

# The growing importance of being international

BY ZACH MESSITTE

Whoever the next occupant of the White House, the new president will have an appreciation for international travel and culture that began at birth. Even before they became members of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees, John McCain and Barack Obama were respectively defined by their global experiences.

It was just 10 years ago that the Majority Leader of the House of Representatives Richard Arme, R-Texas, pronounced that he had been to Europe once and didn't need to go again. When President George W. Bush decided to run for governor of Texas in 1994, his resume included a only few brief trips abroad — a bit of tourism in Europe, a trade mission to Gambia in West Africa, and a visit to see his ambassador father in Beijing in the 1970s. His first visit to the Middle East, the region that will end up defining his legacy, didn't occur until he was readying to run for national once in the late 1990s.

During his first term, Bush publicly mocked NBC News reporter David Gregory, who had studied in Paris during college, for asking French President Jacques Chirac a question in French during a press conference. As a Texan, Bush spent some time south of the border, but as



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Mexican President Vincente Fox recently noted, the president's Spanish language ability never progressed beyond the grade school level.

The international biographies of Sens. McCain and Obama are striking by comparison. McCain was born at the Coco Solo Naval Air Station in the Panama Canal Zone to a Navy family that lived all over the world. As a bachelor midshipman at the Naval Academy McCain made several visits to Brazil where he had a whirlwind romance, according to biographer Robert Timberg, with a Rio de Janeiro socialite that he still recalls fondly today.

Before he served in Vietnam, McCain spent time on aircraft carriers around the world, visiting ports of call while his first wife and children lived in Europe. McCain, of course, spent five and half years as a POW. His heroic story is well known, but his ability decades later to understand how the world had changed and reconcile his wartime experience,

helped him lead the process of normalizing U.S.-Vietnamese relations.

Obama's international biography is part of his allure to the younger generation in today's age of globalization and disappearing borders. Obama's father, a Kenyan of Luo ethnicity, was a foreign exchange student at the University of Hawaii when he met Obama's Kansas-born mother. The Democratic nominee also spent four formative years with his Indonesian stepfather in Jakarta. His half sister lived in Heidelberg, Germany. Obama's trips through Europe and the multiple visits to his family in Africa, chronicled in his first book, "Dreams from My Father," shaped his outlook on life.

I tell my students that the best way to understand what it will mean to live and work in the 21st century is to spend time overseas. Even though English may be widely spoken around the world, the ability to converse in another language is a reward that pays dividends for a lifetime. Beyond being able to order in restaurants or make hotel reservations, it shows a respect for other cultures that Americans so badly need to make a priority in years to come.

At the University of Oklahoma, international and area studies is one of the most popular and fastest

growing majors on campus. Started just seven years ago, there are now almost 400 students in the program and they are required to study abroad and take a foreign language in order to graduate.

However, students from academic disciplines across campus are taking advantage of study abroad. A business major knows that there are practical reasons for learning Arabic just as an architecture student wants to see the classic beauty and new buildings of Asia. There are also almost 1,500 international students from 100 countries on campus in Norman that adds to the idea that higher education is going global.

The good news is that the next American president, whether Republican or Democrat, will have a similar appreciation of the importance of understanding societies beyond our shores. Whoever wins in November, the next president needs to remind Americans — in both word and deed — that curiosity and education about the world is critical to our future.

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