

DECEMBER 12

Is the USA the center of the world?

Some things don't seem to change. Five years after I wrote this column in the form of a news dispatch, it seems more relevant than ever:

WASHINGTON – There were unconfirmed reports yesterday that the United States is not the center of the world.

The White House had no immediate comment on the reports, which set off a firestorm of controversy in the nation's capital.

Speaking on background, a high-ranking official at the State Department discounted the possibility that the reports would turn out to be true. "If that were the case," he said, "don't you think we would have known about it a long time ago?"

On Capitol Hill, leaders of both parties were quick to rebut the assertion. "That certain news organizations would run with such a poorly sourced and obviously slanted story tells us that the liberal media are still up to their old tricks, despite the current crisis," a GOP lawmaker fumed. A prominent Democrat, also speaking on condition of anonymity, said that classified briefings to congressional intelligence panels had disproved such claims long ago.

Scholars at leading think tanks were more restrained, and some said there was a certain amount of literal truth to the essence of the reports. But they pointed out that while it included factual accuracy in a narrow sense, the assertion was out of context and had the potential to damage national unity at a time when the United States could ill afford such a disruption.

The claim evidently originated with a piece by a Lebanese journalist that appeared several days ago in a Beirut magazine. It was then picked up by a pair of left-leaning daily newspapers in London. From there, the story quickly made its way across the Atlantic via the Internet.

"It just goes to show how much we need seasoned, professional gatekeepers to separate the journalistic wheat from the chaff before it gains wide attention," remarked the managing editor of one news program at a major U.S. television network. "This is the kind

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of stuff you see on ideologically driven websites, but that hardly means it belongs on the evening news." A newsmagazine editor agreed, calling the reports "the worst kind of geographical correctness."

None of the major cable networks devoted much air time to reporting the story. At one outlet, a news executive's memo told staffers that any reference to the controversy should include mention of the fact that the United States continues to lead the globe in scientific discoveries. At a more conservative network, anchors and correspondents reminded viewers that English is widely acknowledged to be the international language – and more people speak English in the U.S. than in any other nation.

While government officials voiced acute skepticism about the notion that the United States is not the center of the world, they declined to speak for attribution. "If lightning strikes and it turns out this report has real substance to it," explained one policymaker at the State Department, "we could look very bad, at least in the short run. Until it can be clearly refuted, no one wants to take the chance of leading with their chin and ending up with a hefty serving of Egg McMuffin on their face."

An informal survey of intellectuals with ties to influential magazines of political opinion, running the gamut from *The Weekly Standard* to *The New Republic*, indicated that the report was likely to gain little currency in Washington's elite media forums.

"The problem with this kind of shoddy impersonation of reporting is that it's hard to knock down because there are grains of truth," one editor commented. "Sure, who doesn't know that our country includes only small percentages of the planet's land mass and population? But to draw an inference from those isolated facts that somehow the United States of America is not central to the world and its future – well, that carries postmodernism to a nonsensical extreme."

Another well-known American journalist speculated that the controversy will soon pass: "Moral relativism remains a pernicious force in our society, but overall it holds less appeal than ever, even on American campuses. It's not just that we're the only superpower -- we happen to also be the light onto the nations and the key to the world's fate. People who can't accept that reality are not going to have much credibility."