

Better Than Good Enough for Government Work

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Three episodes in the 34-year career of a cartographer at the US State Department illustrate how ethics can inform, or intrude on, mapping for foreign policy. While US federal government cartography is guided by international law, political disputes and how they are handled put the cartographer in a position to inform and possibly influence an ethical policy. Or not. This article will explore instances in which mapping ethics get discussed, tested, and resolved in a foreign policy environment.

IN THE LATE 1980S, I WAS EARLY IN MY CAREER AS A cartographer with the State Department (“the Department”). A Cold War mindset was strong within the United States government, and almost none of the best and brightest foreign policy experts would have predicted that the Soviet Union would very soon be gone from the map. During this period a map request from one of the Department’s regional bureaus was assigned to me. I was given a list of hypothetical locations of Soviet missile systems along with their effective ranges, and another list of real American or allied targets that these theoretically placed weapons could hit. I was to make a map of these locations and ranges to support a briefing to a senior policymaker.

When I measured the range from one of the weapons systems, a missile launcher located conjecturally on the coast of a Soviet-allied country, it didn’t reach the target of interest. This target, a major US military base, was the most impactful facility shown on the map, and was just outside the missile’s maximum range. I told the regional bureau staffer who requested the map about this anomaly and was told, without regard to my concern, to leave the questionably located facility on the map.

Being a junior cartographer and uncertain of how far I could push back, I reached out to experts in my bureau whose job it was to know everything about these weapons. Looking at the map, they scoffed at the idea of placing this type of launcher at that location—a coastal mangrove forest with no nearby infrastructure to support its construction. To them, this was a non-threat. Together we went back to the requestor who said it was close enough and to leave it on the map.

This troubled us. The map would be shown to someone whose influence shaped foreign policy and the information on the map was at best misleading, but really just plain wrong. We took our concerns to the highest level available to us, our bureau’s assistant secretary, who supported our analysis and conclusion. A call was made to the head of the policy bureau preparing the briefing and the dubious missile launcher was removed from the map.

In my 34-year career at the US Department of State’s Office of the Geographer and Global Issues (“the Office”), that was likely the most unambiguous example of a positive ethical decision in foreign policy mapping: an undeniable fact backed by the objective judgment of geography and military subject matter experts. Truth to power, high-fives all around.

Ethics in foreign policy aren’t always straightforward. Taking a position in a political dispute, or even remaining neutral, requires ethical judgment and guarantees that at least one of the parties involved won’t be satisfied. Throughout my career, I worked with smart, dedicated public servants whose commitment to ethics—at least within the parameters of policies they were required to follow—was guided by truth, objectivity, and even-handedness. It was rare to be asked to map something that gave me serious ethical qualms. I didn’t always agree with policies I was asked to help implement (few civil servants with long careers ever do) but, other than the instance cited above, I was never asked to outright lie on a map. In the Office, if we felt that a truth was being stretched, we could voice our concerns and debate freely. I was, and remain, proud of my work.



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Most people, I expect, view ethics in mapping through a thematic lens. It's what you put on top of a map's "base elements" that can be subjective or judgmental. But some of the base elements (including map projection) can promote bias, whether intentional or not. For foreign policy considerations, three main cartographic elements convey political information: boundaries, sovereignty portrayal, and geographic names. For all three, US Government (USG) cartographic policy is guided by a legal approach, which provides a useful ethical foundation.

A small but influential group, the Office coordinates policy on sovereignty and international boundary issues for the USG. I worked in the Office from 1986 through 2020, first as a cartographer and later as chief of the division handling cartography, international boundaries, sovereignty issues, and geographic names. The Office doesn't establish cartographic policy for the USG; rather, it works with policymakers within the Department and throughout government to craft and disseminate policy to USG cartography agencies.

Geographic names are one of the base elements of a map that are often overlooked from an ethical perspective, but a cartographer's choice of place names can be impactful. English conventional names, such as Moscow, Bangkok, and Cairo are usually preferable to their less familiar native names Moskva, Krung Thep Maha Nakhon, and Al Qāhirah. The US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) standardizes place names for USG use. The Office represents the Department on the BGN and is the Board's conduit for foreign policy concerns.

