

# Instruments of conquest and platforms for compromise: Using geographical names as guideposts for learning in the Social Studies classroom

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Toponyms are essential guideposts for students of World History and Geography. More than mere titles inscribed on maps, place names often denote the rise and fall of political regimes, the expansion and contraction of powerful empires, and the enduring influence of indigenous cultures. A close analysis of geographic naming in the Social Studies classroom will afford students greater insight into the dialectical relationship between history and geography. Furthermore, a thoughtful consideration of controversies over existing toponyms will deepen students' appreciation for the ways in which maps serve as both instruments of conquest and platforms for compromise.

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In 2015 the United States Secretary of the Interior implemented a monumental change. North America's highest peak, Mount McKinley, would assume a new name: Denali. This seemingly simple geographic name change necessitated the reprinting of maps, road signs and travel brochures. It also marked the end of a hard-fought battle over one of the continent's most revered landmarks. After more than 100 years of paying homage to William McKinley, a US President gunned down by an anarchist in 1901, the towering peaks of Alaska's outback would finally bear a name that better reflected its identity among indigenous populations.

For nearly a century, naturalists, geographers, and members of the Athabascan tribes rallied for the name change. They cited historical records to advance their cause, explaining that President William McKinley had never visited Alaska. Furthermore, he showed no noteworthy interest in the region's stark, unforgiving landscape. In fact, history offers only one tangential connection between the late-19th century leader and the Alaskan tundra: gold. (NPS, 2016)



**Figure 1. Denali National Park**  
(Source: Amy Perkins)

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In his 1896 bid for the presidency, the Republican candidate campaigned as a stalwart supporter of the Gold Standard. He insisted that the preservation of the Gold Standard was essential to the young nation's continued economic growth. His platform resonated with bankers and industrialists who feared that a shift to bimetallism would result in a significant loss of profit. In November 1896 wealthy elites joined forces to secure McKinley's election. (Morgan, 1998) As they celebrated his political victory, one especially excited gold prospector proposed that the continent's highest peak bear the name of the newly elected president. His logic was simple: The snow-capped mountain was positioned near the heart of the 1896-1899 Klondike Gold Rush. His suggestion garnered little attention, that is until McKinley's assassination in 1901. Just 16 years later, the United States Congress voted to memorialize the slain president with the establishment of Mount McKinley National Park.

Almost immediately, opponents to the newly-assigned name pressured Congress to reconsider. They asserted that "McKinley" was not an appropriate title for the majestic peak. The name ignored the rich cultural heritage of the Athabaskan people who had populated the region for several thousand years. They argued that Denali (deenaalee in the Koyukon language spoken by the Athabaskan people) which translates to "the Great One," was a name more befitting a snow-capped mountain. They also insisted that President McKinley did not deserve direct association with the region's untamed, natural landscape. His short stint as president was marked by the unchecked exploitation of the environment, a blatant disregard for native cultures, and an imperialistic campaign to dominate distant lands. This legacy, they contended, should not be rewarded with the creation of a national park bearing his name. (Steinhauer, 2015)

After nearly 100 years of petitioning Congress, arguments advanced by the opponents of the McKinley name proved persuasive. In 2015 the Secretary of the Interior proposed that the mountain's name change to Denali, and President Barack Obama approved. Today, as the expansive six million acre national park celebrates its centennial, visitors stand in awe of Denali. "The Great One" most certainly lives up to its name.

## **GEOGRAPHIC NAMING AS A THEME FOR LEARNING**

Denali is not the only place name to generate controversy and widespread debate. Similarly impassioned discussions are occurring throughout the world. Why does geographic naming attract so much attention from governments, citizens, and scholars? The answer is simple: the process of assigning a name to geographic and maritime features is positioned at the intersection of history, politics, culture, and language. The name assigned to a mountain, river, city, or region often communicates ownership, identity, and power. And since "identity" and "power" are rarely stagnant forces, people expect the names of the locations around them to be similarly dynamic.

