

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why Is The World Split Into Countries?

January 6, 2017

[Jane] This is *But Why: A Podcast For Curious Kids* from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this program we take questions from kids like you and we find interesting people to answer them.

If you have a question, I'll tell you how to send it to us at the end of the episode. Later on we're going to be hearing about this.

That's the sound of the school bus. Many of you are probably very familiar with that sound. We're going to be learning more about why some school buses don't have seat belts.

But first we have two questions about geographical and political borders. Many of you listening live in the United States. But we have also heard from kids in other countries like Canada, Australia, Belgium, the Cayman Islands, the Czech Republic, and the United Arab Emirates. Here are our two questions about borders.

[Devika] My name is Devika. I am 8 years old. I live in Overland Park Kansas. My question for you is why are all of the world split up like countries, states, cities and counties and more?

[Sophia] My name is Sophia. I'm from Apopcoa, Florida. I'm eight years old. My question is why is the world made up of so many countries? Why can't we all just live as one big group?

[Jane] To understand countries, you first have to know what a border is. The kind of border we're talking about is a boundary set up by a government, and its basic function is to say within these lines a specific government is in charge and specific rules are in place that people who live here have to follow. Sometimes borders can be defined geographically by a natural feature like a river, a mountain, or an ocean. But sometimes they're just a straight line that cuts through all kinds of natural spaces and is just more of a political boundary. It's not always easy to come up with a border that everyone can agree on. Wars have been fought over where one country's boundaries start and another one ends and people have been killed over border disputes. This stuff can get really, really messy.

You've probably learned about the U.S. Civil War in your history classes, if you're in school. That was back in the 1860s when the southern portion of the United States wanted to secede from, or leave, the United States. The Confederate States of America,

as they were called, even elected a president, Jefferson Davis. But the president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, fought to keep those states as part of the Union, the existing United States.

It's often the people who are living in a disputed territory who suffer the most because these decisions about border disputes are often a struggle, not something that people decide with a handshake. And the decision makers don't always have the best interests of the people who live there in mind. Powerful governments have historically wanted to take over land that's valuable and that has sometimes been more important to them than the wishes of the native people who live there.

Borders are always changing. The newest country in the world is South Sudan in east Africa. That country declared independence from Sudan in 2011, just five and a half years ago, but it was after a very violent civil war. In some places, it's still not clear who gets to claim the land. In Antarctica, for example, there are seven countries that all claim overlapping territories. And in other places voters have thought about becoming a new country and then decided not to. In 2014, people living in Scotland thought very hard about separating from the United Kingdom. The UK is made up of four countries England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland all have their own governments and varying degrees of sovereignty, or independence, but they are still part of the United Kingdom, which is this larger country made up of those four.

So Scotland was thinking about leaving the UK and they had a referendum, or a big vote, where everybody could say yes or no. And in the end they decided to stay in the UK, for now at least.

The idea that borders are in constant change is not something we think about a lot in the United States these days. We kind of take it for granted that there are 50 states and there probably always will be. But Juan Enriquez has thought a lot about it. He actually wrote a book called *The Untied States of America*. Get it?

I asked Juan Enriquez to share his thoughts for Devika and Sophia. So let's remind ourselves first of their questions.

[Devika] Why are all of the world split up like countries, states, cities, and counties?

[Sophia] Why is the world made up of so many countries? Why can't we all just live as one big group?

[Juan] Originally, many thousands of years ago, on you've got to 30 or 40 people you'd split off and you'd become a different tribe, a different group. We've now learned that having a town is a nice thing to do. That having a city is a really fun thing to do. When

you have thousands, or hundreds of thousands, or millions of people living together, you get amusement parks, you get zoos, and you get restaurants, and you get better schools, and you get other sports teams to play against. So I think the history of humanity has been a history of learning to tolerate, learning to learn how to live together in large and larger groups in peace. And we're not law perfect at it. One of the very interesting thing that's happened in the last hundred years is we've moved from being a group of, or a species that lived mostly in the countryside, to being a species that's living about 80 percent in cities. And as we do that I think we'll get better at tolerating, other countries will get better at living with other people, and maybe our notion of current countries may start to fade.

[Jane] Why do we need to have country borders to begin with? Because you know each country has its own government and its own set of rules. And included in those rules are who is allowed to move into the country and who is not allowed to move in. So why do we have to have those kinds of boundaries that includes some people and exclude others?

[Juan] Countries for a long time concentrated people who had one belief system. So they thought about we are of X religion or we are of X color or we are of x beliefs. And one of the things that makes the United States so strong, that has made it such a successful country, even though it's a very young country compared to many others, is that while it does have borders, within those borders it has gotten more tolerant of people who may think differently, who may look differently, who may have a different system but in other places would lead to a border, that a lot of the history of humans has been moving from 'only my family matters' to 'only my tribe matters' to 'only my town matters' to 'only my country matters.' And one of the really nice things about what's happening today particularly among young people is there are problems like the environment, or education, or stopping wars, or keeping the planet clean, or getting to Mars, that require a whole lot more people. That has to break down some borders. And I think we're gradually heading in that direction.

