were confined to research and not contrived as a political and propagandist football) then let a separate board and appropriation be provided for.

The danger arises when a highly controversial matter representing a clear need is tackled on to a generally recognized need that need not be controversial.33

In the deliberations over Harvard geography, Bowman offered similar sentiments in his widely distributed testimony on "Geography as a University Discipline" (Bowman 1949). Presented to the 1949 committee re-examining the question of geography, this document was an embarrassment to Ullman. For Bowman not only endorsed the vision of social science — and by implication, a separate human geography — as a haven for socialists; he was determined to obstruct any such development. Ullman felt obliged to write the chairperson of the committee apologizing for Bowman's implication that "geography is . . . the most important bulwark to communism and bru-
tality in the world . . . . Just because this article may ramble," Ullman continued, "does not mean that Bowman is stupid."34

Apart from the personal considerations, Bowman’s approach to the question of geography at Harvard was dominated by an increasingly outmoded prejudice against an emerging human geography. His attack on human geography was neither veiled nor subtle, and this from a man whose political career had taught him well that silence could speak louder than words. Precisely this perception, after all, was the essence of his reaction at Harvard. Bowman’s silence condemned Harvard geography; his words provided nails for the coffin.

Assessment

The oral wisdom about the Harvard affair is dominated by the discussion of personalities. While this might be good gossip and might provide some comfortable rationalizations, four decades after the event it is dubious history. First, Alexander Hamilton Rice may have fostered a bad impression at Harvard and elsewhere, but he was more a nuisance than the villain of the piece. Likewise, Whittlesey may have “invited disrespect” on the Harvard campus of the 1930s and 1940s, and we would not want to underestimate the depth of discrimination against gays, but this too should not be seen as alone decisive; probably the most revered economist in America in this period was the Briton John Maynard Keynes, himself gay. Whittlesey’s political weakness as a defender of geography was in fact much more important than his sexual orientation. He had not been aggressive in making allies, either in the administration or among other prominent faculty members, apparently contenting himself with paper submissions rather than personal lobbying. And when the fateful decision came, he seemed wholly incapacitated; rather than fight the decree, he seems to have been resigned to it, becoming deeply despondent. It was left to the younger and more aggressive Ullman to coordinate a response (Glick 1982). It would be equally narrow-minded to concentrate all of the blame on Billings or to explain the whole episode as the result of empire building by avaricious geologists. Billings was certainly a catalyst and academic empire building undoubtedly his rationale, but at most he was responsible for taking advantage of an existing vulnerability.

And although it was they who finally made the administrative decision, Buck and Conant can hardly be made to take all the blame either. They certainly remained uninformed or unconvinced about the merits and potential of geography, but that was not entirely their fault. It was not just Whittlesey or even Rice but Bowman too, the sometime star intellectual witness for the defense, who had failed to win respect for the subject and had been unable to make Conant or Buck “see anything in geography.” Thus Kirk Bryan’s is probably the most succinct assessment of the actual causes: “Conant thinks that he is captain of a sinking ship (financially) and he is prepared to jettison anything. Geography was the first good opportunity.”35

Finally there is Bowman. Bowman may have overestimated his own participation when he claimed to be decisive, but it is not a wholly erroneous assessment. He chose silence when his voice could well have led a successful chorus. He certainly contributed substantially to the demise of geography at Harvard. In light of this reconstructed history, one could sympathize with Whittlesey, Ackerman, and Ullman had they felt a sense of abandonment at the hands of Bowman. Yet however culpable, both deliberately and as a result of serious political misjudgment, Bowman should not be transformed into a scapegoat either. There was much about the situation at Harvard that he could not influence, no matter how much he may have thought he could. Still, he did play a central role, and this itself illustrates a more profound problem. For the personal issues that dominate the oral wisdom about Harvard geography are something of a stochastic flotsam riding the waves of far deeper concerns. Most fundamental among these is the question why geography was so vulnerable in the first place.

We can assess the vulnerability of geography under two headings: first there is the institutional weakness of geography, which is closely bound up with the lack of a clear intellectual terrain and set of goals; second is the alleged low caliber of geographical scholarship at Harvard. American geography emerged in the late nineteenth century as an outgrowth of geology and was clearly a weak relation in the consequent bifurcation of geography and geology. The essentially physical origins of American geography resulted not only from the influence of the German school but from more pragmatic considerations; the expansion of the American economy and nation state were above all else a struggle against the natural environment, an attack on wilderness, a rolling back of the fron-
tier. The social need in this context was for an understanding of the physical attributes, resources, and processes of the natural environment, and geography emerged with geology as that part of the academic division of labor devoted to investigating such questions.

The bifurcation of geology and geography beginning by the turn of the century coincided with two crucial developments. First, absolute geographical expansion of the American frontier and of global European colonization were at an end; geographical expansion was no longer the most effective vehicle for economic and political expansion as natural frontiers in the landscape were progressively replaced by social ones. Second, on the intellectual front, environmental determinism was steadily being discredited, thereby removing the most important single rationale (in the context of the period) for an intellectually independent discipline of geography. This was a less troublesome transition in Europe where geography already included a strong human component as a result of both the long social history engrained in European landscapes and the more societal questions provoked by colonial expansion. But in the U.S. these twin developments go some way toward explaining the compounded intellectual weakness of geography as it attempted to split administratively from geology. A common pattern, especially among the older private elite institutions clustered on the East Coast, where geography had been taught under various guises (but not in independent departments) for decades and even centuries, was to adopt a dual defense. With the exclusive explanatory dependence on physical processes now discredited, geography adopted the synthesis of human and physical elements as its primary rationale. The second defense, less intellectual and more pragmatic, was to emphasize the practical utility of geography. Thus in the Ivy League particularly, geography came more and more to be seen, and to justify its own existence, in terms of its service function. At Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania particularly, geography serviced the Business Schools, whereas at Harvard this "sternly practical science" (Livingstone forthcoming) was more environmental and military in its focus in the early twentieth century. In the Midwest, by contrast, the supposed "heartland" of institutional stability in U.S. geography, the enforced transition of the discipline was less difficult. Geography developed there only a few decades behind the passing of the frontier and in symbiosis with the emergence of normal schools and land grant colleges; there was less of a tradition to be overcome and the midwestern institutions were much more practically oriented than were the eastern universities. The practicality of geography and its service function were therefore taken for granted, its intellectual tradition to be strenuously built.

The administrative weakness of geography at Harvard is in part due to these broader considerations. Like most programs splitting from geology, they were numerically weak. While several of the faculty served in both the geology and geography sides of the Division, Whittlesey was the only tenured member wholly devoted to geography. Apart from Ullman and Ackerman the other untenured members, who numbered variously between two and four in the late 1940s, were usually part-time instructors; split appointments were common and some geographers were even positioned wholly in other departments. This administrative weakness was capitalized upon by the geologist Billings who, in casting geography adrift, was explicit about the close scientific relationship of physical geography to geology but profoundly skeptical about the importance of a human geography. The administration could surely be forgiven if they did not immediately understand the intellectual difference between Billings and Bowman, geography's main opponent and proponent.

By all participants there was an inability to convey to nonspecialists — academics and administrators alike — the unique subject matter of geography. The field was always defined so broadly that it was virtually all-inclusive or so narrowly that it had little raison d'être as an independent pursuit. Where broadly defined, geography was meant to cover all aspects of the "man-environment relationship" or of the "spatial distribution of phenomena," meaning that geographers had to be knowledgeable in many fields. The uniqueness of geography, then, must lie in the character of its synthesis of these other specialties, but why was this unique? In the end, the answer that was continually reiterated was that in the act of synthesis, the geographer brings a particular geographical perspective to the task. For a coherent statement of intellectual agenda was substituted tautology; the nonspecialist was asked to make a leap of faith (which is what the 1949 committee charged with reconsidering the geography situation eventually did) in support of geography. When the field was defined in terms too specific to convey its purpose, the result was essentially the same. Thus in his rambling defense of "Geography as a University Discipline," Bowman (1949) devoted
fully a third of his effort to a series of illustrations of the pioneer fringe. The discussion was disjointed, alternately prosaic and arcane, and evocative of no "significant geographical principles"; the subject matter was sufficiently marginal to contemporary geography that had it been more coherent, it would still have conveyed little of the essence of the field.