However, geographic renaming cannot happen arbitrarily. Toponyms are essential to navigation, diplomacy, and historical records. If place names change frequently or they are not recognized by the broader international community, attempts to abandon antiquated names will cause confusion and possibly provoke armed conflict. That being said, proposed name changes must survive heated debates, vigorous research, and thoughtful consideration before they are ratified by governing bodies.

To what extent is the process of geographic naming relevant to education? Place names are essential guideposts for students of World History and Geography. More than mere titles inscribed on maps, place names denote the rise and fall of political regimes, the expansion and contraction of powerful empires, and the enduring influence of indigenous cultures. The names Leningrad, Saigon, Constantinople, Bombay, and New Amsterdam are but a few examples of this reality.

The winners write the history, scholars often say. But is it not equally accurate to claim that the winners also print the maps? If that is true, then a careful examination of geographic naming in the Social Studies classroom will afford students greater insight into the dialectical relationship between history and geography. Furthermore, a consideration of controversies over existing toponyms will deepen students' appreciation for the ways in which maps serve as both instruments of conquest and platforms for compromise.

### **NATIONAL STANDARDS**

Students' investigation into geographic naming is consistent with the national standards for geography published by the National Council for Geographic Education (Heffron and Downs, 2012). More specifically, National Geography Standards 6, 10, 13, 17 and 18 can be achieved through a close study of place names.

Geography Standard 6 challenges students to consider the ways in which diverse cultures and lived experiences influence people's perceptions of places and regions. "The significance that an individual or group attaches to a particular place or region may be influenced by feelings of belonging or alienation, a sense of being an insider or outsider, a sense of history and tradition or of novelty and unfamiliarity." (Heffron and Downs, 2012) Standard 6 encourages students to acknowledge how their own biases influence their perceptions of places and cultures, near and far. Furthermore, it challenges students to move beyond their elementary understanding of the world, which tends to be egocentric and ethnocentric, and replace that viewpoint with a multi-dimensional explanation for the complexity of the world's cultural diversity. These objectives can be achieved through the close study of toponyms.

National Geography Standards 10, 13, 17 and 18 are similarly relevant to the study of place names. Standard 10 spotlights the existence of overlapping "cultural landscapes". Active human-environment interaction results in the creation of distinct cultural regions throughout the world. These regions bear names and features that reflect the values and beliefs of the people who reside there. And as these cultural regions expand to encompass neighboring lands occupied by another cultural group, the place names assigned to the shared landscape often need to be renegotiated. That being said, controversies over place names frequently denote disagreements over boundaries and power distribution.

Examining this trend more closely, National Geography Standard 13 considers how human interaction throughout history influences the ways in which the earth's surface is divided and controlled. More specifically, Standard 13 requires students to explore how "conflicts over trade, human migration and settlement, ideologies and religions, and exploitation of marine and land environments" influence the division of the planet. (Heffron and Downs, 2012) These conflicts are reflected in debates over place names.

Finally, National Geography Standards 17 and 18 challenge students to use their geographic and historical knowledge to influence policy decisions about the future. Students' advanced understanding of diverse cultures and their familiarity with patterns of human-environment interaction throughout history equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve political change. A close analysis of controversial place names will offer students a unique opportunity to insert themselves in national and international debates as they propose solutions to ongoing disagreements. (Heffron and Downs, 2012)

## A CASE STUDY

One case study emerging from a heated debate in Victoria, Australia demonstrates how an investigation into geographic naming enables students to achieve several national standards for geography. Located near the center of Alpine National Park, Mt. Niggerhead was a controversial site. Its name was unquestionably offensive and, for that reason, it attracted global attention. Australia's concerted effort to rename the landmark in 2008 elucidates the dialectical relationship between history and geography. Furthermore, it illustrates how issues involving identity, power, language, and culture influence the ways in which people interpret (and assign) place names.

