

Commentary Bill Hall Tell me where Afghanistan is

Bill Hall /Lewiston Tribune

Geography teachers tend to put their students to sleep. And no wonder. Until you've been there, who cares where the Rhine River runs? Or what kind of winters they have in North Korea? Or which ocean is home to Iwo Jima? And what's an Iwo Jima anyway?

All three places were once boring to most third-grade geography students. However, all three of those places eventually became lethally interesting. In fact, the day would come when former third graders would suffer and die in all three locations.

War is a terrible geography teacher. It knows how to make the topic not just interesting but also so terrifying that the grieving families of the dead will never forget where an unlucky loved one met his end.

There is a lot of memorizing involved in ordinary geography classes. But Professor War gives us sudden knowledge of the names and locations of killing grounds. The Rhine, Korea and Iwo Jima are burned for life into our minds.

Older people can tell you instantly where Pearl Harbor is. They learned it the day the Japanese attacked that Hawaiian harbor and changed millions of lives overnight.

Similarly, to the warriors who were there, the weather in Korea is not just a memory but frostbite on the brain. The combatants in that war were threatened almost as much by a harsh Korean winter as by their armed adversary.

And how can anyone here or in Japan forget Iwo Jima? All losses are painful but some are more numerous. A few thousand U.S. and NATO troops have died in Afghanistan over the long years of that conflict. That many died in hours on Iwo Jima in the Pacific.

Speaking of Afghanistan, it's hard to believe now that hardly anyone knew anything about that once-obscure place in all the vast nowhere of the world until the old Soviet Union and the United States took turns going to war there.

That affected journalism as well as third graders. Afghanistan used to be such a cipher that hardly anyone could tell you much about it, let alone where on God's green earth that forlorn country was to be found. Even the toughest history teachers would cut a kid a little slack for not knowing much about Afghanistan. How are you going to keep them down on the subject of Afghanistan after they've seen Paris?

In journalism, something else was being taught - "Afghanism." That was a term in newspaper editorial writing that referred to the habits of a timid newspaper. If you write a critical

editorial about the mayor of your town, you may bump into him at the grocery store that same day and he will glare at you - or maybe do worse to your paper if he also runs an auto dealership and is one of your advertisers.

The word Afghanistanism was coined to describe how some twitchy newspapers felt obliged to write limp editorials and avoid angry mayors. Nervous newspapers chose safe topics, writing tiresome lectures about how the leader of Afghanistan (or some other obscure place) has become a rotten bully and should be spanked by the United Nations. An editor doesn't have to worry about the leader of Afghanistan canceling any advertising

Of course, you don't hear the term anymore today because Afghanistan has become so infamous that a third grader could remember it. Today, a timid editorial writer probably practices Nowhereism.

And where is that?

I don't know and neither do you. That's the whole point of Nowhereism and of once-invisible places like Afghanistanism.

But sparse knowledge of geographic places can also be a good thing. Almost by definition, countries and provinces you've never heard of and can't locate on a map are places that don't get in enough trouble to stand out in the news. So most of us don't know where they are.

Former CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite once conceded that much of the news is negative by definition. Television stations and newspapers don't do stories on the cats that don't get caught in a tree.

So if people in small countries that are off the beaten path suddenly make it into international news, look out!

I live in such a place, in the state of Idaho. We have yet to go to war against other states, so media centers like New York City, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta hardly ever mention us.

And we want to keep it that way because, if we get any mention at all in the major media, it's usually a forest fire.

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