[Jane] I think some of our audience may also be absorbing news in the United States and beyond that's a little bit confusing and complicated, but involves who should be let into various countries. So if you're following the situation with refugees from Syria and you live in Europe this may be something that you hear a lot about, in different countries talking about how many people from Syria we should let in or not. And in the United States in this recent political election immigration has been a big topic and should we tell people who are here without papers that they have to leave? Or should we accept people of certain religions. How would you explain to kids what they're hearing? That doesn't sound like what you're saying about more openness but in fact sounds a little bit like less openness.

[Juan] What seems like a whole lot of hate today, and there is a lot of hate in some places out there today, is something we have to fight against. That doesn't mean that you completely open your borders. That doesn't mean that you let anybody in at this point because you have a series of norms and you have a series of building blocks for a country, a set of common beliefs. You probably would not want tens of millions of people who do not believe in democracy, or who do not believe in free speech, or who do not believe in education, or don't believe in allowing people to worship freely.

Those people who you do let in, you want to make sure they go through an education system, and the system that says 'look the way that we live here starting with which side of the road we drive on, starting with you should get an education, you should be tolerant of other people.' Those basic norms are important to be able to live together in big groups. And the bigger the group gets the more important it is to have some of shared norms within those freedoms.

[Jane] Many countries do impose those kinds of restrictions on citizenship and they require a long process for someone to become a citizen. It often involves having to get permission to live in a country other than your own. And this permission comes in the form of a visa. It's sort of a temporary step. For example my family lives in the United States, but my husband is from Wales. He has a visa that allows him to live and work here but he can't vote because he's not an American citizen. But our two kids are citizens of both the United States and the United Kingdom.

Sometimes people are granted the right to move to a new country because the situation in their home country is so bad. You may have been hearing about refugees in the news. It's a very complicated political issue around the world right now and we're not going to get too far into it in this episode. But you should talk to an adult you trust if you have questions about what you're hearing. In some places you don't even have to get permission if the country you're from and the country you want to live in have an agreement. That's true for countries in the European Union. Juan Enriquez says this kind of open border concept may be the way of the future.

[Juan] I think borders are getting more and more tenuous. And part of the reason why they're doing that is because it used to be that people didn't travel, more than, call it, 20 or 30 miles from where they lived. It was perfectly normal for people to live and die in the same town, and often not see another town. And when you invent the automobile and when airplane travel gets cheap, then one of the things you can do is you can go and see other cities, towns within your country, and even other countries. The amount of kids who are getting an opportunity to travel to see cousins somewhere else or to see aunts or uncles or friends is increasing.

And travel shows you how interesting it is to talk to people who can be different from you and who has maybe different looks, or different ways of eating, or different ways of coloring something or different ways of learning something or different books that can teach you stuff or like different programs. The other thing that's happened is communication has gotten so cheap.

Today probably most of you have or will have in a very short period of time, friends on Facebook that are in very different cities, and different countries and maybe you'll see people on Twitter or on Instagram or on a whole series of things. And it doesn't cost you anything to communicate with these people. And what that does is it allows you to have friends that you can ask about living somewhere else and allows you to communicate with those folks and then it becomes harder for governments to create a sense of distance, to create a sense of hate between one place and another because you've met the children there, you've seen where they go to school. You've seen what they eat and they aren't the others they're your friends and that makes a big difference.

[Jane] Many of you listening now in the United States both kids and adults have always known our country as one with 50 states. It was 50 states when you were born and there's sort of an assumption that it will be 50 states for your whole life but it wasn't always that way and it may not always be that way in the future.

[Juan] People can take their countries for granted and when they do that, when they don't respect their country, when they don't respect their flag when they don't respect their traditions. Those countries can fall apart and can fall apart very quickly. The opposite is also true if you respect tradition too much and you respect the way things work too much and you don't accept new people and you don't accept new ideas then countries become irrelevant.

And the United States is actually a very young country, so the United States has only been around for about six full lifetimes if you think of a lifetime as, you know, 60 years. This is a very young country and it's gone through a lot of change. Every president born before Martin Van Buren wasn't born in a house that was flying the United States flag outside because the United States flag didn't exist when George Washington was born. And it didn't exist when Madison was born. None of the founding fathers were born under United States flag. And what gradually happened is United States came together into 13 states. So the original flag of the United States had 13 stars. And then other people wanted to join and then some states wanted to split into two states or three states. And gradually what happened is you started adding more and more stars to the flag. And the last two stars on the flag were added in 1959, which where Alaska and Hawaii. And what that means is there has never been a United States president that was born under the same flag he was buried under because the number of stars changed. And yet we tend to take the flag for granted and we tend to take the design of

flag for granted. We think it's always been there we think it will never change. It'll change in the way that all of you want it to change. And in a lot of countries in the world they've been splitting countries. They've tried to split the United Kingdom. They've tried to create Scotland, they've tried to create Wales. They've tried to create different bits of Spain with the Basques and the Catalans and the Galicians and they've tried to create northern Italy. I hope that doesn't happen to the United States. I hope that we remain a united country. I hope that it does remain the United States instead of the Untied States.