Historical records offer little insight into the rationale behind the mountain's controversial name. However, the etymology of the word "nigger" is less obscure. Derived from Latin, French, and Spanish terms used to describe the color black, "nigger" was often wielded as a derogatory and pejorative reference to the darker-skinned inhabitants of Africa. For generations, ruling elites used the term as a means by which they could dehumanize and demean non-whites and thereby justify the preservation of race-based policies. This pattern is apparent in the Americas, Africa, and Australia. (Kostanski and Clark, 2009) On the surface, the mountain's name appeared to reference British imperialists' racist views of the aboriginal population. However, scientists contend that "niggerhead" is also a term used to describe a common species of grass (*Enneapogon gracilis*) and an outcropping of black basalt. (Hercus and Koch, 2009) Yet despite the disagreement over the place name's origins, the continued use of the title "Mount Niggerhead" conflicted with 21st century enlightened views of race.



**Figure 2. Mt Jaithmathang**  
(Source: <https://awildland.blogspot.com>)

In 2008 the incongruence between the historic name and contemporary views on race inspired the Government of Victoria to take action. Politicians invited scholars and citizens, including Aboriginal leaders, to propose a new name for the mountain. After months of discussion, State Environment Minister Gavin Jennings announced that the controversial outcropping would be renamed Mt Jaithmathang. The revised title borrowed its name from a native tribe that resided in the neighbor-

ring Bogong High Plains. Authorities hoped that the new name would honor indigenous people, thereby reversing the effect of the earlier derogatory toponym. This change, however, was not warmly received by all Aborigines. Gary Murray, co-chair of the Dhudhuroa Native Title Group, insisted that the new name was even more offensive. He explained, "It's a bit like renaming Australia as England. ...This is offensive to our people. The Jaithmathangs are from the other side of Omeo, which is miles away. The name is linguistically and culturally inappropriate." From his perspective, the new name ignored the rich cultural heritage of the Dhudhuroa people who originally occupied the mountain. (Australian Associated Press, 2008)

This controversy over geographic naming in Victoria elucidates the extent to which toponyms provoke heated debates, challenge biases, and influence cultural identity. Historical names deemed offensive by a growing majority are not necessarily easy to replace. In fact, the process of renaming a geographic feature is likely to generate as much antagonism as the preservation of the site's original name. For this reason, a case study of geographic naming is an excellent approach to improving students' knowledge of geography and history. Furthermore, students' analysis of place names, specifically toponyms with overt references to race or ethnic identity, enhances their understanding of ongoing disputes over the recent removal of Confederate statues from public property in the southern United States. In both cases, historic representations of "racist" viewpoints, recorded on maps or carved in stone, challenge citizens to revisit the intersection of history, geography, and identity.

## **GEOGRAPHICAL NAMING ON THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL**

Disputes over geographical names often extend far beyond a state, province, or nation. In fact, some of the most hotly contested toponyms today involve geographical features of international import. For example, Iran and Saudi Arabia are currently divided over the name assigned to the body of water located between them. Iran asserts that "Persian Gulf" is the only acceptable title for the expansive waterway, citing historical references dating back to Ancient Greece to prove its point. Rallying for the preservation of the historic place name, Iran's Parliament Speaker explained that "the Persian Gulf is an integral part of the Iranian national identity." (El-Abidn, no date) In contrast, neighboring Saudi Arabia insists that "Arabian Gulf" is a more appropriate name. Its assertion is also grounded in history. Saudis cite the significant accomplishments of the Arab Empire, claiming that European scholars' depictions of Middle Eastern history often exaggerate the influence of the Persians and undervalue the enduring presence of Arab tribes in the region.