A deeper and more general disciplinary malaise surfaces during the Harvard affair. Although the most adamant and most influential, Bowman was by no means alone in arguing that a department of human geography was the wrong direction for Harvard to take. Charged with examining the broad field of geography as well as the future of the field at Harvard, the 1949 committee consulted a series of prominent geographers and their works, and with the exception of Ullman who was on the committee, all of the geographers recited versions of what Glick (1983), drawing on Reynaud (1974), has recently called the "unity myth" in geography. Unable to specify a particular object of study that differed from the bordering sciences, the geographers resorted to the traditional claim that the brief of the discipline was to synthesize, thus offering a unified vision of "man-environment relations." For many giving testimony, this also meant that geography was unique in providing a bridge between the natural and social sciences. Thus the raison d'être of geography as a separate field depended wholly on the unity of physical and human geography. A familiar claim now as then, it did not convince the committee, far less Buck and Conant. The 1949 committee was perplexed by its inability to extract a clear definition of the subject, to grasp the substance of geography, or to determine its boundaries with other disciplines. To the end the committee saw the field as hopelessly amorphous. Unlike Conant and Buck, whose decision was dominated by financial rather than intellectual criteria, the committee still felt on completion of its deliberations that it could recommend the reinstatement of geography. They did so, however, without any clear sense of what they were endorsing. Whether they were for it or against it, none of the principals at Harvard seems to have had a clear concept of what geography was. This was the first prong of vulnerability, and one that stays with the discipline today.

The second potential vulnerability was the belief, as Bowman put it, that their Ph.D.s were worthless and their program an intellectual kindergarten. There may have been substance to some of these accusations, especially given the smallness of the program and the relative lack of senior faculty serving full time, but available information today casts some doubt on this assessment. Ackerman and Ullman were certainly young researchers but were widely regarded as among the brightest of a new generation of geographers, and both received AAG honors within a decade of their ejection from Harvard. Whittlesey's contributions were also recognized within the discipline. He had been elected President of the Association of American Geographers for 1944, and was the editor of the Annals who had the foresight to commission what eventually emerged as Richard Hartshorne's The Nature of Geography. As regards their graduate students, Harvard awarded eight Ph.D.s in geography between 1939 and 1955 (Harvard University . . . 1939–1955). Seven of these were in the human side of the field, one in geomorphology. Of these, the majority of the recipients pursued careers in geography, attained at least full professorships in U.S. universities, and earned national and international reputations. Besides Ackerman himself, the first Harvard Ph.D. in human geography, the list included John Augelli, Rhoads Murphey, and Saul Cohen, until recently President of Queens College, City University of New York. This list of personnel of course, is no guarantee against mediocrity, but if Harvard sheltered an intellectual kindergarten of geographers as Bowman alleged, it could hardly have been alone. Given the intellectual caliber of the Harvard faculty and students, as judged by the field itself, it is surely the discipline as much as the Harvard individuals that should bear responsibility in the event that Bowman was correct.

There is some discomfort among geographers themselves concerning the quality of scholarship in this period. The Director of the American Geographical Society, in a letter to Buck supporting the Ackerman promotion that sparked the whole affair, admitted that geography "has had more than its share of pedestrian workers." Ackerman lamented the intellectual provincialism of geographers, claiming that much of the twentieth-century geographical work up to 1945 had been conducted by scholars who were "more or less amateurs in the subject on which they published" (Ackerman 1945, 124). And in a later retrospective, Peter Gould (1979, 140) describes the geography of this period as "bumbling amateurism and antiquarianism." If these descriptions convey even a partly accurate impression of the mediocrity of much
geographical inquiry in this period, then it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Bowman’s indictment makes the discipline itself the scapegoat.

Conclusion

The discipline was sufficiently vulnerable administratively and intellectually that the “academic war over the field of geography” at Harvard was won with the first shot fired. There were bright spots at the same time, as the expected potential of the discipline seemed to be recognized elsewhere; barely a year after the termination at Harvard, Yale announced that it was adding a geography department (“Yale adds geography” 1949) although it survived only two decades. At Harvard hopes were raised briefly as the 1949 committee investigated the future of geography and filed a sympathetic report recommending the establishment of a separate department of geography. For financial reasons, apparently, the recommendation was never implemented, and despite another affirmative recommendation from a reconstituted committee later in the 1950s, geography was never reintroduced. At that time still, the faculty and the administration considered geography “unfinished business.” In 1960, according to David Bailey, Secretary to the Harvard Corporation, geography was still on the Harvard agenda: “when there is enough money,” he said, and “when Harvard can find the right man” geography will again become a field of study (Morris 1962, 239). Formally, the question of geography at Harvard remains unresolved.

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Notes

1. Interview with Jean Gottmann, College Park, Md., 23 March 1982.
2. Derwent Whittlesey to Isaiah Bowman, 7 October 1949, Isaiah Bowman Papers, Johns Hopkins University, Record Group 58 (hereafter JHU).
4. Marland P. Billings to Provost Paul Buck, 6 June 1947, Letter A, JHU. The designations A, B, and C are my own means of identifying the three separate letters Billings sent to Buck under that date.
5. Billings to Buck, 6 June 1947 (Letters B and C), JHU.
6. Billings to Buck, 6 June 1947 (Letter B), JHU.
7. Hartshorne to Buck, 5 June 1947; Wright to Buck, 5 June and 9 June 1947; Whittlesey to Buck, 13 June 1947; Lieutenant Colonel Hubert G. Schenck to Buck, 11 June 1947, JHU.
8. Buck to Bowman, 6 November 1947; Bowman to Wright, 22 March and 31 March 1948, JHU. The Harvard Archives includes a file on the Ad Hoc Committee on Geography, relating to this committee, but “by the nature of these files,” access was denied by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. The Conant Papers at Harvard are likewise closed. (C. A. Elliot to the author, 6 May 1983 and 1 June 1983.)
9. Isaiah Bowman to Robert G. Bowman, 28 October 1947, Bowman Papers previously held by Robert Bowman, Lincoln, Nebraska (these papers are currently being integrated into the Bowman Papers at Johns Hopkins University, but as they were consulted separately they will hereafter be referred to separately with the designation RGB); Bowman to James B. Conant, 26 November 1947, JHU.
12. Whittlesey to George Cressey, 16 April 1948, Harvard, HUG 4877.412; Kirk Bryan to Bowman, 16 March 1948, JHU.
14. Bowman to President Harry Truman, 12 September 1946; Memorandum on a conversation with President Truman, 25 September 1945, JHU; J. B. Conant to Karl Compton, 28 September 1949, Bowman Papers (restricted collection), JHU, Fishing Trip file.
15. Bowman, untitled memorandum, 27 July 1937, RGB.
16. O. M. Miller to Preston E. James, 4 October 1966, American Geographical Society, Correspondence of the Director (Isaiah Bowman), James file, (hereafter AGS).
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20. Bowman to Wright, 8 March and 31 March 1948;
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21. Bowman to H. H. Barrows, 6 November 1920 and
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1932; Whittlesey to Bowman, 3 October and 26
October 1932, AGS, Whittlesey file; Bowman to
Platt, 28 September 1936, JHU; Whittlesey to
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22. Bowman to John Orchard, 23 February 1926; Bow-
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23. Interview with Jean Gottmann, College Park, Md.,
23 March 1982; Interview with George Carter, Long
24. Bowman, Brookhaven Laboratory Conference, 13
October 1948, Memorandum; Bowman to Wright,
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25. E. Ulmann to Bowman, 25 February 1949; Bowman
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26. Bowman to Wright, 22 March 1948, RGB.
27. Bowman to Conant, 26 November 1947, RGB.
28. Bowman, The geographical situation of the United
States in relation to world politics. Draft of an ad-
dress to the Royal Geographical Society, London,
21 June 1948, p. 2, JHU. Bowman was introduced
on this occasion by the Right Honorable Lord Ren-
nell of Rodd and the discussion of his paper was
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and previously Foreign Secretary. In the final printed
version of the address, the allusion to Harvard is
omitted (Bowman 1948).
29. Bowman to Conant, 26 November 1947, JHU.
30. Bowman to Gladys Wrigley, 15 April 1948, JHU.
31. Bowman to Wrigley, 15 April 1948, JHU.
32. Minutes of the Fourth and Sixth Regular Meetings
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33. Bowman to Harlow Shapley, 9 November 1946,
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37. The other four were Edmund Schulman, Benjamin
Earle Thomas Jr., Howard Green, and J. Rowland
Illick. The Division of Geology and Geography at
Harvard in the late 1940s and 1950s also included
among others M. Gordon Wolman, who received a
Ph.D. in geology in 1953, George Lewis (geography,
1958), George Hoffman, who left Harvard for
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38. J. K. Wright to Buck, 5 June 1947, JHU.

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As a peripheral participant in the events, I wish to thank Neil Smith for airing the story of the closing of the Geography Department at Harvard (Smith 1987). I was an undergraduate major at the time and remember the confusion caused by the tight-lipped explanations of the administration. (I was one of those interviewed by the Harvard Crimson.) I confess that I knew nothing of the role played by Isaiah Bowman. Among us undergraduates the primary reason for the “elimination” was believed to be the desire of Geology to obtain the extra funds and positions that would result. Somewhat later, the “lifestyle” of Whittlesey was recognized as a contributing factor.

Whittlesey was a true gentleman, in fact too much of a gentleman. Yet one can hardly fault him for his inability to launch a successful counterattack. I’m sure that when he came to “America’s Oxford,” he never anticipated the need to protect himself from academic predators. I feel that Smith is too easy on the geologist Billings. To say that “at most he was responsible for taking advantage of an existing vulnerability” is to imply approval of the existence of Macht-politik in American academia. So much for the disinterested search for Veritas.