[Jane] That was Juan Enríquez author of *Untied States of America: Polarization, Fracturing and Our Future*. We have another question about countries.

[Celia] My name is Celia and I am eight years old. I would like to know which country has the least amount of people.

[Jane] OK, Celia thanks for sending that. The smallest country has only about 800 people. Do you know what it is? It's called Vatican City. It's the home of the Pope the head of the Catholic Church. Vatican City is a city and it's entirely within the city of Rome, Italy, so it's a very small amount of land. The city became its own country in 1929 after an agreement with the country of Italy. Of those 800 people who live there not all of them have actual citizenship and most of the ones who do are clergy or sort of working members of the Catholic Church.

Other than Vatican City, when you look at a list of the smallest countries they kind of fall into two groups. The first is small, remote islands. Two of them are Tuvalu with fewer than 10,000 people and Palau with 21,000. Now these are very remote islands and that's what makes them unlikely to have big population growth any time soon. They're remote and they're small. The next group is small European countries sometimes called micro states. These are places like San Marino, Liechtenstein, Monaco, and Andorra. They are small independent countries and some are monarchies ruled by a royal family. When larger European countries were formed by smaller countries and kingdoms joining together these places remained independent. But most do have a close relationship with a neighboring larger country. So these boundaries are more historical than based on some restriction like the size of an island since they're all within Europe. So that answers our borders questions for the day.

Thank you so much for sending those questions in!

That's a sound you might recognize. It's a school bus starting up and opening the door for riders. Lots of kids, maybe you, get to school by riding the bus. And one of you noticed one big difference between riding the bus and riding in the car.

[Kayla] My name is Kayla. I am eight years old and I live in Colchester, Vermont. My question is why don't buses have seat belts?

[Mark] Hello, boys and girls. I'm Dr. Mark Rosekind. I work for a government agency called the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration or NHTSA for short. Our job is to make sure that every time you and your family is driving or being driven by someone else that they are doing it as safe as possible.

The school bus is by far the safest way for kids to get to and from school. This is due to the engineering that occurs when the buses are built. Notice the high seats when you get in on the bus the next time. These are some of the safety features that keep you safe. In fact NHTSA wants to make them even safer by eventually adding seatbelts on all school buses.

[Jane] That's right. NHTSA eventually wants all school buses to have seat belts. But some already do.

[Mark] Some states believe that children are safer with seatbelts on school buses so they placed them in their school buses. Other states are considering adding seat belts due to NHTSA suggestions. If your school bus has seatbelts, make sure you buckle up every trip, every time. If it doesn't always make sure you are facing forward and sitting properly for the whole ride. All school buses even the ones without seatbelts are the safest vehicles for kids to ride to and from school.

[Jane] Even if your bus doesn't have seatbelts it has many features that make it safe.

[Mark] Buses are very large vehicles. They are bright color so they stand out more allowing other vehicles to see them better. If a bus gets in a crash it will not crumble like a regular car or truck would. This means that the people inside the bus are much safer. Also the big seats inside the school bus are like big padded walls which stop children from getting hurt during a crash. Always make sure you are riding in the school bus seated properly. Students should always be facing the front and not sitting sideways.

[Jane] And here are a couple other things you can do to stay safe on the bus.

[Mark] When your school bus approaches stand at least three giant steps, that's about six feet away from the curb and lineup away from the street. Wait until the bus stops. The door opens and the driver says that it's OK to enter or exit the bus.

If you have to cross the street in front of the bus, be sure the driver can see you. Never walk behind the bus. If you drop something near the bus, tell the bus driver, never try to pick it up because the driver may not be able to see you.

[Jane] So there you have it. If your bus doesn't have seat belts now, it might someday soon. At any rate stay safe on your way to school.

That's it for this episode. If you have a question have an adult record it on a smartphone and send it to questions@butwhykids.org. We will do our best to get an answer for you. Make sure you tell us your first name where you live and how old you are. And by the way you should check out our Facebook page. We always post new episodes sometimes we post little snippets of things that we've seen and loved and we post pictures of kids who are asking us questions.

If you'd like to be featured yourself, send us a photo and tell us a little bit about what your interests are and we'll pop your picture up on our Facebook page too. You'll find it at But Why Kids Podcast on Facebook.

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