

Addressing U.S. Foreign Language (FL) Shortcomings

Testimony before the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs -- March 12, 2002

1. **Should the teaching and learning of foreign languages be of national concern? Yes, the preamble to the Constitution of the United States specifically states that the Union was formed to "insure domestic Tranquility" and "provide for the common defence."**
 - **Our enemies do not speak English when they are talking to each other about us.**
 - **In today's world, national defense requires capabilities in foreign languages.**

2. **The shortage of citizens with FL skills is not a new phenomenon. The problem has been identified many times in the past, but interest has waned before systemic improvements have been implemented.**
 - **1923. WWI had created a distrust of things foreign, including foreign languages. The Supreme Court overturned laws in twenty-two states that restricted FL instruction, but enrollments remain low.**
 - **1940. The national report, *at the High Schools Ought to Teach*, found that high schools' overly "academic" curriculum was causing too many student failures. FL instruction was among the subjects recommended for elimination. It was not only difficult, but took so much time that new courses could not be added.**
 - **1954. *The National Interest and Foreign Languages* reported that only 14.2% of high school students were enrolled in FLs, and most U.S. public high schools (56%) offered no foreign language instruction at all.**
 - **1958. In response to Sputnik, the National Defense Education Act was passed to prepare more and better Foreign Language teachers. Immediate improvements were evident. Then funding waned, and progress ceased.**
 - **1975. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement published the results of a study titled, *The Teaching Of French as a Foreign Language in Eight Countries*. In the U.S., the researchers could not find enough 12 grade students with four years of language-study to complete the study as designed, and the U.S. students ranked last in competence. The study found that "... The primary factor in the attainment of proficiency in ... any foreign language... is the amount of instructional time provided."**
 - **1979. The President's commission on Foreign Language and International Studies reported, "Americans' incompetence in Foreign Languages is nothing short of scandalous, and it is becoming worse."**

- **1983.** The Commission on Excellence in Education heard testimony that in the U.S. FL instruction had yet to attain mediocrity, and recommended in *A Nation at Risk* longer course sequences.
- **1999.** A senior DOD official summarized the situation with the statement, "We face a number of challenges in meeting the immediate and long-range language needs in the Department of Defense -r and these are mirrored in every federal and state government, in the courts, in NGOs, and in corporations doing business overseas. *Perhaps the* greatest challenge we face is the general apathy toward learning foreign languages."

3. Comments on S. 1800 and S. 1799. I am, pleased to see that these bills include several initiatives designed to improve U.S. readiness in foreign language *skills*. While the demand for competency in specific languages has shifted from one language to another, two trends have remained constant over time:

- a. The total number of linguist requirements has grown.
- b. The levels of proficiency required of those government linguists has increased.

Therefore, the central challenges facing the government are recruiting more employees with language skills and then building on, those language skills. In most other developed nations, the educational system provides the foundation language courses, and the government language school builds on those *skills*. Whereas more than 90% of the enrollments at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) are in beginning language courses, Germany's counterpart to DLI, the Bundessprachenamt, has nearly 100% of its students enrolled in advanced language courses.

The provisions of the Homeland Security Federal Workforce Act and the Homeland Security Education Act will help to correct our national shortage in qualified linguists by:

- a. Encouraging language majors to accept federal employment.
- b. Recognizing that second language skills are as necessary to our national defense as are skills in math and science.
- c. Producing graduates with advanced levels of language proficiency.

I would suggest, however, that the programs described in the Homeland Security Federal Workforce Act include all federal employees, because most of the linguist assignments are in the "excepted service" or are "exempt" from the requirements of the "competitive service."