



UCSD Science Studies Program

Colloquium Series

presents

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4:00 – 6:00pm

Humanities and Social Sciences Bldg. #3027

Reception prior to talk at 3:30 pm in HSS 3005

The national map and the republic of knowledge in late nineteenth-century America

Abstract

From 1884 to 1886, the U.S. Congressional Allison Commission convened to address the administrative organization and escalating costs of the major federal scientific agencies, and to establish new modes of accountability to ensure their proper conduct. Much of the commission's attention turned to the Geological Survey's plans for the production of a geodetically accurate, national topographic map (in 2600 sheets), and the national geologic map that would follow the topographic work. While critics saw the national mapping program as an immense and inefficient scientific boondoggle, its advocates, notably its author, Survey Director John Wesley Powell, saw instead a tangible reflection of science's republican virtue – a vision of the body politic founded on both the production and the democratic and geographical distribution of useful scientific information. This lecture explores the scientific nature of territoriality in late nineteenth-century America by revisiting a moment when both the technical requirements and fiscal expenses of America's new national mapping program were called into question. Through a close reading of the conflicts between Powell and the Alabama Representative, commission member, and future US Secretary of the Navy Hilary Abner Herbert, the paper examines the hearings as a complex hybrid of public sphere and formal legislative arena. The outcomes of these debates would have profound implications for the politics of scientific expertise amidst the rising American Leviathan, and for the changing dimensions of modern state territoriality and sovereignty.

*For more information, please contact the Science Studies Program Office
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