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A SOBERING TRIP THROUGH THE FEDERAL BUREAUCRACY
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By chance, Martin Miller discovered in 1981 that there was a big mistake in government publications about who legally owns the West Bank, occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

The discovery led him on a four-year odyssey through the snail-like workings of the federal bureaucracy that left Miller a lot more cynical about the government he once worked for.

Miller, a retired Treasury Department employee, found U.S. publications gave ownership of the 2,200-square-mile area to Jordan.

But Jordan's 1950 annexation of the West Bank is not recognized by any government except Britain and Pakistan, and in 1974 even Jordan gave up its claim to the area.

The United States considers the area occupied territory, with ownership to be determined by negotiation, but the area still is shown on U.S. maps to be an occupied part of Jordan.

Miller, filled with confidence in the essential goodness of the U.S. government, pointed out the cartographic mistake in a polite letter. The State Department geographer responded, saying the department would tell all government publications that the West Bank is not under the sovereignty of any Middle East country -- including Jordan.

In 1983, the State Department announced that the mistaken map would be changed in the next edition of the "World Factbook," which is published by the CIA under the policy direction of the State Department.

The map was corrected, but the accompanying text was still wrong, giving back to Jordan what the map took away.

The matter was brought up at the State Department press briefing and spokesman John Hughes, whose office is in charge of the subject, promised something would be done.

Nothing was.

Miller then called in one of his big IOUs, a casual friendship with George Shultz. Miller saw Shultz in April 1984 and explained his story. The secretary of state promised quick action.

Another year passed. Miller, carrying a briefcase full of letters, maps, books and promises, went from the CIA to Capitol Hill and back to the State Department.

At the CIA, spokeswoman Patti Volz told him the agency has no intention of 'revising, replacing or changing maps of Jordan published by the U.S. government at this point in time.'

Miller wondered aloud if the rest of CIA intelligence is as accurate as its maps of the Middle East.

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2.

This year, Miller decided to take his case elsewhere.

He went directly to such publishers as the National Geographic and Macmillan and pointed out that government publications are either wrong, inconsistent or both. He suggested that map and atlas publishers ignore the government and follow the facts. Some publishers followed his advice. Others did not.

The National Geographic played it right down the middle. In their aerial map of Jordan in February 1984, they got it wrong. But in a bird's-eye map of Israel in July, they got it right.

The State Department, after more than four years of ignoring Miller and his retirement obsession, finally put together a new ''background paper'' on Jordan, to be published later this summer.

For the first time, both the maps and the text are correct.

Thus, it is possible to compute that it took 18 months for a direct order from the secretary of state to filter down to the working levels of the department and take effect.

There is no indication how long it will take the CIA to follow the State Department policy guidance in its publications.