The tense rivalry between the two nations has complicated matters for journalists, publishers, and software engineers. In 2004 the National Geographic Society received sharp criticism when it published a map with the term "Arabian Gulf" appearing in parentheses below the place name "Persian Gulf." Two years later The Economist magazine identified the Persian Gulf as simply "the Gulf" on a regional map, provoking Iran to ban distribution of the magazine within its borders. In 2008 Google Earth included "Persian Gulf" and "Arabian Gulf" as place names in its 3D representation of the world, thereby sparking the creation of an online petition in protest. More recently,

Google Maps attempted to sidestep the entire matter by utilizing geolocation tools included with its program software. The tools enable the program to personalize the interactive map to match the nomenclature of the user's current location. (Levinson, 2011)

These issues accompanying place names are also evident in publications prepared by political and military leaders in the United States. Although the United States endorses "Persian Gulf" as the official name, leaders within the State Department and the US military occasionally use "Arabian Gulf" when they discuss policies involving the region. For example, the US Navy has consistently used "Arabian Gulf" in the decades following the Gulf War. Commander Kevin Stephens, a spokesman for the United States Fifth Fleet which is headquartered in Bahrain, explained, "It is commonly understood to be a friendly gesture of solidarity and support for our host nation of Bahrain and our other Gulf Cooperation Council partners in the region to use the term they prefer." (Zraick, 2016) Other branches of the military have adopted a similar stance, instructing personnel to abide by local conventions when referring to the body of water positioned between Iran and Saudi Arabia.



**Figure 3. Arabian Peninsula by Nicolaus Germanus (1467)**

This apparent inconsistency is instructive, offering students of history and geography valuable insight into identity, culture, and diplomacy. First of all, the situation illustrates how the United States' ever-evolving relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia often exacerbates tensions in the region. In the 1960s when the Shah presided over Iran, the United States embraced "Persian Gulf" as the official title. American political leaders actively courted the Shah, believing that his leadership would stabilize the region and preserve American access to the nation's sizable oil reserves. (El-Abidn, no date)



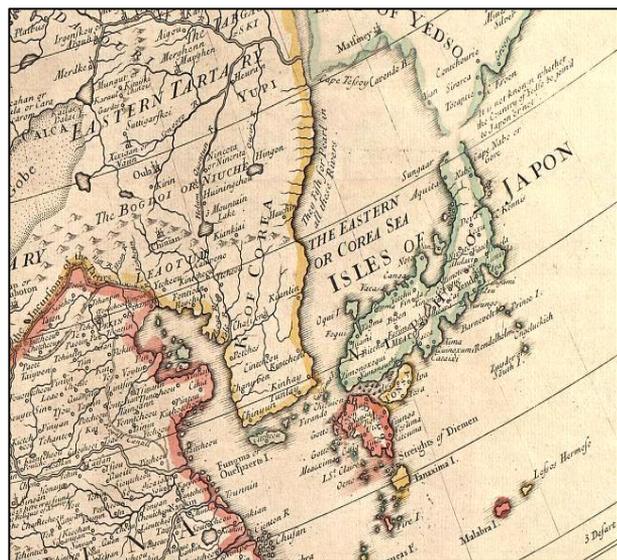
**Figure 4. A meeting of American and Saudi diplomats in March 2017.**

However, the violent Iranian Revolution of 1979 eviscerated the American-Iranian partnership. Saudi Arabia saw this break as an opportunity to strengthen its alliance with the United States. Saudis worked closely with the United States in the final decade of the Cold War and proved to be an invaluable partner in the 1991 US-led coalition against Iraq. From 1980-2000, Saudi-American collaboration emboldened Saudis' efforts to secure greater recognition of "Arabian Gulf" as the official name for the waterway. However, their efforts were only moderately successful. (United States Council on Foreign Relations, 2017)

Today, American leaders walk a fine line as they endeavor to preserve their relationship with Saudi Arabia while simultaneously brokering agreements with Iran. As tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran escalate, this line becomes even finer. World leaders are finding it increasingly difficult to appease both sides of the debate in an effort to preserve diplomacy and avoid direct confrontation.

The ongoing disagreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia presents students with a unique opportunity to employ their skills as geographers and historians. With guidance from their teachers, they can closely examine arguments presented by both sides of the naming dispute, juxtapose these details with historical records, and expertly evaluate the consequences of potential resolutions. Furthermore, they can interview scholars and political leaders as they attempt to craft a compromise. Finally, they can synthesize various viewpoints and relevant evidence to draft a policy proposal.