I found it curious that Erwin Raisz was never mentioned as a member of the department. It is true that he was somewhat of an outsider, but his textbook dominated cartography, and his land-form maps were the most popular publications of that time, and still are.

In his analysis of the “vulnerability” of geography, Smith overlooks the most obvious fact of all, the lack of time. Ackerman’s appointment was considered in May 1947; the department was effectively abolished by February 1948. The department never had a chance. I don’t doubt that Whittlesey and Bowman did a poor job of defending the discipline. However, this was at a time when human geography was just emerging from its physical cocoon. I feel that it is somewhat distasteful for contemporary geographers, with the richness of thirty years of intense discussion behind them, to blame the progenitors of the field for their lack of insight.

I must admit to being annoyed and saddened by remarks such as that quoted from Peter Gould, “bumbling amateurism and antiquarianism” (159). Some American geographers give the appearance of perpetually expressing the adolescent attitude that the world began with them, and that the “old man” knows nothing. It is weird for a discipline dating back to the ancient Greeks to base its legitimacy upon a denial of its past. Every other field has enshrined its forefathers as heroes. It is gratifying to see a plaque to Sölich in the academic court of honor in Vienna, or see the pictures of the great men of geography in Berlin. Certainly an appreciation of what the Whittleseys, Harshornes, and Sauers accomplished could not help but establish the maturity of our discipline and the general acceptance that it has long been, and should now be, an integral part of an academic education.

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Neil Smith’s article on “Academic War Over the Field of Geography” (Smith 1987), is timely, welcome, well organized, and very informative. The author very appropriately has sought to go beyond the “oral wisdom” in seeking to develop a perspective on the crisis in geography that occurred at Harvard between 1947 and 1951. A host of issues deserving comment, however, are raised in the article. Constraints of space allow only several of these to be addressed, and necessarily briefly, here. In so doing these comments draw on the perspective which two of us acquired who lived through that experience.

Oral history need not be described as “dubious.” Rather, it should be seen as one means to amplify and possibly to reslant or amend a perspective derived from the written word. Both can be fallible. Both are certainly incomplete. Most of us would place greater credence on the written record, and thus would commend what Neil Smith has done, but we must keep in mind that this record has severe gaps in it. An earlier alternative to our contemporary paper shredding was the time-honored practice of uttering crucial opinions or facts but refraining from putting them in writing. Indeed, Thomas F. Glick in his paper entitled “Before the Revolution: Edward Ullman and the Crisis of Geography at Harvard, 1949–1950” (1982) (and referenced by Smith, 171) has in fact articulated this approach through his statement: “and Ullman was frank only in private.” It is hence from this viewpoint that these present comments are offered.

We concur with Smith that Whittlesey’s and Kemp’s alleged homosexual behavior, although affecting Bowman’s attitude toward Whittlesey, was not a decisive element in the situation. We would nevertheless point out that Harold Kemp, through a pattern of behavior not addressed directly by the article, contributed very significantly to the problems encountered by Whittlesey and by geography at Harvard in the late 1940s. Kemp weakened Whittlesey, and ultimately and indirectly the cause of geography at Harvard, by his deviant public (verbal abuse) behavior throughout an extended period in the 1930s and early 1940s. In essence Kemp’s personal statements in public, in countless one-on-one situations that went beyond just members of the student body to other members of the university community, could only be described as execrable. His ongoing patent mental problems resulted in some of the most vitriolic outbursts directed personally at individuals that we have heard in our lives. Not only did this behavior by an instructor in geography antagonize many, it also had become wide knowledge in the university even in the 1930s. For many in that community, Kemp figured prominently in their collective image of geography at the university, and that image may well have muted what might otherwise have been stronger support for the case of geography at Harvard once the crisis broke.

We believe that Whittlesey’s bringing Kemp to the Department of Geology and Geography was also regrettable for an even more basic reason. In brief, if in place of Kemp a highly promising younger geographer had been brought to Harvard by Whittlesey as an instructor in the 1930s, it is entirely possible that the subsequent intellectual output of such an individual could have affected the eventual denouement of the situation. Conflict in the late 1940s was precipitated and influenced in part by events in the 1930s.

Although we both look back upon Whittlesey warmly as scholar and friend, we believe that Smith’s statement respecting the political weakness of Whittlesey is not strong enough. The problem was deeper than that he “had not been aggressive in making allies, either in the administration or among other prominent faculty members” (p. 167). Whittlesey, in fact, had never effectively involved himself with the broader university community and was seemingly unwilling or incapable of organizing any meaningful projection of geography into that community. We are struck by the fact that he seemed to have withdrawn not only physically
but also in spirit from the university's faculty and administration long before the crisis developed. Further compounding this attribute of Whittlesey's role was of course his poor administrative ability and his virtual collapse after the crisis came, thereby being completely unable to mount any counterattack; Smith assesses this last point quite accurately.

A more particular consequence of Whittlesey's deficiencies as an administrator, coupled with his inability to grasp fully the larger issues and problems confronting the administration, was his fatal support of the idea of establishing a separate department of Human Geography. In view of the financial situation in the university at that time, sound strategy on his part should rather have been to support vigorously the maintenance of the existing administrative structure, which was unchallenged in 1946, namely, the Department of Geology and Geography within the Division of Geological Sciences. After all, even though the word "Geology" came before the word "Geography" and even though geologists outnumbered geographers, this department had had a long and distinguished history during which research and teaching contributions by geographers had by no means been confined to physical geography. If this status-quo stance had been adopted, we feel that there could well have been a chance to resolve the half-time appointment issue. Moreover, we would also point out that to most of us who were there at that time, the department title was not viewed negatively; rather, most of us were comfortable with the fact that in our graduate study we were also involved with Bryan, Raup, Brooks, Raisz, and others at Harvard who were not working primarily in human geography.

We agree with Smith that the crisis stemmed in considerable part from the larger issue of geography as a university discipline, as seen by the administration, but we would also emphasize more than does Smith that personalities—in this case those of Conant and Buck—were critically important at this particular juncture. Conant, Harvard president but also brilliant chemist, was an extremely forceful proponent of the intellectual rigor that is prerequisite to accomplishment in any of the hard sciences. By personality, as well as through his roles of president and scientist, he directed a most penetrating examination of any subject that seemed to border the natural sciences or to label itself a physical science. Likewise, we think Smith is correct in stating that the higher echelons of the Harvard administration, and especially Provost Buck, had comparatively little understanding or appreciation of previous or potential contributions of geographers, but we would further stress the point that the provost by personality also remained stubbornly antagonistic to the educational and scholarly claims of geography. This view would appear to be supported by a long personal discussion which one of us had with the provost at the time of the crisis. Buck's remarks during that meeting not only reflected his comparatively scant knowledge of what geographers were attempting to do, but he also was quite intransigent in holding to his view that even an undergraduate teaching role, such as the presentation of physical and cultural spatial patterns within the U.S., was in fact being effectively performed in the History Department.

Finally, a minor point perhaps, but Smith's article fails to portray accurately the size and diversity of the graduate group at Harvard from 1945 on, or the Ph.D. degrees in geography that were earned and granted over a span of years extending well beyond the period from 1947 to 1951.

In conclusion, we would like to suggest what we think are several of the lessons that can be drawn from the Harvard case.

Geography and geographers should continue to "run scared." We can be just as vulnerable today as we were in 1948 to the whims of administrative decisions, to the demands of financial crunches, and to the potential criticisms of colleagues in other disciplines who might see us as "stealing their thunder" or cutting into what could otherwise be larger funding for them. Every effort should be made to maintain sound departmental public relations with the general university community, and to enlighten administrators about the contributions of geography. It is natural for people to distrust a field which they do not really understand.

If geography among its several roles is to serve as a bridge between physical and social sciences, geography departments should make every effort to maintain both physical and human geography. A tendency for departments to specialize in either physical or human geography should be avoided if the Harvard experience means anything.

Although we would agree of course that the
professional geographer must specialize, we would also like to argue that some effort should be made to establish a "core education" for a geographer and to avoid excessive early specialization of our professionals. Back in 1948 a student did not become immersed in a clearly defined special field until well after he had received his Ph.D. Currently, even undergraduates speak of specializing in computer cartography, or location theory, or what have you. Using the medical profession as an example, geographers should become general practitioners first and specialists later, otherwise we will have increasing difficulty communicating with each other, and even more so with other fields.

Regardless of their political outlook, geographers, like good Republicans, should adopt a new commandment: thou should not speak evil of geography and geographers simply because you do not happen to agree with them. The statements of some of our people have provided ample ammunition for those who would see geography eliminated as a university subject. This tendency, perhaps born of a ghetto complex, to defend one's own work and to loudly decry the objectives and approaches of others in the discipline, is a luxury geography cannot afford.

