"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 geology 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.

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 tackled 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.”

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. 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. 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, his was the demeanor 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 join in.”  

**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. 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.”

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 autumn 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 Raye 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-
graph that would convince Conant and all other doubt-ers of the overall merits of geography, whatever the problems at Harvard.23

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 acquiescent 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.”24

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.”25

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.

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 uncontroversial. 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.

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 sundeck 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.

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 pretention, along with the pompous

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26 U.S. Congress 1945, 980.
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.\(^{39}\)

Bowman believed that a separate human geography could hardly be more than "descriptive, fragmentary, and 'easy,'" \(^{40}\) and directly impugned Whittlesey's work in this regard. "It is systematic geography that is lacking in all of the younger generation of geographers," \(^{41}\) 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," \(^{42}\) 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," \(^{43}\) 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," \(^{44}\) 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 CIO 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 ascendency in 1950. Far from being ivory towers, university campuses found themselves embroiled in these issues (Schrecker 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 tacked 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.'’

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 reviled 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 unconfident 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.’’

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 Annuals 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.

Acknowledgments

In this research, I have been assisted by a Young Faculty Grant from the Spencer Foundation, through Teachers College, Columbia University, and by a grant from the Mellon Foundation to the Department of Geography and Environmental Engineering, Johns Hopkins University. I am indebted to Professor Arthur Maass and to Harvard University Archives for permission to comment on my work on Isaiah Bowman and made material available, and while I fully appreciate this debt, it may be more appropriate to acknowledge their specific contributions in a different context.

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. Elliott 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).
20. Bowman to Wright, 8 March and 31 March 1948; Kirk Bryan to Bowman, 27 March 1948, JHU.
21. Bowman to H. H. Barrows, 6 November 1920 and 8 October 1921, AGS, Barrows file; Bowman to Whittlesey, 27 September, 5 October, 31 October 1932; Whittlesey to Bowman, 3 October and 26 October 1932, AGS, Whittlesey file; Bowman to Platt, 28 September 1936, JHU; Whittlesey to Charles Colby, 4 March 1943, Whittlesey Papers.
22. Bowman to John Orchard, 23 February 1926; Bowman to Wrigley, 15 April 1948; Bowman to J. Russell Smith, 15 November 1948, JHU.
24. Bowman, Brookhaven Laboratory Conference, 13 October 1948, Memorandum; Bowman to Wright, 8 March 1948; Bowman to Buck, 12 May 1948, JHU.
25. E. Ullman to Bowman, 25 February 1949; Bowman to Ullman, 2 March 1949, JHU.
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 address to the Royal Geographical Society, London, 21 June 1948, p. 2, JHU. Bowman was introduced on this occasion by the Right Honorable Lord Rennell of Rodd and the discussion of his paper was led by Lord Halifax, Ambassador to the United States 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 of the Subcommittee on Geography of the Committee on Educational Policy, Harvard University, 10 October and 18 November 1949; cited by permission of Arthur Maass.
33. Bowman to Harlow Shapley, 9 November 1946, JHU.
34. Ullman to Donald McKay, n.d., Archives of Harvard University, Subcommittee on Geography of the Committee on Educational Policy, Faculty of Arts and Sciences. UA 111.10.198.132 (hereafter cited by file number).
35. Bryan to Bowman, 27 March 1948, JHU.
36. Geography as a subject of university research and teaching. Report of the Subcommittee on Geography of the Committee on Educational Policy, 3 April 1950, Harvard UA 111.10.198.132. Among those consulted by the committee, other than Bowman, were Richard Hartshorne, Dudley Stamp, and Carl Sauer.
37. The other four were Edmund Schulman, Benjamin Earle Thomas Jr., Howard Green, and J. Rowland Flick. 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, 1956), Peter Nash (city and regional planning, 1958), George Hoffman, who left Harvard for Michigan, and Kempton E. Webb, an undergraduate.
38. J. K. Wright to Buck, 5 June 1947, JHU.

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College doms major in geographical field. 1948. Harvard Crimson, 4 March.
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