

Americans Must Correct Their Ignorance of Asia

John Brandon IHT

Tuesday, October 23, 2001

WASHINGTON When Hawaii was attacked by Japan in 1941, few Americans could locate Pearl Harbor on a map. Shortly afterward, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked the American people to have a map of the world on hand when he explained to them in his radio address why it was important for the United States to defeat fascism in Europe and Asia. Roosevelt wanted the American public to understand what countries the Axis powers had invaded and where U.S. troops would be deployed in World War II. More than 80 percent of Americans listened to his address and map stores throughout the country sold out of their stock of world maps.

Many have compared the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington to the Pearl Harbor attack. The knowledge of most Americans about the rest of the world is still woefully inadequate. The U.S. presence is strongly felt - politically, economically, culturally and militarily - in all corners of the globe. Yet Americans treat their preeminence with indifference, exhibiting little interest in foreign affairs, much as they did before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The rest of the world senses U.S. indifference, construes it as arrogance and resents it greatly. The hijacking and crashing of passenger jets into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have transfixed U.S. attention. Americans can no longer be indifferent to the rest of the world or what it thinks of them. As the United States turns its attention to fighting terrorism, Americans must quickly learn more about other people, their cultures and religions, especially in Asia where two-thirds of the world's people live.

President George W. Bush is on record saying that he wants to be an education president. He should build on the momentum of his first trip to Asia by returning from Shanghai this week and announcing a new initiative to make learning about the world, especially Asia, an integral element of quality education in American schools. The study of Asian languages should be part of this effort. At present, the U.S. is failing to graduate enough students with expertise in Asian languages to help fill the demands of government, business and academia.

In the 21st century, Asia will wield greater international influence and play a much larger role in world affairs. If Americans remain ignorant of emerging trends and issues in Asia and elsewhere, it will undermine the ability of the United States to meet many of the global challenges it faces. America must combat ignorance at home, as well as terrorism both within and outside its borders.

U.S. forces are becoming more deeply embroiled in the struggle to root out terrorism from Afghanistan. Three American wars in Asia in the past six decades should be a graphic reminder that the United States ignores the region at its peril. Yet a recent Asia Society report titled "Asia in the Schools" paints a disturbing picture about how little Americans know about Asia.

Some 25 percent of high school students do not know that the Pacific Ocean separates North America from Asia. Eighty percent of adults surveyed do not know India is the world's largest democracy. Moreover, half of all adults and two-thirds of students incorrectly identified Vietnam as an island country, even though 58,000 U.S. lives were lost in the Vietnam War.

Americans should be educated to know that Asia is a continent of remarkable diversity, with different histories, cultural and religious traditions, levels of economic development and political systems. Except for geographical proximity, it is impossible to link Asian nations into a coherent whole. Like Roosevelt in 1941, Mr. Bush should explain why it is important for Americans to bridge geographical distance and cultural gaps by developing a better understanding of the rest of the world. He should work with Congress and others

to change the U.S. education system to achieve this objective.

The writer, a Southeast Asia specialist, is the assistant director of the Asia Foundation in Washington. He contributed this personal comment to the International Herald Tribune.

IHT

Copyright © 2001 The International Herald Tribune