A final comment brings us clearly to the realm of "public relations." Patently we must make ourselves as necessary and as useful to the research and the publications of other disciplines as possible. Joint research and publication ventures by geographers in concert with individuals in other fields should be expanded well beyond present levels.

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References


Reflections on the Elimination of Geography at Harvard, 1947–51

Neil Smith has done the field of Geography a considerable service with his study of the elimination of Geography at Harvard (1987, 155–72). It is true that this is a case study, and that all cases are unique. However, whether we speak of the elimination of Geography at Harvard nearly four decades ago (1947–51), or in recent years at Michigan, Northwestern, Chicago and now Columbia, many of the issues raised in the course of events at Harvard were repeated in different forms at these other universities. We must be mindful of these experiences, as we seek ways of strengthening the position of Geography in American universities.

Four lessons can be learned from Professor Smith’s history and assessment. The first is the danger of overdependence upon the influential figure, the patron, to save the day. In the Harvard situation, it was Isaiah Bowman who, because he was close to James B. Conant and a member of Harvard’s Board of Overseers, and because of his reputation as a geographer and university president, was perceived by his geography colleagues as the deliverer. Neil Smith analyzes Bowman’s ambivalent attitudes and his ultimately negative role in the unfolding events. Certainly his bias against human geography, based upon his belief that physical geography was the vital foundation of the discipline, did much to undermine the efforts to have the decision rescinded. The moral to be drawn is that dependence on an outsider, no matter how powerful, to affect the dynamics of university policy is risky. Universities are very independent institutions, and individuals are fickle. The politics of departmental defense are best conducted within the appropriate faculties and their committees, and by aggressive departmental action at the first signs of crisis, not as last ditch responses to formal review committees.

A second lesson has to do with the quality of teaching. In an American university, no matter how heavily oriented to research and graduate work a department may be, its public exposure is to large numbers of undergraduates. A good deal of the image of a department, and the mythology that surrounds it, stems from the repute of its faculty in the arena of student public opinion. In this respect, Geography at Harvard was in a weak position. Harold Kemp’s introductory Human Geography course was known as a “white shoe” or a “gentleman’s C” course. It was anecdotal, gave little of the sense of what an academic discipline was all about, and did not convey the scholarly traditions of the field.

None of the Harvard faculty were charismatic lecturers. The courses were invariably small. Moreover, the significant scholarship represented by such figures as Derwent Whittlesey, Edward Ackerman, Edward Ullman, Kirk Bryan, Charles F. Brooks and Erwin Raisz (the latter two on a part-time basis) was not translated into a highly visible, exciting and integrated set of undergraduate course offerings. Probably only those of us who were graduate students were able to appreciate fully the importance of geographical scholarship at Harvard.

Since I was one of the very few who took both undergraduate and graduate Geography degrees at the institution (Edward Ackerman, Donald Patton, and George Lewis were the others—Rhoads Murphey’s undergraduate concentration being History), I may be especially sensitive to the teaching issue. However, my later experience at Clark, to which I was invited in 1965 to help restore eminence to a school that had fallen on hard times, convinces me that a graduate-oriented department that ignores the quality of its undergraduate offerings does so at its own peril. When at Clark we increased the number of geography undergraduate majors from a handful to nearly a hundred and fifty, and nurtured demanding and exciting teaching, we gained increased strength and repute as a graduate program as well. Geography at Harvard did not have Clark’s Martyn Bowden who introduced, with verve and sweep, hundreds of freshmen to geographical ideas.
and concepts through the combination of his own lectures and the selective contributions of his colleagues.

A third lesson to be learned from the Harvard case is that structural weakness and fragmentation is an invitation to disaster. In fact, Geography was a section within the Department of Geology and Geography, not a formal department. The autonomy enjoyed by Geography was highly circumscribed, especially in the area of appointments and promotions. As a student, I had no sense whatsoever that the members of the geography faculty had a framework within which they worked as a team. Even now, I can't conceive of this faculty coming together in meetings of the section—although it surely must have—to talk about any matters beyond those of graduate student admissions and dissertations, summer school teaching candidates and, of course, the crisis when it finally came. There were close friendship networks—Whittlesey, Kemp and Ackerman, and Ackerman and Ullman. But Bryan, Brooks, and Raisz were not organically part of the human geography core. So the number of geographers who constituted the geography section was very small, too small to provide a critical mass for working as an organized force within the division of geological sciences and the university. The problem of size also appears to have been a major weakness at Chicago, Columbia, and Northwestern (although not at Michigan where intra-disciplinary and interpersonal fragmentation undermined the viability of the department).

With only a handful of persons, the weaknesses or foibles of any single individual are magnified in a university community. In addition to Geography's formal dependence upon the good will of Geology for survival, it was hurt by its inability to shape the research directions of the externally funded Institute for Geographical Exploration. A major falling on Whittlesey's part was to have accepted without protest the Institute's establishment in 1931. Strong objection should have been made then on the grounds that its financial patron and director, Alexander Hamilton Rice, clearly lacked proper academic credentials.

When institutes and centers are spawned by a department or arise through outside intervention, a firm effort must be made to assure their control. A department's core needs structural integrity, and the allegiance of the core's members has to be assured even while it may be intellectually important and/or politically practical to pursue inter- and cross-disciplinary links.

A fourth lesson has to do with the capacity of departments to create a mutual support network. In the Harvard case, there was such capacity. Small size, of course, may work against this, but cohesiveness can increase limitation of size. The argument has been advanced by some that Geography at Harvard had far too small a faculty to create a meaningful network of contacts within the field. Certainly Harvard's human geography section was much smaller than that of other small but major departments. However, successful efforts were made to augment the faculty on a short-term basis. I took summer courses with Walter Kollmorgen, Joseph Russell and Thomas Smith. These visitors added dimensions that were important to students—the agricultural/cultural sphere, and applied industrial location. Moreover, such individuals helped us to develop broader contacts within the field.

The importance of "networking" is crucial for graduate students, and Harvard's faculty and students were successful in creating a mutual support network. I don't think that my personal experience was unrepresentative. Thanks to Derwent Whittlesey, I met Stephen Jones, a Harvard Ph.D. in Geography (1934). He invited me to teach at Yale for a semester. The contact with Steve Jones sparked my interest in developing a systems approach to political geography. Joe Russell's course became a basis for my eventual interest in marketing geography—a field in which I became engaged in the mid-'50s under the tutelage of William Applebaum, and in which Howard Green, a fellow doctoral student at Harvard, had preceded me.

Networking also led to my first teaching post opportunity. Former fellow geography student, George Lewis, who preceded me to Boston University, alerted me to an opening and facilitated my joining the Geography Department there in 1952. And Edward Ackerman invited me to become a member of the NAS-NRC's ad hoc Committee on Geography in 1963—my first exposure to the profession's national scene.

If we were not a large group of students at Harvard, we were a band whose ties endured and became even stronger after graduate school. In addition to those that I've mentioned
as having received Geography doctorates at Harvard (Ackerman, Green, Jones, Lewis, Murphy, Patton), the list includes John Augelli, Paul Buckholtz, Rowland Illick, Robert Johnson, Benjamin Thomas, Robert Williams, Peter Nash (in Planning), and Gordon Wolman (in Geology). Among the undergraduates were Ronald Beveridge, Andrew Burghardt, Thomas Scott, Kempton Webb and William Withington. John K. Wright, AB, Ph.D. (in History), and Preston James (AB, AM) were of the older generation, but their identification with Harvard geography remained strong.

Bowman’s characterization of Geography at Harvard as a “kindergarten” stems from his view that human geography was not a properly scientific field of study. If the grounding in physical geography of most of Harvard’s second generation Geography degree-holders lacked the breadth and depth that the first generation of Harvard physiographers had possessed, it is also true (and contrary to Bowman’s assertions) that most of us in human geography were broadly trained in a related social science field or in history. Thus as an undergraduate, I concentrated in Government in addition to the major in Geography.

The results of social science cross-disciplinary training speak more loudly than Bowman’s rhetoric. He was naive when it came to Social Science. Whittlesey, educated in History and Geography, had a conceptual and methodological approach to the study of the national state that was powerful in its sweep, developmental in its approach, and meticulous in its design. When Bowman, the physical geographer, entered the world of human geography, the scholarly results were amateurish. Bowman’s New World was an encyclopedia of facts thrust upon a base of physical geographic description. In contrast, Whittlesey’s Earth and State, which looked at nation-state building as an evolutionary process in harmony with spatial features and patterns, remains a landmark study in political geography.

The Harvard experience does not prove that there is no place in a university for a school focused on human geography. Rather, it demonstrates the failure of Harvard to have made a more serious effort to reinforce the very small faculty numbers so that foci in such areas as the cultural-archaeological, the ecological, the sociological, and the social-psychological could have been included.

