



DON'T BE FOOLED BY...

MAPS

The next time you happen to be in Asia, take a look at a map of the world. Guess what? The United States is not in the center; in fact, it's squished over to one side. Asia is in the center. Can it be that Asian mapmakers are just poorly trained or out of touch? Of course not. The Asia-centric maps used by schoolchildren in Korea, China, and Japan reveal an important feature of mapmaking—it is political. The national boundaries that we see on a map are not etched into the earth; they are made by humans and are constantly being rearranged as the peoples of the earth rearrange themselves. For instance, mapmakers had their hands full in 1991, when the Soviet Union fell. As we can see in the map here, a giant republic had broken down into many small countries—as if the United States were all at once fifty separate nations. The lines of Eastern Europe had to be redrawn, and redrawn again, as the ethnic and national rivalries suppressed by Soviet domination began to work themselves out politically and militarily (see the map inset on Yugoslavia). The political nature of mapmaking means that we need to ask ourselves some important questions about the maps—in the media, in books, in classrooms—that purport to tell us what the world looks like.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

- **What type of information is being conveyed by the map?** Maps are not just graphic illustrations of national boundaries. They can also reveal topography (mountains,

hills, oceans, rivers, and lakes), population density, weather patterns, economic resources, transportation, and a host of other characteristics. The map on page 713 for instance, shows how the various colonies voted on the Constitution. Maps can also show regional patterns of colonization, immigration, industrialization, and technological development.

- **Who drew the map?** This information can explain why Asia is at the center of a world map, but it can also address more overtly political questions. Palestinians and Israelis, for instance, might draw very different maps of contested territories. Mapmaking can be not only a precise way of delineating national borders, but also a way of staking a claim.
- **When was the map drawn?** A map of today's Europe would look very different from a map of Europe in 1810, when the continent was dominated by the Napoleonic, Austrian, and Ottoman Empires; the Confederation of the Rhine; and at least three separate kingdoms in what is now Italy. The map of Europe continued to change throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries until it reflected the Cold War division between the East and West from the mid-1900s on. The map at right shows how the end of the Cold War again changed the map of Europe. Not only do boundaries change over time, but even the names of countries can be different. The countries once known as Siam, the Congo, and Rhodesia have changed their names to Thailand, Zaire, and Zimbabwe, respectively. Name changes often reflect a country's attempt to emphasize a particular part of its heritage, or to disavow foreign influences.