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William C. Levin
Bridgewater State College

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Cultural Commentary

I'm O.K. Who Are You?

William C. Levin

We humans spend a great deal of time figuring out where we stand. For example, put the average American into the center of a totally dark room and, after a few moments he or she will start to cautiously shuffle around, groping with extended hands to survey the size and contents of the place. Why risk barking your shins on an unseen coffee table in order to explore like this when it would be safe to stay put? It seems to be a fundamental survival strategy to always feel oriented, to learn where you stand so you'll know what the threats and opportunities are. We do this constantly in our day-to-day lives. A little girl strains to see how tall she is compared to her classmates. A college student wants to know how well he did on his exam relative to others in the class. My uncle George learns the location of all the gas stations in his area so he'll know where to go if his gas gauge drops below half empty. Satchel Paige may have said that you should "never look back because someone may be gaining on you", but the rest of us usually want to know as much as possible where we stand.

I think it is one of the good qualities of American culture that we seem to be pretty much unafraid of finding out what is "out there" that might hurt us. We keep track of all the foods that are bad for us, the murderers in our midst, the bad weather that is sweeping our way, and the fluctuations in the value of property that threaten our financial futures. Not only are we usually well informed about the dangers around us, but we also do an excellent job of attending to our opportunities. We pay attention to where the bargains can be found (try leaving a decent looking toaster oven on your sidewalk on trash day), to chances for moving up at work, to the opportunities for fun that are being invented all the time and to ways of saving money at tax time. In short, we seem to do a pretty good job of getting the "lay of the land" to help us in our lives.

But I do think that there is an area of our "orienting" practices in which we fall way short of where we should be. We seem to pay almost no attention to the world beyond our immediate surroundings. Specifically, we have no good idea of where our country stands relative to the rest of the world. This fact is reflected in the terribly low rates of foreign news reporting in our newspapers, and on our television broadcasts. Recent media watch studies have counted the percent of print space and news time devoted to the reporting of events in other countries, and found that it has always been low, and since the 1950's it has declined by more than half in most of our newspapers (with the exception of the largest city papers like the New York Times), and by more than seventy percent on network news broadcasts. There are lots of reasons given for this trend, such as the loss of a clear enemy with the end of the cold war, the relative isolation of the United States from dangerous neighbors and differing cultures, and the deeply held belief of most Americans that our fates are (and should be) in our own hands. But whatever the reason for our unconcern with what is going on in the rest of the world, it is clear that on the international scale, we are like a person in a darkened room who isn't in the slightest interested in finding out whether the place is filled with snakes or Snickers. Perhaps it is time to do a little groping about for information about the larger world.

How about trying a little quiz. Let me dig up a few numbers that place the United States next to other countries and see if they surprise you. They surprised me. To do this I will just flip through the all-time champion single-source of data about the United States, a publication of the U.S. Bureau of the Census called the Statistical Abstract of the United States. This massive listing of vital statistics has been compiled annually for the last 116 years and is my favorite dictionary of numerical gee-whizzers. It is in the reference section of your local library, or you can buy it from the Government Printing Office or in a much less expensive version called The American Almanac from Hoover's Incorporated. The following startling bits of information, listed by topic...
for your convenience, are from the most recent edition, the 116th.

**Tax Revenues, by Country**

Let's start with everyone's favorite, taxes. How do we stand compared with the rest of the world for taxes paid? (Table 1343, page 840 of the American Almanac). In 1993 the United States' tax revenues amounted to $1.836 trillion. That is about 30% of our gross domestic product, which is the dollar value of all the goods and services produced by our labor and property. If that high? It turns out to be a higher rate than in Australia (29% of GDP), Japan (29%), and Turkey (24%), but not higher than any of the other industrialized countries listed in the table. For example, higher tax rates exit in Austria (44% of GDP collected in taxes), Norway (46%), Belgium (46%), Italy (48%), and Sweden (50%). By the way, in case you are thinking about moving to Turkey to take advantage of the lower tax rates, be careful. They only collected $41 billion in 1993 ($688 per citizen), so don't expect much in the way of public services.

**Prices of petroleum products by country**

Did you ever listen as your cousin Ralph complained about the cost of gas in the United States only to hear aunt Harriet counter that fuel is much more expensive in Europe? Well, according to the American Almanac, 116th edition, Table number 1359, the price of premium gasoline was $3.34 in Germany, $3.46 in Italy and $2.96 in Ireland. (Right you are, Harriet!) But there is really more. The average price of a gallon of gasoline in 1994 was just 41 cents in Russia and a paltry 18 cents in Venezuela. No other countries are even below a dollar a gallon. Go figure.

**Trade surpluses and deficits with various countries**

In Table 1305 on page 800, plain as the nose (etc.) are the U.S. Exports, Imports and Merchandise Trade Balance, by Country 1991-1995. Of course, anyone can tell you we have a negative balance of trade with Japan. But our economic standing in the world is a good deal more interesting than that. In 1995 the trade deficit we ran with Japan was just over 59 billion dollars, about one third of the total 158 billion dollar deficit we ran with the entire world. Next closest is China at 33 billion and change. After that competition drops way off to 18 billion (Canada), 15 billion (Mexico) and 14 billion (Germany). So what countries buy more from us than we buy from them? Well, the winner (or loser, depending on your point of view) is the Netherlands with a trade deficit with the United States of over 10 billion dollars. I guess they buy more blue jeans than we buy tulips.

**Life expectancy for people born in 1996**

An American who was born in 1996 can, on average, expect to live for 76 years. Pretty good, considering that the average life expectancy in 1970 was less than 70 years. Is our rate higher or lower than other countries? Well, it's a great deal higher than in some, such as Cameroon (53 years), Niger (41), Rwanda (40), Zaire (48 years), Zimbabwe (38) and Uganda (38). Does this give you a sense of what life (such as it is) is like in Africa? But our life expectancy is actually lower than in other countries such as Belgium (77 years), Australia (79), Denmark (77), France (78), Italy (78), Japan (80), and Hong Kong (the champ at 82). That means the average African lives half as long as the average Japanese citizen. Perhaps that little fact will help us get oriented, meaning (literally) to face east.

I understand that there is a great deal more to understanding conditions in the rest of the world than can be conveyed with any number of statistics, much less from this handbook. But given the rate at which the world is shrinking in political, economic and even geographic terms, it is about time that Americans peek over the walls of self interest and complacency that threaten to leave us stranded with knowledge of only ourselves.