In Asia, the *East Sea/Sea of Japan* geographical naming issue presents another excellent case study. Japan and South Korea, joined by the larger international community, have attempted to resolve an ongoing disagreement over the appropriate name for the waterway they share. Both names, *East Sea* (Donghae) and *Sea of Japan* appear on historical maps. Advocates of the *East Sea* name assert that their preferred toponym has a longer history that dates as far back as 50 BCE (NAHF, 2008). In contrast, the Japanese government insists that although *Sea of Japan* did not appear prominently on maps until the early 19th century, it is the only name officially recognized by the United Nations (MOFA, no date)



**Figure 5. The Eastern or Corea Sea**

(Source: UK, John Senex, 1710, 94.3×64.8 cm)

The *East Sea/Sea of Japan* issue has very compelling historical and political origins that begin with the 1928 Conference of the International Hydrographic Bureau. When this body of policymakers met in 1928, Korea was a colony of Japan and consequently not permitted to represent its viewpoints regarding the official naming of international waters. Japan, on the other hand, was in attendance and well-positioned to ensure that *Sea of Japan* became the commonly recognized title for the waterbody located between Korea and Japan.

More recently, South Korea has leveraged its position within the United Nations and other international governing bodies to secure greater recognition of the *East Sea* name. Its ongoing efforts highlight the importance of representation in history and geography. Today Koreans participate actively in global decision-making, and they remain optimistic that their renewed position of influence will inspire world leaders to reconsider

the decisions made at the 1928 conference. Central to their arguments are questions involving fairness and social justice: Should the 1928 decision remain valid and binding when all relevant parties (namely Koreans) were not included in the discussion?

The *East Sea/Sea of Japan* debate illustrates how controversies centered on toponyms often reflect broader disagreements over power, culture, history, and identity. Furthermore, it demonstrates how these disputes frequently inspire a multi-faceted response, including changes in Social Studies education. For example, several textbook publishers in the United States have adopted a policy of dual naming when referring to the waterway located between Japan and Korea. Their response to the ongoing debate contrasts sharply with the single name policy endorsed by the United States Board of Geographic Names.

All things considered, the *East/Sea of Japan* controversy offers students a chance to examine historical evidence, evaluate conflicting arguments, and propose public policies in an attempt to resolve the ongoing debate. Ultimately, this thoughtful consideration of geographic naming demonstrates for students the interconnectedness of identity, language, politics, and culture. Much like the debates involving the Persian Gulf, Mt. Niggerhead, and Mt. McKinley, it highlights the dialectical relationship between history and geography and illuminates the ways in which maps serve as both instruments of conquest and platforms for compromise.

## **CONCLUSION**

Place names are essential guideposts for students of geography and history. They trace the rise and fall of political regimes, the expansion and contraction of powerful empires, and the enduring influence of indigenous cultures. Heated debates over toponyms often reflect significant shifts in the distribution of power as the dominance of the reigning elites is challenged by the growing influence of emerging political factions, ethnic groups, or religious sects. These disagreements typically result in conflict or compromise, each outcome promising long-term consequences for the regions involved.

Geographic features in Alaska, Australia, and Arabia are among several sites attracting attention and exciting controversy. Similar debates rage in Asia, India, Eastern Europe, and South Africa. In fact, groups throughout the world are presently rallying to change toponyms in an effort to advance their political agenda, commemorate their cultural heritage, and establish themselves as power brokers in an ever-changing world.

Students' careful examination of these disputed place names will enhance their understanding of history and geography, thereby accomplishing the United States' National Standards for geographic education. Furthermore, students' investigations into the history and geography of regions and cultures and their careful consideration of conflicting viewpoints will challenge them to think creatively and critically. Finally, their efforts to employ their skills and inspire policy changes will help them appreciate the simple fact that they, too, are agents for change in a dynamic world.

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