My education at Harvard was not continuous. I entered as a freshman during the summer of 1943. My first brush with Geography was with Harold Kemp’s Human Geography I course. Compared to voluminous lecture or reading notes in freshman History, Economics and English, my freshman Geography I notes were sparse and reflected a simple set of man-land relationship observations. I then left for the armed forces, returning in 1946. It was Whittlesey’s course on political geography that stimulated my interest in Geography as a major, and his field course on Greater Boston (taken with many graduate students) that gave me an understanding of the elegance of environmental possibilism. I took my Bachelor’s degree and was already enrolled in graduate studies when the department was closed in 1948. A year later, I interrupted my work to spend two years in New York (taking some studies at Columbia on a part-time basis with George Renner), returning to Cambridge in 1951. By then the decision to eliminate Geography had been confirmed, and all that remained for me to do was to take qualifying examinations and write my dissertation with Whittlesey.

During the 1946–49 period, I benefitted immensely from the contact with Whittlesey, Ackerman and Ullman. They were role models for me and, from their different perspectives and interests, an invaluable group of tutors. Sunday afternoons with other graduate students at Whit’s, during this period and in the early ’50s, were events that revealed the dignity, keen intellect and essential humanity of this shy and retiring scholar. When I took my first teaching post and was assigned certain courses that I had never even taken, Whit gave me his notes. I remember especially the power of his field observations of Anglo-America. The demise of Geography at Harvard was a tragedy for him although his spirit was not broken. Indeed, shortly before his death, he agreed to teach a political geography course at MIT in the hopes that it would pave the way for developing a permanent post for Geography there which then might be occupied by one of his “disciples.”

But Derwent Whittlesey was too far removed from the harsh realities of university political life to build and protect a department. His was the world of withdrawn scholarship, suited to writing and to serving as mentor for graduate students. Geography at Harvard in the post-
World War Two years therefore lacked the leadership and the organizational strategy for assuming a lead role in the directions that American geography was about to take.

This is perhaps the greatest tragedy—the opportunity that was lost even though in 1947 Whittlesey had brought to the Harvard scene Ullman and Ackerman, both of whom would play pioneering roles in the field in the '50s and '60s. The two young faculty whom Harvard rejected were to prove highly influential in moving American geography from its traditional focus on areal differentiation to spatial patterning and systems analysis. With a strong departmental base, Geography at Harvard could have played a leadership role in the profession, and the University would then have been the beneficiary of a renewed center of geographic excellence rather than being marked as having eliminated an important field of study. After the department's closing, the University's efforts to find a place for the field in the Planning School, and the eventual establishment of a Computer Graphics Laboratory, were failures as a strategy for saving Geography. For all of the Laboratory's important contribution to postgraduate training, it could not provide broad-based intellectual exposure to the discipline, or the traditions of scholarship and mentor-disciple relations that emerge within a field's doctoral training environment.

I look back at my Harvard education in Geography with nostalgia, pride and regrets—the nostalgia of recalling an era that has passed, the pride of having been identified with a group of illustrious faculty scholars and talented fellow alumni, and the regret that Harvard's administration failed to carry out the primary role of university administrations—their stewardship over major scholarly disciplines. The elimination of Geography at Harvard University was a loss to the field, but it also was a loss to an institution which has for 350 years taken pride in its role as a preeminent national and international center for scholarship and learning.

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References

On Whittlesey, Bowman and Harvard

In this invited commentary I wish to propose modest revision of the emphases placed on the roles of Whittlesey and Bowman in "Academic War over the Field of Geography" (Smith 1987).

Before Whittlesey accepted a post at Harvard University, a very close friendship with Harold Kemp had already been formed. This seems to have developed while Whittlesey was studying at the University of Chicago, 1912–15.1 When he accepted a position as Acting Assistant Professor of History at Denison University, Granville, OH, Harold Kemp went with him. While in Granville, Whittlesey wrote to his family (January 10, 1916) "Nobody but Harold knows how much I like him and how hard a pull it will be if we have to separate."2 Months later Whittlesey and Kemp returned to the University of Chicago where they remained the closest of friends. Kemp undertook studies leading to Bachelor and Master's degrees. Whittlesey, who had already completed these degrees in history, undertook doctoral work in geography and history. He assumed a post in the geography department and began demonstrating a competence which was to win attention. Notably, with Wellington Jones he wrote Types of Climate (1922) and An Introduction to Economic Geography (1925). In 1926 Whittlesey proposed that Kemp be appointed to a junior instructorship in the Department of Geography. Charles Colby joined him in supporting Kemp. The matter was made departmental and a vote taken. Jones and Goode voted against Kemp's inclusion. H. H. Barrows cast the deciding vote against Kemp.3 When the suggestion of a position at Harvard arose, Whittlesey at once showed his interest. He was given a post as assistant professor (a reduction of rank and salary). He wrote to the Dean, claiming that he had expected appointment as associate professor, then wrote to R. Blanchard after the fact.4 He accepted the offer and wrote to Blanchard, "As I understand it the plan is to have me devote all my time the first semester to assisting you with your two courses, "Principles of Human Geography" and "Regional Geography of Western Europe."5"6

Assisting Blanchard became something of a vexation to Whittlesey. He administered and graded examination papers for Blanchard (who spent much of the year in Europe and preferred to spend Christmas there), then reported results to Blanchard in Grenoble, e.g. "Your class in Alpine geography was successful. It was not necessary to turn in a grade of F for anyone."7 Whittlesey attempted to arrange summer school teaching for Blanchard (e.g., at Berkeley in 1931),7 helped him by sending photographs to editors to illustrate his articles, and otherwise looked after departmental details. Stephen Jones has written that Whittlesey "came to hate Blanchard, who regarded an assistant professor as an assistant to the professor, and how!?"8 Whittlesey was tied down by the tasks of administrative detail: Blanchard was free to lecture on both sides of the Atlantic and to travel. It was not what Whittlesey had expected. Whittlesey began to seek promotion for himself, develop a departmental program of "chorology" and bring his friend Harold Kemp into the department. Whittlesey had already corresponded with W. M. Davis on this subject. He had helped Kemp obtain a position at Dartmouth College and had secured a winning letter from Barrows supporting Kemp, even though two years earlier Barrows had cast the deciding vote denying Kemp a junior instructorship in the Chicago department. The Dartmouth post became for Kemp a stepping-stone to appointment at Harvard.

All the above was possible as Blanchard was not interested in building the department, while his work was beginning to focus ever more on Alpine France. Whittlesey's effort to substitute the term "chorology" for human geography (it was "less clumsy") failed, notwithstanding a seven-page document which was sent to Harvard authorities.9 In fact the memo probably muddled matters, as others could at least understand the term "human geography" while geographers themselves were still unclear on the meaning of the terms chorology and chorography. (Colby, James and Whittlesey used the terms though each intended different meanings.) And since Harvard's strength in geography had, since the succession of Shaler,
time on field work that there was little time to publish (eyestrain and a supposed volume on Europe also, Whittlesey claimed, deferred Kemp's publication). Whittlesey claimed for Kemp "the light touch," "the quality of geographic maturity"; "His teaching is superb—wise, sound, and stiff" (necessary "to ward off the snap hunters"); "unluckily he has been criticised by two geographers... One of these is Atwood. The other is Blanchard who, busily turning out pot-boilers while doing none of the work for which Harvard was paying him (Kemp and I were doing that) has said that Kemp is 'stupid and lazy.'" Whittlesey continued, "if there are any brilliant geographers, Kemp is one of them. Isn't it sad that these two men (Atwood and Blanchard) should be deferred to by Harvard University?... "He (Kemp) is well launched on the writing of a book which will be of highest value to American geography."

Whittlesey concluded his letter by urging that "if Dean Birkhoff does not ask your opinion, I hope you will give it, unasked, to President Conant."19 Bowman requested of Whittlesey (January 30, 1937) "a set of Kemp's papers" and remained distant from commitment.20 In this same year (1937) Blanchard severed his relations with Harvard and returned to Grenoble. Whittlesey and Kemp were alone. The curriculum included but nine courses. In 1938, in congratulating G. T. Trewartha on a promotion, Whittlesey wrote "there is no promotion at Harvard, at least in this department,"21 and in 1940 "there is no secret about the situation here. Conant is not a money-getter, and is afraid Harvard is going bankrupt. Therefore we can have no expansion apparently ever."22

Of course the Great Depression had also played its unhappy part in the no-growth story of geography at Harvard. Yet the fact remains that Whittlesey had not developed a meaningful geography program, had not made his mark on the Harvard Yard, and above all had selected a departmental colleague—Kemp—on the grounds of friendship rather than capability. There were many hard-working and very capable geographers available to him for the asking, young scholars who would have invested themselves fully in Harvard geography as Kemp was not able to do. Reflecting on the matter, Kirk Bryan later wrote, "Beginning last year everything looked up. We lost Kemp who was a handicap."23

Whittlesey's selection of Kemp as a helpmate
for nearly two decades was surely the largest single mistake made in the sad affair. A scattered correspondence exists on this subject. At this juncture it should be reiterated that it is Whittlesey's judgment regarding Kemp and not his scholarship, or his contribution to this association or the larger geographic community which is here written of. It is perhaps appropriate to mention that, feeling Whittlesey's contribution had remained little known (his passing seems not to have been formally noticed in these Annals), I encouraged one of my students, James E. LaRocco (1978), to write an M.S. thesis on "The Life and Thought of Derwent S. Whittlesey." This was accomplished largely from original sources and contains good narrative and perhaps the most complete bibliography of Whittlesey's work to date.

