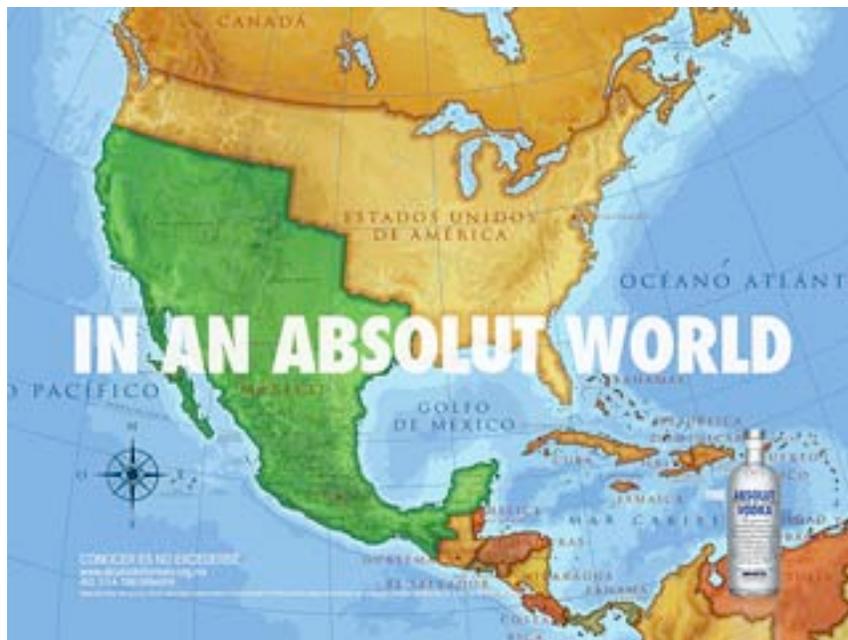


“Maps and National Sensitivities”

Thomas W. Gallant

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Imagine a people who are so thin-skinned and insecure about their nation’s integrity that a simple map showing part of their country incorporated into the territory of a neighbor is provocative enough to incite mass protest and calls for an economic boycott. In case anyone thinks that I am referring to Greece and its continuing dispute with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia over the name “Macedonia” and over the maps circulated in that country which show parts of Greece included in FYROM, I am not. No, I am referring to people in the US who are up in arms over the advertising campaign for Absolut vodka launched in Mexico.



As widely reported in the US media (“LA Times”, Reuters, Fox news, etc) and as ferociously debated on conservative talk shows and websites, Americans are outraged by the map used in the ad campaign, The campaign promoting Absolut vodka had the theme of proposing ideal scenarios about how things might look “In an Absolut World.” The ad (left) contained a map from the 1830s depicting the boundaries of Mexico at a time when it included

California, Texas and other southwestern states. Mexico still resents losing that territory in the 1848 Mexican-American War and the fight for Texas independence. And there is in Mexico today a movement calling for a “Reconquista”, or re-conquest of the territories “stolen” by the US during the last century. Even though the ad ran only in Mexico, it ignited a firestorm of protest in the US, especially among conservatives.

The following, taken from the “Blogs” page of the “LA Times” captures the rancorous tenor of the US response:

“How clever of Absolut! When is their ad for Central Asia [sic.] with a map showing Israel gone [sic] coming out? Or the one for the Germans that show Poland missing and Gdansk relabeled Danzig? Or how about India as a British colony again? Answer: Never, because that would be

"offensive". Only white Americans can be made fun of. This ad is hypocritical. I'll never buy Absolut. **Posted by: Ken Heerdegen | [April 09, 2008 at 07:13 AM](#)**

“This map/ad is an abomination. Absolut and the ad agency that produced it have attempted to justify it by claiming that it is historically accurate and simply reflects borders that existed at the time. That is absolutely false (pun intended)! All of the countries and borders represented in this ad are CURRENT borders for all of the countries except the US and Mexico - for example, Canada didn't even exist at this time, it was British North America, Panama was still part of Columbia, and all of the countries of Central America were one country (United Central Provinces of America), etc. Why weren't these countries portrayed with their accurate borders and names in the early 19th century? Because Absolut was pandering to a political agenda. And as some have pointed out in earlier posts, can you imagine what would happen if an ad were produced for the Russian market showing the borders of the old USSR, or in Europe showing the "Großdeutsches Reich" with not only modern-day Germany but most of Central and eastern Europe within German borders. **Posted by: Gman | [April 09, 2008 at 06:59 AM](#)**”

“So go peddle your phony, racist rewrite of American History back in your own country. ... This [area- California, Texas, and the southwest] is, and always will be, the United States Of America. **Posted by: T. Macallan | [April 08, 2008 at 09:51 PM](#)**”

On radio talk shows and on conservative websites, like the one run by Michelle Malkin, people expressed their outrage. Some called for total boycott of Absolut. Others recounted how they have already poured all of their stock of Absolut vodka down the drain. So widespread was the outrage that that Vin & Spirit, the company that produces Absolut, felt the need to issue the following statement: “As a global company, we recognize that people in different parts of the world may lend different perspectives or interpret our ads in a different way than was intended in that market, and for that we apologize.”

All this over a map.

My point is not to lend support to those expressing outrage. What I want to highlight is the contrast between the US popular response to this issue, and to way it has been reported, with the way the name controversy and the maps issue that led Greece to veto the accession of FYROM into NATO was. In the lead-up to the recent NATO summit in Bucharest, numerous editorials appeared in the mainstream US press, conservative talk-show hosts and bloggers in the US excoriated Greece for its “hyper-sensitivity” over the name issue, which includes of course the maps distributed in FYROM that show Greece’s province of Macedonia as part of FYROM’s national territory. And it was not just the fringe media that adopted this stance. The Editorial Board of the “New York Times” (April 3, 2008) in a piece entitled, “Shame on Greece: Messing with Macedonia” chides the Greeks for their position, stating that “tiny Macedonia doesn’t

threaten Greece under any name.” I agree. Does Mexico threaten the US? Does anyone seriously believe that the Reconquista movement poses a real, tangible threat to the US? Of course not.

Yet, many people in the US are outraged at the appearance of a map in an ad campaign that wasn't even shown in their country that depicted Mexican irredentism. Are they over-reacting? Absolutely. Are there people in Greece and in the Greek Diaspora who are over-reacting to the FYROM issue? Absolutely. But lets at least recognize that for many people in countries all around the world, maps and symbols that touch upon national history, national identity and national integrity are meaningful and important. Selecting only some groups for criticism for doing this should be labelled for what it is: hypocrisy.