A good example of an ethical BGN decision was changing the spelling of Ukraine's capital from "Kiev" to "Kyiv." Kiev was the English conventional name for centuries, but that spelling is romanized from the Russian language version of the city's name and not the Ukrainian language one. In 2006, the Ukrainian government appealed to the Department to get the USG to change its spelling from Kiev to Kyiv. The BGN rejected that proposal, arguing that Kiev was as valid a conventional name as Moscow or Vienna. But for diplomatic reasons, the Department requested that USG cartographers use the native language-based spelling Kyiv while Kiev remained a conventional name in the official toponymic database.

In 2019, after five years of Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory in Crimea and the Donbas, the Ukrainian government appealed again to change the spelling. This time the BGN deemed it unethical to retain a name based on the language of an occupying aggressor, and voted to drop Kiev as a conventional name. This decision made headlines, unusual for a BGN action, and to my personal surprise the "new" name was quickly and almost universally adopted by most English language media sources. Five years on, English language use of Kiev is mostly limited to a popular chicken dish.

International boundaries are perhaps the most sensitive political information on a map and, fortunately, almost all the world's international boundaries are based on legal (de jure) treaties, agreed to by both sides (bilateral) and supported by documentary evidence.¹ To denote their legitimacy, de jure boundaries are shown on USG maps as solid lines. A fistful of the 320 or so international frontiers are not backed by bilateral political treaties. Many of these borders—notably around South Asia, the Levant, and the Korean Peninsula—are the result of a conflict, where militaries or an outside mediator brokered an armistice or ceasefire but the governments behind them made no formal agreements. In rare cases there is no legal bilateral agreement, and each government has competing ideas on where the boundary should be. These lines are dashed on USG maps to denote their extralegal status and, where scale allows, an explanatory label is included.

Official USG policies on boundaries can also change without the relevant parties themselves coming to any new agreements, though changes like this can lead to difficult cartographic decisions. In 2019, President Trump issued a proclamation recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. This major policy change had a sizeable cartographic impact, and the Office began working with Department policy bureaus to issue guidance on how maps should be updated.

Until the proclamation, the USG recognized Syrian sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Israeli sovereignty was depicted up to the 1949 Armistice Line, symbolized as a dashed line, that existed before the Israeli conquest and subsequent annexation of the Golan Heights. Where scale permitted, the United Nations Disengagement Observer

1. The ethical merit of some de jure boundaries can be debated, such as in Africa where colonial powers determined the frontiers, or where stronger states imposed their will on weaker ones.

Force (UNDOF) Zone was shown and “Israeli-occupied” added to the label for Golan Heights (see Figure 1).

With the new policy, the Office recommended showing all boundaries defining the outer limits of the Golan Heights as dashed lines. To the north and south are boundaries established by countries other than Israel, and to the east is a cease-fire line established by the United Nations in 1974. Israel did not enter into a willing bilateral political agreement to any of these boundaries.

The Office felt we had solid justification for these recommendations. They followed long-established principles for depicting international boundaries. We presented a draft map with the recommendations to senior policymakers leading the effort to implement the new policy.

The response from a mid-level staffer was to “make the lines solid.” The staffer, however professional and pleasant, was not part of the policy process. We explained the basis for our recommendation: solid lines on maps convey boundaries legally agreed to by governments of both sides of the line, which clearly didn’t apply in this case. The staffer was noncommittal, saying only that this is what their boss wanted. We consulted with the Department’s legal experts, who agreed with our logic, and tried again, this time with more robust reasoning. We asked if we could present our arguments directly to the policy team but were told that wasn’t possible. The staffer would relay our written concerns to the policy team and get back to us.

This was unusual. The Department traditionally relies on its subject matter experts for guidance and almost always includes them in policy discussions. After a few days we heard back from the policymaker, through the staffer. They asked if there were any instances where international boundaries shown as solid lines were *not* the product of a bilateral agreement.

The answer was yes: one, but with a caveat. China’s eastern boundary between India and Tibet, known as the McMahon Line, was negotiated between the British and Tibetan governments in 1914. Tibet at the time was considered by the British to be autonomous, but under Chinese suzerainty. The Chinese government initially participated in the McMahon Line agreement but ultimately did not approve it. In September 1962, China sent forces across this line into what they consider “South Tibet,” temporarily occupying parts of what much of the world considered Indian territory. The US Ambassador to India successfully pleaded with the Kennedy administration to support India’s claim to this territory by formally recognizing the McMahon Line as a fully *de jure* international boundary. From then on, the China-India boundary between Bhutan and Burma has been shown as a solid line on USG maps.