Now let us consider the role of Isaiah Bowman. As an undergraduate Bowman assisted and studied with William Morris Davis (he also came to know, among others, N. S. Shaler and R. DeC. Ward) (see G. J. Martin 1980). He also studied with Mark Jefferson at Ypsilanti's "Nursery of American Geographers," the Michigan State Normal School (see Martin, 1968). With Davis he learned physiography and discipline; with Jefferson, a one-time Davis student and a lifetime admirer, he learned especially to put "man" into his geography. Bowman's correspondence with both Davis and Jefferson continued until their deaths (in 1934 and 1949 respectively). He never forgot the work of either, and the role of Harvard in producing the first generation of professional geographers in the U.S. (For a list of thirty of Davis's more distinguished students, see James and Martin 1978, 188-89. For further elaboration of the work and role of Davis's students in the U.S. and abroad, see Chorley et al. 1973.) From 1905 to 1915 Bowman was a member of the Yale University Geography Department. Here he became one of the pioneers in the ontographic departure from Davison physiography (Martin 1981). He pioneered in the study of the distribution of man, regional studies (with special reference to Latin America), forms of determinism, which melded to form a genre of thought productive of The Andes of Southern Peru (1916), The New World (1921, [Supplement 1923], 1924, 1926 and 1928), Desert Trails of Atacama (1924) and The Pioneer Fringe (1931). He was also the driving force behind the English translation (1920) of Jean Brunhes's La Géogra-

phie Humaine. In 1934 he published Geography in Relation to the Social Sciences, written in response to a mounting concern regarding the nature of geography and in succession to the "Michigan definition," the Wisconsin "creed," and A. E. Parkins's questionnaire. Certainly this book was the best of its kind published in North America to that time, characterized by Gladys Wrigley as "a universal introduction to the study of geography—for professional and layman alike" (1951). This sample of his work is sufficient to stay the notion that his most important contributions to the discipline were physical treatises, and also to repudiate the strange conception that the hand of "bumbling amateurism and antiquarianism" (Gould 1979) was upon the geographic community.

In 1915 Bowman left Yale to become the Director of the American Geographical Society. By 1930 the Depression had reduced the Society to a low estate. Bowman was concerned about finances, as were other of the officers. In these circumstances Hamilton Rice's wife (the former Eleanor Elkins Widener) proposed to the Trustees of the Society that she provide a one-million-dollar endowment for the Society and a further one-million dollars as working capital. In return, her husband would be made President of the Society, a suggestion that was revised to a request for the position of Director. On the occasion of the meeting when the proposal was placed before Society officers, Archer Huntington asked Bowman to excuse himself and then suggested to the officers, "Gentlemen, I do not believe Mr. Bowman is for sale." The matter was closed. Yet Bowman was never to forget it. He wrote notes on it for his own archives and quite certainly he never forgave Rice. Meanwhile Mrs. Rice took a proposal to Harvard (where she had earlier donated the Widener Library) and found President Lowell receptive. In return for donating a building on the Harvard Yard to house the Institute of Geographical Exploration and providing the funds to operate the Institute, Hamilton Rice was to be given a professorship. The Institute became a reality. Yet it and the geographic wing of the Geology Department did not grow together. In fact there was very little (if any) exchange between them. And it is probable that the faculty, one of the most distinguished in the country, did not approve of the award of a professorship in exchange for financial considerations. Bowman certainly did not
and later tweaked Conant on the subject of the price of a Harvard professorship.

In any case "exploration" may not have been regarded as a university subject, yet on the Yard there may well have been a linkage in the minds of some between the Institute and the geographers in the Geology Department. At the A.G.S. Rice had been involved in the development and financial support of the School of Surveying. After donating some equipment to the Society, he nevertheless took it to Harvard to help equip his Institute. Apparently he also took some equipment which he had not donated.22 While Bowman was not anxious to pursue the matter, three members of the A.G.S. Board "all very influential, felt otherwise." The matter was transferred to the Harvard Yard, where resolution of the contentious issue was brought about.23 Harvard administration was involved and the impression left with them could hardly have been satisfactory. One can find references to "the Hamilton Rice affair" in Bowman's correspondence and his notes. For example, in writing to Philip Henry some ten years later he mentioned "the incessant sniping of Hamilton Rice while he was on the Council."24 The point is that Rice and his Institute and Whittlesey, in charge of the geographic appendage of the Geology Department, were not able to cooperate and help one another, and Bowman did not respect either of them. The matter of Harvard geography was in abeyance during the years of World War II; afterwards came termination. But why blame Bowman?

Bowman was, in 1947, sixty-nine years of age. He invariably worked seven days a week, rarely less than twelve hours a day, notwithstanding the fact that he was under the care of Doctor Thomas Brown. He was responsible to Johns Hopkins University. This meant meeting and working with the University Board of Trustees, writing the annual report, raising money for the university, giving talks in the community, reading, and making reply to faculty members who sent him copies of their publications, and nurturing the geography department which he had founded in 1942-43. He brought a galaxy of first-rate minds into juxtaposition with one another (at just one of the departmental seminars in 1947 he arranged to have Lattimore, Stefansson and Wilkins participate in addition to faculty and graduate students), and in that same year sought a $2 million endowment for the department. Shortly thereafter he tried to establish a School of Political Geography and proposed an endowment of twelve million dollars for that purpose. He corresponded endlessly, saw many people in his office, wrote notes for his files, articles for newspapers, Hopkins tracts, and geographical essays, prepared statements to be delivered before Congressional Committees, and maintained a close tie with the American Geographical Society. He also planned to write several books relating to his experiences, with special reference to international affairs. With such an array of tasks on hand the matter of Harvard geography could not have commanded Bowman's attention in quite the way that once it would. And Bowman had seen geographic standing ebb and flow at both Harvard and Yale; Yale, for example, has experienced four surges of geography followed by four terminations. (Bowman left in 1915 pursuant to the third collapse of the geographic undertaking. See Martin 1968).

By 1947 Bowman well knew that a university president had to be firm once a decision had been made. When Conant made his decision, it was the presidential prerogative which Bowman respected. (In the previous year, 1946, Bowman had dealt with Conant on matters relating to the founding of the National Science Foundation and composition of the Atomic Energy Commission at the request of President Truman. In these negotiations Bowman came to realize that Conant was intelligent and incisive). Quite additional to this point of view was Bowman's lack of respect for Whittlesey and his accomplishment. The latter had taken nearly two decades to accomplish so little. Consider what Bowman had accomplished as Director of the A.G.S. 1915-35, and he had built a staff the envy of any university department in the country. Bowman did not like Whittlesey's selection of Kemp as a geographer-colleague: "Kemp was a responsibility of Whittlesey and Bryan. Why did they keep him on? To my way of thinking, he positively invites disrespect."25 Bowman did not think well of Whittlesey's scholarship. As early as 1930 Bowman could write to W. M. Davis of Whittlesey, "I see no depth to him yet."26 After reading The Earth and The State Bowman wrote to G. M. Wrigley (March 11, 1941):

A truly appalling book... The style (or want of it) makes the book turgid beyond any possibility of developing interest... I deplore its fundamental
ignorance. It is filled with assertions that are just not true.
I feel that I must put into the archives of the Society
this letter of condemnation. It will not see the light,
also! But I feel that even this deficiency is a small
matter compared with the need for a protest lodged
somewhere and in writing.27

Miss Wrigley replied, "this is a simple cry of
joy over your letter on Whittlesey. . . . I could
not read his book—I fell asleep after the first
couple pages."28

There were doubtless other reasons why the
two men really were not en rapport. These rea-
sions perhaps went back a number of years.
Bowman had invited Whittlesey to render The
New World in a manner suitable for the eighth
grade. Whittlesey entered upon the task, com-
pleted a chapter, "The Political Geography of
Austria,"29 then, when Bowman secured agree-
ment from the World Book Company to com-
plete the work and so wrote to Whittlesey, the
latter withdrew from the commitment. He
claimed that in only the previous week he had
been invited to participate in the development
of six other books, that he could not accept
the terms of the contract, and that in any case
he had just signed another contract.30 Later
Bowman invited Whittlesey to represent the
A.G.S. on the occasion of Karl Compton's in-
aguration as President of the Massachusetts
Institute of Technology. Whittlesey replied to
Bowman on the day of the inauguration (June
6, 1930) that he could not participate owing to
lack of regalia.31

