

**Testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on
Oversight of Government Management, the Federal
Workforce, and the District of Columbia**

on

**Closing the Language Gap: Improving the Federal
Government's Foreign Language Capabilities**

by

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The opinions in this draft reflect solely the views of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by either IDA or the Department of Defense

**Creating a National Language Capacity:
Lessons from the Department of Defense Experience**

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Senator Akaka, Senator Voinovich and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the invitation to appear as part of this distinguished panel. It is a privilege to offer my testimony on enhancing federal language capacity, which I do in my personal capacity, based on my previous service in government.

In my judgment, success begins by specifying the outcomes desired. For the American military, these were outlined in the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap directed by Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld, issued February 2005. The Roadmap benefitted from both Secretary Rumsfeld's longstanding interest in global language preparation, and the sharpened understanding of the need for such preparation after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The Roadmap identified three principal goals:

- Create foundational language and regional area expertise
- Create the capacity to surge
- Establish a cadre of advanced language professionals

Because the Deputy Secretary had earlier established Senior Language Authorities (March 2004), the Department had in place the leaders needed to effect change. They were empowered by the clear direction provided by the Secretary and his Deputy, together with the substantial additional resources the Department provided in the President's Budget Request, which the Congress authorized and appropriated. Sustaining those resources in the years ahead will be critical to achieving the goals so many share for the Department's linguistic capacity.

The success in enlarging the Department's language capacity importantly depended on creating new tools with which to address the military's needs. These included opening new avenues for the recruitment of heritage speakers, establishing and enhancing the incentives for military personnel to acquire and sustain linguistic excellence, and creating a Civilian Linguistic Reserve Corps (now the National Language Service Corps) to provide an on-call cadre of high-proficiency civilian language professionals to support the nation's evolving demands.

Some of the elements of success were quite straightforward—for example, requiring all military personnel to report the languages they could speak (inviting civilian employees to do the same), or requiring added language opportunities (especially immersion opportunities) at the

military academies. Others were much more ambitious—for example, seeking to change the national supply of linguists.

The Department benefitted enormously from the rich suggestions it received from civil society, starting with the National Language Conference convened in partnership with the Center for the Advanced Study of Languages at the University of Maryland in June 2004. The conference findings, together with the substantial academic literature on language learning, helped identify the steps the Department needed to take.

It was that literature that reinforced the merits of recruiting heritage speakers, the benefit of providing immersion experiences, and the need to begin language learning in elementary school (if not earlier). The Department felt privileged to be a charter member of President Bush's National Security Language Initiative, which envisaged federal encouragement to K-12 "pipeline" language programs. Indeed, DoD funded the first three.

The emphasis on elementary school as the starting point led DoD to employ additional funding provided by the Congress to underwrite the first three state language roadmaps (Ohio, Oregon, Texas). Governor Hunt of Utah (now America's ambassador to China) picked up this idea and led the creation of a similar roadmap for Utah. These roadmaps recognize the reality that if we are to improve national language capacity, including that of the federal government, we must involve state and local government in the effort.

While there is still much to be done to reach the language capacity the Department of Defense needs, its capacity today is importantly stronger in the languages of interest than it was ten years ago. Perhaps most significant, language competence is now embraced by many senior leaders as a military skill equal in importance to the skills traditionally emphasized. And it is my impression that this is welcomed by the young men and women who wear America's uniform. Given the Department's emphasis on language competence, and the response from its young volunteers—officer and enlisted—I look forward to the day when America's military will be noted for the fluency of its leadership, who will be able to explain America's policies and objectives to foreign audiences in their own tongues, both at the tactical level, and strategically in whatever media are then the standard of communication.

That is not to say that the Department of Defense has yet put in place all the steps necessary to reach this goal. Indeed, the House Armed Services Committee notes correctly that the Department still needs to specify more carefully where it needs language capacity, so that it sends the correct "demand" signals to those who recruit and train its people. It will also need to improve its ability to assign linguistically capable personnel quickly to deploying forces. But it has begun.

As Defense thinks about specifying its language needs, it may be time to abandon the usual model, which builds the force against a specific set of billets. Reflecting the uncertain location of future operations, perhaps DoD should shift to a “build to inventory” principle, for both the military and the civil servants who are so important to ultimate success. For the civil service, especially, this will require both new authorities and a new philosophical outlook.

Looking to the challenges faced by other federal agencies, I believe the DoD experience offers valuable lessons:

- Change requires strong leadership from the top—and resources
- It requires clear articulation of the goals, and identification of the path to their realization (i.e., a roadmap)
- It may well require new tools, processes or programs, some of which will challenge institutional preconceptions about how business is done
- And it will require relying on the larger national capacities if it is to have a reasonable chance of large-scale success

In looking at the need to take a national perspective, I believe a recommendation of the June 2004 National Language Conference may well merit a second look: That is, the formation of a federal council to coordinate the actions and investments of the several federal agencies. I also believe the encouragement of state roadmaps provides a productive way to marshal state and local participation. And I hope that the present administration will take a look at what might be done to restart the National Security Language Initiative of its predecessor, especially the provision of K-12 “pipeline” programs as part of the “Race to the Top” awards. The National Security Education Program of the Department of Defense already provides a new paradigm for advanced language education through its Language Flagship. Can we now provide a broader foundation from which it builds?

An immediate opportunity for federal cooperation is available in the National Language Service Corps. It is now constituted to serve all federal needs—and it is my understanding that it has begun to do so in a limited way. It may be sufficient simply to ensure all federal agencies know the Corps exists, and are encouraged to use it. But it may also be that strengthening its structure and funding need to be considered.

Not all steps that could quickly improve federal capacity are costly. Some involve removing barriers to action. The military, for example, benefits from being able to enlist anyone who is eligible for regular employment in the United States (i.e., holds a “green card”). Should similar authorities for civilian recruitment be available in areas where linguistically competent individuals are needed?

In short, while there are always programs that could benefit a specific agency and its needs, in the end our national success will depend on a national effort. It is my hope that this hearing can be one step in energizing that start.