This, it seemed, was all the justification the senior policymaker needed. If one contested boundary could be recognized to support a policy decision, why not others? Like in my earlier example in the 1980s, the Office appealed to our bureau’s assistant secretary in the hopes they could

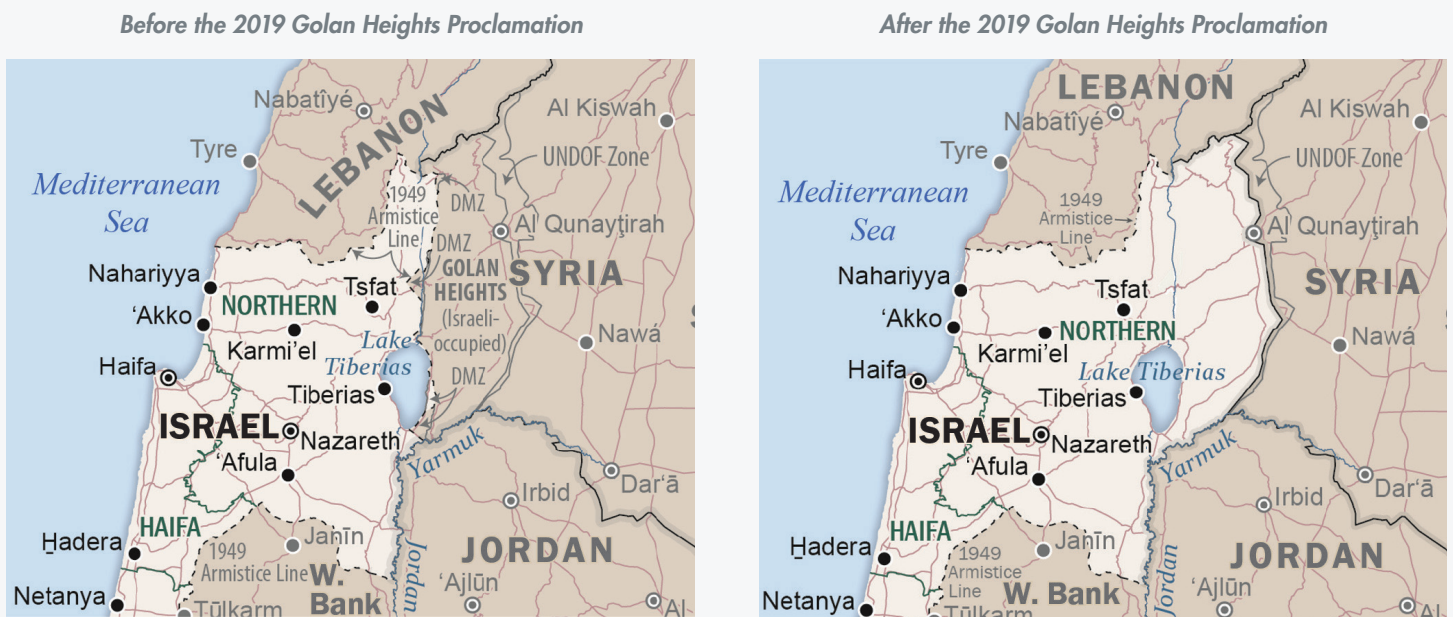


Figure 1. Excerpts of maps produced by the Office of the Geographer and Global Issues, US Department of State; modified by author.

convince the policymaker to at least discuss our rationale directly with them. The request was denied, and the Office was instructed to issue cartographic guidance showing the limits of the Golan Heights as solid lines (see Figure 1).

It was disheartening for me, and others in the Office, to see a key principle underpinning the USG's ethical treatment of international boundary representation disregarded. Showing dashed boundary lines around the Golan Heights would not alter the President's proclamation—Israeli

sovereignty would still be depicted on the map—and it would adhere to the legal foundation that gave USG map depictions a sense of fair play. There was a sense that our top policymakers felt dashed lines “looked bad” by suggesting something other than complete support for the new policy. Established practice and rule-based order, it seemed, would take a back seat to optics. As a civil servant whose career was guided by professional ethics, that was a hard reality to swallow.

