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Why Geography Matters: Three Challenges Facing America: Climate Change, the Rise of China, and Global Terrorism

By Harm de Blij



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Why Geography Matters: Three Challenges Facing America: Climate Change, the Rise of China, and Global Terrorism By Harm de Blij

Over the next half century, the human population, divided by culture and economics and armed with weapons of mass destruction, will expand to nearly 9 billion people. Abrupt climate change may throw the global system into chaos; China will emerge as a superpower; and Islamic terrorism and insurgency will threaten vital American interests. How can we understand these and other global challenges? Harm de Blij has a simple answer: by improving our understanding of the world's geography.

In *Why Geography Matters*, de Blij demonstrates how geography's perspectives yield unique and penetrating insights into the interconnections that mark our shrinking world. Preparing for climate change, averting a cold war with China, defeating terrorism: all of this requires geographic knowledge. De Blij also makes an urgent call to restore geography to America's educational curriculum. He shows how and why the U.S. has become the world's most geographically illiterate society of consequence, and demonstrates the great risk this poses to America's national security.

Peppering his writing with anecdotes from his own professional travels, de Blij provides an original treatise that is as engaging as it is eye opening. Casual or professional readers in areas such as education, politics, or national security will find themselves with a stimulating new perspective on geography as it continues to affect our world.



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- Sales Rank: #921294 in Books
- Published on: 2007-02-12
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.10" h x .80" w x 9.20" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 320 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

De Blij, a geography professor and former National Geographic Society editor, seeks to rekindle interest in his discipline with this unfocused survey of the world and its discontents. Struggling to describe his notoriously hard-to-define field, de Blij suggests that geographers "look at things spatially" as opposed to "temporally" or "structurally," the "things" being a grab bag of phenomena, including climate, topography, demographics, national boundaries and the distribution of languages, religions, energy deposits and pipelines. It's an often illuminating perspective, nicely visualized in the book's many splendid maps. Unfortunately, while mapping things spatially is a very useful methodology, it doesn't add up to a coherent analytical framework, and often boils down to simply compiling information about places. As a result, de Blij's discussions of global developments, including European integration, the decline of Russia, Africa's ongoing travails and the three challenges mentioned in the title, amount to extremely well-informed but hardly groundbreaking rehashes of conventional wisdom. (Aug.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Geography professor de Blij writes from a conviction that not only the American public but also government officials can be dangerously ignorant of basic geography, so to enlighten them he discusses three topics with national security implications. His tour of Islamic radicalism has the most immediate relevance and, buttressed by a profusion of maps, it covers Afghanistan, Iraq, the Islamic "front" in sub-Saharan Africa, and--Paraguay? Learning the significance of that outlier to the geography of Islamic terrorism (as well as its unappeasable aims) typifies many of de Blij's informational surprises, which are arranged clearly and spiced with the author's allusions to his career and travels, including China. His observations of attitudes and changes he's seen there are sober divinations of the cold war potential vis-a-vis China and the U.S. The putative threat of global warming receives de Blij's somewhat contrarian assessment, an outgrowth of his geographic summary of the ice age gripping the earth right now, geologically speaking. Accessible expertise vital for the current-events display. *Gilbert Taylor*

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Review

"Remarkable.... A friendly and accessible reader for those who have a basic grasp of some of the concepts of geography and who want to understand where the world is headed. It is also an urgent call to educators across the United States to restore the study of geography to the nation's schools.... A powerful and deeply personal writer, de Blij discusses his own background in detail and fills the book with anecdotes from his experience. This makes for an entertaining and enlightening trek."--David J. Smith, *Christian Science Monitor*

"A provocative, fast-paced book that interprets the world through the dynamic discipline of geography. The remarkable chapter on Africa is at once compelling and tragic, but also cautiously hopeful. If you think that geography makes your eyes glaze over, try this book and you'll discover insights you've never encountered before."--David Miller, Senior Editor, *National Geographic Maps*

"Harm de Blij packs so much useful information and so many thoughtful insights into *Why Geography Matters* that the book is indispensable to those seeking to understand our complex, changing world. The United States State Department would be well served to make this book required reading for all newly recruited foreign service officers and diplomats--and it is strongly recommended for all citizens.... de Blij demonstrates persuasively how the tools and findings of geographers are indispensable in understanding the world today. In its scope, analytical balance, power, originality, and readability, *Why Geography Matters* is a matchless book; the riveting chapter on Africa is the best summation of the continent's past and prospects I have ever read." --Willard DePree, Former United States Ambassador to Mocambique and Bangladesh, On Special Assignment to the Department of State

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