

Because global issues matter more now than ever, here's ...

How America Can Maintain Its Edge

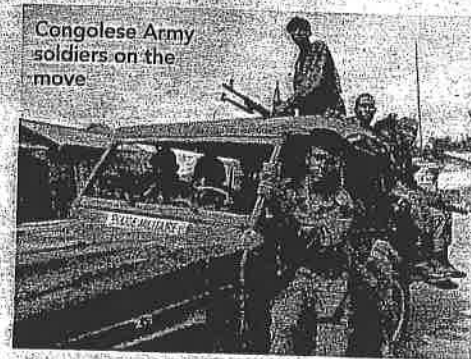
by Simon Winchester

tion of Barack Obama—a man whose childhood was shaped by connections to Hawaii, Kenya, and Indonesia—provided the ultimate proof.

Nonetheless, the degree to which Americans know about and travel around the world is surprisingly low. Thirty percent of Americans possess a valid passport, according to State Department figures. Despite our immigrant roots, just 10% of U.S. citizens can speak a second language. In contrast, more than half of the people in the 27 nations of the European Union are bilingual, and 28% are trilingual. And while America is home of the world-famous, yellow-bordered *National Geographic* magazine, 63% of U.S. students surveyed in a 2006 poll could not find Iraq—where their troops are fighting—on a map. In addition, 75% had no idea where Israel—the largest recipient of America's foreign aid—was, and 75% had no idea that Indonesia was an Islamic nation (in fact, the world's biggest).

The U.S. Department of Education recently pinpointed the languages most vital to this country's

future: Chinese, Arabic, Farsi, Korean, Japanese, Russian, Hindi, and Urdu. Less than 1% of high school students are studying any of these. More specifically, around 30,000 to 50,000 American students—high school and college—are learning Chinese. But in China, where



Conflict in the Congo could affect how many jets we can build

English is mandatory for students from third grade onward, at least 150 million students currently are becoming fluent in our language.

"The U.S. will become less competitive in the global economy because of a shortage of strong foreign-language and international-studies programs at the elementary, high school, and college levels," stated one of the findings in a 2006 report from the nonprofit Committee for Economic Development. "Our diplomatic efforts often have been hampered by a lack of cultural awareness."

Almost all events, no matter how far away, have an effect on us. Upheaval in Bolivia? That could mean a shortage of cellphone batteries down the road. (Bolivia has the world's largest reserves of lithium, vital to small batteries.) War in the Democratic

is what your bucketful of iron ore made." He was astonished. Astonished that I had come back to see him. Astonished that his pile of ore had been made into a car. But most astonished of all to learn that so many people—Chinese, Japanese, American, Norwegian—from so many countries had

been involved in the process. "I guess we are all linked," he said. "Even if we never think we are." Americans

are coming to this realization—that we are connected in so many invisible little ways—more and more often these days. Every week, it seems, we're greeted with news of more melting ice in the Arctic, a result of carbon emanating from the pipes and smokestacks in this country and others. In September, the U.S. investment bank Lehman

Brothers was the first major firm toppled in a financial crisis that has afflicted economies and workers from Iceland to Dubai. And, for any lingering doubters of globalization's reach, the elec-

AT AN IRON-ORE MINE IN western Australia, I once stood and watched as a young man worked an excavator to claw bucketfuls of deep-red ore from the ground. For a project, I wanted to follow the ore on its journey from raw material to finished product. So I went on a train that took it to a port, then traveled on the Chinese ship that carried it to Japan. There it was refined into steel ingots, which were sent to a factory outside Tokyo and fashioned into a Toyota Corolla. Next I got on a mighty ship carrying thousands of Toyota imports across the Pacific Ocean to Seattle.

The car made from my ore—small, red, sporty—was unloaded in Washington and put on a truck. I rode with it to a dealer in San Francisco, where I bought the car. Then I drove it to a port and put it, and me as well, onto a Norwegian passenger liner bound for Australia. Ten days later, I unloaded and drove the car to the cliff face and to the young excavator operator.

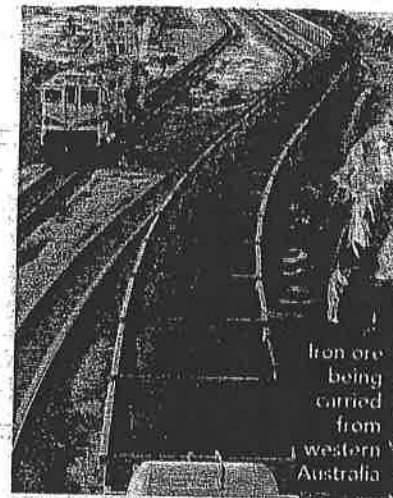
"Here," I said to him, pointing at the car. "This



Turmoil in Bolivia may end up causing a U.S. shortage in cellphone batteries

tronic

Republic of Congo? We may have to produce fewer jets, since Congo is a leading exporter of cobalt, a metal crucial to jet engines. More dramatically, if the conflict heats up between Pakistan and India, then nuclear annihilation threatens, since they both have atomic weapons. And yet how much do most Americans know about Bolivia, Congo, Pakistan, or India? And how many of us have contemplated visiting them or their neighbors?



Australian iron is used to make the cars we drive

I raised these questions with a college student I know from Elko, Nev. He felt that technology trumped the need to go overseas, saying, "Anything can be found out on the Internet—you don't have to go places to find out about them."

I'm not so sure. I'm a firm believer in getting to know people who are very different from ourselves, in trying to understand customs and beliefs and systems that are unfamiliar and, yes, foreign. More than a century ago, Mark Twain said words that still are true today: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness."

I first arrived in America from continued

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England as a teenager. A nervous schoolboy, I hitchhiked (it was safe back in the 1960s) up and down and from coast to coast—30,000 miles in six months. The lesson I learned as I met strangers in Texas, Oklahoma, and Maine? That Americans are some of the biggest-hearted people in the world.

To fully appreciate that we are all passengers on the same vast

We are all linked, even if we never think we are

The author on a boat off the Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic



planet, it's essential to go and see the intricacies of humankind for yourself. You don't need to spend a lot to achieve the kind of wisdom that is necessary to be fully informed citizens and participants in the world.

So, if you're ready to embark on your own journey toward greater awareness, get yourself a shiny new blue-jacketed U.S. passport. And then get going.

PARADE Contributing Editor Simon Winchester is the author of 20 books, including the best-selling "The Professor and the Madman" and "Krakatoa." His newest book is "The Man Who Loved China." He is on his 11th passport and has been to more than 150 countries.