

AKAKA STATEMENT

SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY, PROLIFERATION AND FEDERAL SERVICES HEARING

Critical Skills for National Security and The Homeland Security Federal Workforce Act (S.1800)

March 12, 2002

The Committee will please come to order.

We are beginning to find that many of my colleagues and many in the public have much interest in what we are discussing today. I want to thank our witnesses for joining us this afternoon.

The terrorist attacks of September 11th, exposed the strengths and weaknesses of our great country. We saw firsthand the impact of the lack of critical personnel and needed skills in our national security agencies. These events also gave us a preview of the problems we will face tomorrow if these skills are not strengthened. Federal agencies did not have the critical personnel with the language capabilities needed to investigate the attacks. Some agencies, like the FBI, were forced to post urgent job announcements for foreign language speakers to translate and investigate crucial evidence. According to the President's science advisor, there is not enough scientific expertise in government to evaluate proposals to combat terrorism in a timely fashion.

In today's Washington Post, we are reminded that agencies have a shortage of analysts to translate and analyze the large volumes of intelligence data acquired since U.S. forces entered Afghanistan. This has led some officials to admit that there is a risk that information valuable to our efforts against terrorism could slip through.

The importance of national security critical skills in government has been recognized for some time.

Congress passed the National Defense Education Act of 1958 in response to the Soviet Union's first space launch. We were determined to win the space race and make certain that the United States never came up short again in the areas of math, science, technology, or foreign languages.

Members of this Subcommittee have worked on this issue more recently.

Under the guidance of Senator Cochran, this subcommittee held a hearing a year and a half ago to define more clearly the United States' need for foreign language proficiency and to examine whether appropriate resources were made available to strengthen these skills among federal workers. At that time, we heard that the intelligence community lacked individuals with the translating skills needed to respond in times of crisis.

Last March, Senator Voinovich held a hearing on the national security implications of the human capital crisis. Witnesses from that hearing sent a strong message : strengthening math, science, and foreign language capabilities in government is a precondition for fixing virtually everything else in our U.S. national security complex.

Let me thank Senator Cochran and Senator Voinovich for their leadership in these areas. Senator Voinovich has also asked me to announce that he thinks this hearing is very important and although he has been unavoidably delayed, he expects to be here later.

Our math, science and foreign language capabilities in the federal government are at risk, and there is no quick solution.

It has taken years of neglect to reach this deficit in trained workers, and it will take sustained efforts to hire, retain and retrain employees with critical skills.

We must use every tool at our disposal to defend America against present and future threats. To do this we must ensure that the talented people in government have the right expertise to meet their changing missions.

Senators Durbin, Thompson and I introduced S.1800, the Homeland Security Federal Workforce Act as a comprehensive, long-term approach to addressing these shortfalls in government. I am pleased that the Ranking Member of this Subcommittee, Senator Cochran, as well as Senators Voinovich and Collins are cosponsors of S.1800. Our bipartisan approach takes important steps toward recruiting more people into government with critical national security skills.

Complementing this legislation is S.1799, the Homeland Security Education Act, which addresses shortages of those students pursuing degrees in math, science and critical foreign languages.

The Homeland Security Federal Workforce Act proposes several measures to ensure that government preserves its expertise in matters of national security. This bill increases student loan forgiveness programs for those who work in positions of national security and offers fellowships for existing federal employees and those who commit to serve in federal national security positions. It also offers a rotational assignment program for mid-level federal employees and provides training and professional development opportunities.

We must make certain that those entering federal service have the needed skills and that our existing workforce has the opportunity to acquire specialized training. As we seek new government employees, we cannot ignore the people whose expertise and talents guide agencies daily in meeting their missions.

With our witnesses help, we will explore the skills that agencies need to accomplish their current national security missions and how the Homeland Security Federal Workforce Act can help meet the challenge of strengthening these skills in the future.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for being with us today and I look forward to an interesting and lively discussion.

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