

## A NEW ERA FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Not since the late fifties and early sixties of the Cold War and the Space Race have languages enjoyed the support and attention that they are currently receiving. Over the last few years, numerous studies, reports, and hearings have noted our nation's serious language shortages and called upon the federal government to increase and improve the U.S.' language capabilities. For example, last November the prominent Abraham Lincoln Commission released their report, *Global Competence and National Needs: One Million Americans Studying Abroad*, calling on Congress and the Administration to provide \$125 million by 2011 for scholarships and fellowships for one million students to study overseas. In early February, the influential Committee for Economic Development (CED) released their study, *Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Languages for U.S. Economic and National Security*, urging increased investment in international studies and foreign languages. Among their various recommendations was "expanding the training pipeline at every level of education to address the paucity of Americans fluent in foreign languages especially critical, less-commonly taught languages."

These studies and others, as well as the language community's own advocacy efforts have helped create public pressure, media attention, and consideration by policy makers that are producing new opportunities and advantages. Recently, attention and concern have given rise to new and increased federal policies and funding for languages and international studies. While this may not yet be the golden age of language study, it is quite evident that the U.S. has entered a new era with respect to the knowledge of other languages and the understanding of other cultures. It is a new era that is being determined by national security and economic competitiveness, but its most serious impact will be upon education.

One of the most significant of these new policies is the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) launched by the President of the U.S. speaking at a National Summit of College and University Presidents held at the State Department in early January 2006. The NSLI is a joint effort by the Departments of Defense (DOE), State, and Education (ED), as well as the Intelligence Community, which will provide \$114 million for languages. This figure is roughly divided into \$57 million for ED, \$27 million for State, \$25 million for DOD, and \$5 million for Intelligence.

Specifically, within the Department of

Education, despite past opposition to the program, \$24 million will be for a "refocused" Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP). Other new or expanded programs will include \$24 million for developing a pipeline through Flagship K-16 Language Programs; \$5 million will go to develop a Language Teacher Corps; \$3 million is to expand teacher-to-teacher language seminars; and \$1 million will create a new E-Language Learning Clearinghouse.

While the NSLI has been in the planning stages for well over a year, some of the sponsoring agencies had already undertaken impressive internal efforts and achieved progress toward addressing their language needs and developing their language capabilities with policies of their own. Within the Department of Defense, the National Security Education Program (NSEP) has been providing scholarships and fellowships for study abroad in a nation's language for almost fifteen years. In recent years, NSEP has initiated the National Language Flagship Initiative, a K-16 Chinese Language Initiative, and laid the groundwork for the creation of a Civilian Linguistic Reserve Corps (all of which will be expanded under the President's initiative). The entire Department of Defense will implement a Defense Language Transformation Roadmap that, among other things, increases resources for the Defense Language Institute (DLI), requires military officers to learn another language, and identifies DOD's long and short-term language needs.

About two years ago the Department of State instituted a Language Continuum that requires Foreign Service Officers to know two additional languages and be able to use them. State has increased their support for the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA). This latter support will continue to increase as part of the NSLI through increases in Gilman Scholarships for needy students to study critical need languages abroad, increases in immersion language study centers overseas, and the creation of new State Department summer immersion study programs.

Some of the changes put forth as part of NSLI will require Congress to authorize new or amended legislation as well as provide the appropriations of funds. The first session of the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress considered twenty-six bills dealing with languages and international education. In such an environment, it seems quite likely that there will be considerable legislative support for new and increased programs dealing with lan-

guages. In fact, some of the pending legislation such as H.R. 4629, Rep. Rush Holt's K-16 Critical Foreign Languages Pipeline Act anticipates the President's Initiative. Other bills such as H.R.115, Holt's National Security Language Act; S.1089, Senator Daniel Akaka's National Foreign Language Coordination Act; or S. 1117, Senators Lieberman and Alexander's U.S.—People's Republic of China Cultural Engagement Act would go considerably beyond NSLI.

Additionally, Congress still has to reauthorize the Higher Education Act in which Title VI contains \$93 million in programs dealing with International Studies and Foreign Language Education. The Senate has passed its version of reauthorization which contains S. 1105, Senators Dodd and Cochran's International and Foreign Language Studies Act. However, the House of Representatives still has to pass its version, and then both houses have to reach agreement. While passage of a final bill in the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress is not certain, what is very heartening is that both houses' bills have provisions beyond Title VI that provide support for financial assistance and loan forgiveness for foreign languages. In short, both the Administration and Congress are providing attention to and support for languages. This is a confluence of interest that has not happened in the last forty years.

Leaving the State Department after the President's speech, I overheard a college president telling a media interview, "It's a good beginning." NSLI is a good beginning. The Lincoln Commission and the CED report are good beginnings. Internal initiatives and changes within federal agencies are good beginnings. Many of the congressional bills and amendments are good beginnings. Taken together, they may be the beginning of a good era for languages in the U.S. If this is the case, this beginning is in large part possible because of the unity of the language profession, because of effective and tireless advocacy, and because of the knowledge, expertise, and effectiveness of language professionals. These three factors will be even more important not just in determining how we begin the new language era, but in determining what this era accomplishes.

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