It is an intellectual curiosity that such small
matters are able to drive such deep wedges into
the human fabric. Such wedges litter the land-
scape of twentieth century American geo-
graphy and have weakened the structure from
within. (It seems not to be until the late 1950s
that disciplinal schism, pursuant to the rejec-
tion of a c. 60-year regional theme, reinforced
"human wedges" which in turn, reinforced dis-
ciplinal schism. The resultant plural eclecticism,
disconsonant with the public image of geo-
graphy, seems to have encouraged departmental
reduction in the universities. The collapse of
geography at Harvard, 1948, seems not to be
part of this reduction; rather it seems to have
occurred during a period of nationwide insti-
tutional growth of the subject, which took place
following both World Wars.) To return to Whit-
tlesey and Bowman: at a formal level they could
correspond (at least Whittlesey could and did
write to Bowman when he needed something).
An example of their necessary alliance was the
occasion for repudiation of the infamous Ren-
er map published in Colliers, June 6, 1942.32
Just as Bowman could write adversely about
Whittlesey, so the latter could write about the
former (relative to a geography book that was
planned for wartime consumption) . . . "we are
fortunate in having the problem shunted our
way instead of having Bowman put it in the
hands of his German staff."33 The point is that
when Conant decided to terminate geography
on the Harvard Yard, Bowman was not well
disposed toward either Rice or Whittlesey, and
felt they were liabilities to the development of
graphy. Yet as President of Johns Hopkins
University, had he wished to try to save ge-
ography at Harvard, what could he have ac-
complished other than a public squabble? The
President of Johns Hopkins University cannot
publicly argue with the President of Harvard
University. Bowman was an experienced ad-
ministrator; he had administered the American
Geographical Society for twenty years, the Johns
Hopkins University for fourteen years, and he
knew, corresponded and talked with or served
six U.S. presidents. Bowman knew that once a
president of Conant's standing had made a de-
cision, the die was cast. The rest of the activity
involving committees and such was just so much
window dressing. In public Bowman's hands
were tied. In private Bowman could and did
talk with Conant. At a Brookhaven Laboratory
Conference, October 13, 1948, just two days
after Bowman's first Harvard Board of Over-
seers meeting, he attempted to show Conant
that geography was a part of science.

At dinner in the evening of October 13 at the Lab.
Conant, Rabi (physicist, Columbia), and I had a three-
cornered talk on science from the historical stand-
point—the importance of the study of great leaps
of thought—Conant on Lavoisier and Boyle and I
on Foucault, pendulum experiment and Eratost-
thenes's first measurement of size of earth. Also
told of our morning stop on way out where I showed
Day and McClellan and Bob Fowler one of the
asymmetrical Long Island valleys and the attribu-
tion to them of effects of rotational deflection. My
purpose was to show Conant that geography had
as good examples as chemistry—and as much claim
to consideration as a science.
The "human geographers" throw away this sci-
entific heritage and step outside the great tradi-
tions of science when they limit their work to de-
scriptive elements.34

Bowman had known Conant for several years
(they corresponded and exchanged telephone calls). Bowman knew of Conant's honed mind and his appreciation of discipline. It is very probable that on the occasion of the dinner mentioned above, Bowman talked to Conant of his correspondence with Albert Einstein concerning rotational deflection effects upon Russian rivers and Einstein's article (1926) on "The Causes of Meander Formation of Rivers and the So-called Baer's Law." It was with the notion of geographic discipline in mind that Bowman wrote to Conant:

In my own teaching of years ago I made my courses disciplinary. They were anything but easy. The earth-man relationship is vital to such a purpose. That is why I also said last Thursday that I would not favor the establishment of a Department of "Human Geography."

Conant wrote to Bowman asking his advice concerning the addition of an associate professor in geography and whether Ackerman was the best man for the position. Bowman replied:

I do feel, though, that it is not necessary today to strive to justify geography as a subject worthy of cultivation in the leading universities. The development of the field during the past twenty-five years or so in the government and in the colleges and universities seems to provide evidence of its cultural, educational and practical values ... the failure to maintain adequate facilities for geographical research and teaching is a definite weakness in a university that aspires to maintain leadership. Geographical understanding is so sorely needed today that it would seem a positive disservice ... not to maintain a competent department of geography ... it (geography) crosses the boundaries and links together so many other subjects that its development seems in keeping with Harvard's policy of breaking down the compartmentalization of learning."

Bowman continued in this letter to rank Ackerman "among the three or four best men in his general age group" and opined that "Ackerman is a good bet." In concluding Bowman wrote, "may I express a hope that some day a wholly independent department of geography can be set up at Harvard?" The tone and detail of this 900-word letter is such that Bowman could have left no doubt in Conant's mind that he wanted an advance made in geography at Harvard.

When I wrote to Conant about geography, Bowman and Harvard he replied that he did not know Bowman. When I sent him evidence of an ongoing "Dear Jim"—"Dear Bow" correspondence, he replied that he now recalled Bowman, but that he had nothing to say in any case, and that his papers were to be sealed for 100 years from the time of his death (1978). I suspect that when the Conant papers are opened in 2078, they will reveal that the personal factor bulked large in termination of geography on the Harvard Yard. Withal Bowman remains one of the most significant friends American geography has encountered this century.

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Notes
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7. Whittlesey to C. O. Sauer, 6 May 1929, University of California, Berkeley.
9. Memorandum, Whittlesey to the Board of Tutors, Division of Geography, Harvard University, 5 November 1929, Harvard.
14. Whittlesey to Bowman, 28 January 1937, JHU.
15. Whittlesey to Bowman, 28 January 1937, JHU.
16. Bowman to Whittlesey, 30 January 1937, JHU.
19. Kirk Bryan to Bowman, 27 March 1948, JHU.
22. Bowman to Forbes, 9 January 1933, AGS.
23. Forbes to Bowman, 3 January 1933, AGS.
24. Bowman to P. W. Henry, 27 October 1942, JHU.
25. Bowman to J. K. Wright, 31 March 1948, JHU.
26. Bowman to William Morris Davis, 16 June 1930, AGS.
27. Bowman to G. M. Wrigley, 11 March 1941, JHU.
28. Wrigley to Bowman, 12 March 1941, JHU.
29. Whittlesey to Bowman, 1 December 1921, AGS.
30. Whittlesey to Bowman, 4 January 1921, AGS.
34. Memorandum, Brookhaven Laboratory Conference, 13 October 1948, JHU.
35. Bowman to James B. Conant, 26 November 1947, JHU.
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37. Bowman to Conant, 8 December 1947, JHU.

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For a History of Geography: Response to Comments

You do not ask, as poor Chas Colby always does, "Is this just pure geography or am I spilling over into Sociology or History?" ... Damn these boundary fellows who think the Lord created "subjects." ... Simon-pure geography is a blind man feeling the elephant's tail.

Isaiah Bowman

The foregoing comments and dozens of letters from other scholars, geographers and non-geographers, suggest that the story of Harvard geography still evokes intense interest and not a little passion fully forty years after the fact. Perhaps most valuable to me have been the reminiscences, suggestions and criticisms from those people who were in and around Harvard in the 1940s and who witnessed first-hand specific facets of this "academic war." The allure of personal relationships and antagonisms, so dominant in the tangled but enduring oral mythology, surely accounts for some of this interest, but the range of responses makes clear that the elimination of geography at Harvard, and the way in which it was done, had a profound effect well beyond the boundaries of the discipline. The fascination with the Harvard story today also results from contemporary events; the last ten years have seen departments closed at Michigan, Pittsburgh, Temple, Columbia, Chicago and Northwestern, and these share some disturbing similarities with the Harvard fiasco. As the commentaries by Saul Cohen and John Augelli and Donald Patton suggest, there are far larger questions embedded in the details of the Harvard affair.

There are certainly enough exceptions to this assessment to prevent it from being a blanket indictment, but as a reasonable generalization it is all too recognizable. The history of geographical thought is descriptive in that it too often takes the form of reciting book and article titles with their applicable dates, appointments and promotions, again with dates, and any other meritorious deeds and honors of the "great men" (and perhaps one woman) of geography. There are lists of geographers' famous correspondents, presumably in the hope that the kudos will rub off, for there is scant assessment of whether the interchange of letters was in any way significant. Also there are long, involved quotes that do little else than provide an excuse for the next quote. This kind of history is dull in that the reader must already have an abiding fascination with the subject in order to endure the detail. There is little or no attempt to connect the stranded details of a life to larger historical events and thereby to give
them meaning. Worst of all, the history of geographical thought tends to be defensive. It is all too often an internal history where the activities and careers of geographers are interpreted as if their significance began and ended within the microcosm of the few thousand professional geographers. The worldly event is rendered less important than the breathless fact that the geographer was there. He even exchanged words with some of the famous people.

Where such internally focused history is the norm, the “great men of geography”—the heroes of the discipline—become the natural and exclusive princes in a looking-glass search for identity. Such an approach represents not only a profoundly false and long discredited conception of history, but a gross disservice to geography. The discipline is measured in a set of self-reflecting and self-distorting mirrors, as if it needed protection from the outside world. But real geography and geographical ideas have been far too important in world history and in people’s lives to be left to such internal decomposition.

Geographers have long complained that they are sadly misunderstood and that no one does capes and bays or capital quizzes any more, that is, “trivial pursuit” geography. But to the extent that we ourselves present our own story as a “trivial pursuit” history, an apparently unending hagiography of heroes, their curriculum vitae annotated into dull books, we collaborate in this trivialization of geography. The history of geography could be an intellectual emblem for the discipline, encouraging historians, social theorists and natural scientists to investigate further, but when it is characterized by the three Ds, it conveys to otherwise interested intellectuals the unfortunate impression that there is little of substance here. Such a defensive, self-conscious history, and the discipline’s overall “angst,” as my Rutgers colleague Frank Popper calls it, communicates to non-geographers that even geographers are not serious about their discipline or its history, so why should others be? Defensiveness if self-fulfilling.

All of the above has direct relevance to the Harvard debacle. Knowledge of the demise of Harvard geography is surprisingly prevalent among intellectuals, especially those with Harvard connections, and those who otherwise recall the widespread debate and discussion that took place in education circles at the time. Many of these scholars are as embroiled in the mythology as are geographers, but others are well aware of what transpired. Many of them had direct dealings with the principles. In this respect, I think Geoffrey Martin’s attempt to whitewash Bowman’s involvement, preserve the reputation of the hero, and cast the blame solely onto a quisling Whittlesey not only flatly denies the archival evidence, contradicts the affectionate if critical testimony of the eye witnesses, and has the effect of continuing the personal mythology; far more damaging, it sends a signal to those in the know and especially those who knew Bowman personally—his weaknesses as well as his strengths—that indeed geography is not a serious intellectual pursuit insofar as historians of geography are more concerned to make false heroes than real history. Isaiah Bowman may well have been “one of the most significant friends American geography has encountered” this century, but this surely does not mean that we ought to cover up his mistakes or omit discussion of troubling consistencies in his life and career, all out of some misguided, narrowly conceived, and defensive disciplinary loyalty. Trivial disciplinary history is not a trivial matter; it trivializes geography and invites others to do likewise.

I would take a rather different stance from Professors Augelli and Patton who exhort that geographers should be as “good Republicans,” refusing to be openly critical of each other in public, refusing to expose any dirty disciplinary linen to others. It would be foolhardy to dismiss the old adage that “appearances are everything,” but in the case of geography I think that any outward appearance of unity and tranquility fools only geographers. The history of geography does not simply happen with the passing of time, but is an active creation, the result of struggle. There is a struggle over which ideas best explain the past, a struggle over concepts appropriate for current research, and also, insofar as scientific research is obliged to have some redeeming social importance, a struggle over the way in which the historical geographies of contemporary landscapes are to be fashioned. These struggles are as intermeshed as the history of today and the history of yesterday, the history of actions and the history of ideas. One of the most damaging aspects of plodding histories of geographical thought is the self-conscious reluctance to enter this fray, to test ideas, to engage in intellectual struggle.
Commentaries

beyond the narrow confines of the discipline—in short to expose any linen at all to public gaze.

Speaking from my own experience at Columbia, a more honest public discussion of the abilities and failings of geography, both as a discipline and within the department, may well have assisted in deflecting the misgivings of administrators who were more dismayed than heartened by superficial proclamations of rosiness. A more realistic recognition of our widely perceived failings would have lent credence to our positive claims. A washing of the dirty linen would have given us something clean to hang out; it would have been a sign of strength, potentially cathartic internally, a challenge externally.

In all of this exchange, there is no intention of indulging in the discipline’s “collective fetish with our alleged inferiority” (Abler 1987, 515). Quite the opposite; the linen is to be washed, not wallowed in. Rather, I accept absolutely the injunction that substantive intellectual research is what counts. It is also often lamented, however, that geography is too scattered toward surrounding disciplines, its center barely holds, and that redemption will require us to hold clearly in focus those core defining themes of geographic research: some combination of space and place, environment and region, physical process and global interrelatedness. I can appreciate the perceived dangers in this fragmentation, but it seems to me a position that values the survival of the discipline per se above researchers’ ability to ask the exciting intellectual questions. Its perspective is first and foremost the bureaucratic predication of geography, not its intellectual substance. Disciplines are not ends in themselves but means to an end, and the intellectual history of the twentieth century would suggest an extraordinary evolution and devolution throughout the entire academic division of labor. At least insofar as this has partially confounded the traditional pigeon-holing of knowledge into dusty academic repositories, it has been a progressive trend, and in the conservative climate of the 1980s one must surely be wary of the effect of renewed calls for disciplinary retrenchment.

Many geographers have trekked away from the traditional core of the discipline precisely in order to ask what they see as the most exciting intellectual questions, but this is neither exceptional nor should it be threatening. Quite the opposite. To take just one example, the exploration of marxism, structurationism and realism by geographers, sociologists and others over the last fifteen years has led to the “reassertion of space in social theory” (Soja forthcoming), and this has drawn a conservative backlash not just in geography but more prominently in sociology (Saunders 1985).

Thus in historical context this scattering of interests can be viewed in a much more beneficent light. It has engendered “a much healthier situation than the hermetic condition of American geography in the early decades of this century” (Zelinsky 1987, 652). Unfortunately, the history of geography has been little affected by all of this and remains largely hermetic. The retardation of this branch of geography owes precisely to its lack of involvement with the supposedly external stimuli of history and social theory. Deliberate attempts to codify a tight geographic canon have generally led to a wooden and trivialized history that garners little respect either inside or outside geography. If they are to compete, geographers will have to be ruthlessly critical—their own best critics—in assessing the history of geography, and enterprising in their disregard for disciplinary boundaries. Only in this way will they attract the attention and respect to establish a discourse with historians and social theorists who often sense the profound imbrication of geography and history but whose ability to conceptualize the significance of geographical transformation is limited; as limited, for example, as Giddens's (1985, passim) ability to conceptualize geographical space in a theory of structuration.

Let me try and illustrate this with a brief example culled from my research on Bowman. Between 1880 and 1918 there was a profound shift in the geographical dimensions of history. European colonization was effectively brought to an end with the carving up of Africa in the 1880s, and in 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner announced the end of the continental frontier line in the United States. The relationship between economic expansion and absolute geographical expansion at the world scale was increasingly severed. Henceforth economic development involved a much more complex process of geographical expansion in relative space at various spatial scales. This period marked the transition from an era of advanced and backward zones of development to one of global uneven development (Smith 1984, esp.
87–96). It coincided with a transformation in "regimes of economic accumulation" (Aglietta 1979) and a thorough renovation of concepts of time and space (Kern 1983).

Born in 1878, Bowman began his career as an explorer in Latin America, effectively charting some of the last pockets of absolute space as yet undiscovered by Westerners, and he ended his career in 1950 in the employ of Harry Truman, for whom he enthusiastically directed part of the Marshall Plan initiative aimed at the industrialization of what was coming to be called the Third World. Bowman's life not only coincided with a dramatic shift in the historical significance of geography; from Versailles to the World War II State Department, he was a contributor and active participant in laying the geographical foundations of this "New World."

Part of the shifting political geography of the period involved the decline of the European colonial empires, won by military and political conquest of absolute space, and the emergence of the quite different American Empire, what Henry Luce in 1942 exuberantly labeled "The American Century." Bowman both embodied and fought for this vision of an American world ruled in the first place by the economic rules of the market rather than political and military force. Seeing himself "a gradual revolutionist," an internationalist and enemy of 1920s isolationism, he helped to found the Council on Foreign Relations which carried to Roosevelt's State Department an acutely geographical vision of the postwar Pax Americana (Argenbright 1985; Smith 1986). He could renounce World War I as a classic imperialist conflict and at the same time champion American domination of the world three decades later in the name of democracy and free trade. He was a lonely but ultimately successful voice in the fight over the dismemberment of Germany, he participated in loosening the European grip on colonial territories that opened them up for American trade, and helped to draft the charter for the United Nations organization that was meant to provide the political stability that would ensure "business as usual" in the American Century. In defense of the new American world, he was in the avant garde of Cold War rhetoricians.

The ruling vision of this period was inherently and inscrutably geographical, albeit quite different from the earlier European vision. It is perhaps best expressed in Bowman, his actions as much as his thoughts, and perceived only in glimpses by historians (e.g., Louis 1978). Of acute interest here is not that "Bowman was there" but that through an investigation of Bowman's life and career, we see the geography and the history in a new light.

So instead of beginning with a fixed core sense of geography and attempting to insinuate it into the history—"we were there! we were there!"—let us start with the history, engender from within it the geography, and in the process change both. This approach will require a closer involvement between the history of geography and historical geography as well as a retheorization of traditional claims about the links between history and geography. It amounts to an appeal that we take the intellectual highroad and let someone else worry about how to define disciplines. Against the three Ds of traditional "history of geographical thought," we would do better to pursue the two Cs in a renovated "history of geography": history of geography must before all else be critical, and it must be contextual.

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Note

References


