

FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION:
IF 'SCANDALOUS' IN THE 20TH CENTURY,
WHAT WILL IT BE IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

By Leon E. Panetta

Presidential commissions, politicians, business leaders, and educators have long expressed concern about the lack of foreign language competence among the people of this nation. Compared to other countries, the United States has a weak language policy.

The United States may be the only nation in the world where it is possible to complete secondary and postsecondary education without any foreign language study whatsoever. The prevalent practice of offering and sometimes requiring one or two years of foreign language study for high school or college graduation is simply inadequate for giving students meaningful competence in foreign languages. And yet, this nation is about to cross the threshold into a new century in which globalization and internationalism will be the hallmarks of diplomatic, military, economic and social policy.

If in 1979, the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies found that "Americans' incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous...", then what is it today and, more importantly, what will it be in the next century? Twenty years after the report of the President's Commission, and as a former member of that Commission, I believe it is time to review again the state of foreign language education.

This paper attempts to do that by considering the conclusions of the Commission, the present challenges of a global world, and how those responsible for education at the elementary and secondary level, higher education, business, and the federal effort have responded. It is fair to say that while the conclusion may not be 'scandalous,' it is at best 'disappointing' for a nation crossing the threshold into a new global era.

I. THE PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION – ITS MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The President's Commission devoted a year to an intensive evaluation of the state of foreign language and international studies and the impact on the nation's strength. It found "a serious deterioration in this country's language and research capacity, at a time when an increasingly hazardous international military, political and economic environment is making unprecedented demands on America's resources, intellectual capacity and public sensitivity."

The Commission confirmed persistent problems in foreign language instruction, from inadequate training of teachers to insufficient administrative support to a lack of imaginative curricula to poor coordination and a lack of sound criteria for the measurement of progress.

The problem was found to extend from elementary schools to higher education to research to business, labor and government. The recommendations were addressed to federal, state and local governments, along with the many great institutions in the private sector that share responsibility for the vitality of education and research. They were addressed to elementary and secondary schools; to postsecondary and higher educational institutions; to community programs, public and private employers, and to all public and private agencies.

The principal recommendations included the following:

1. Foreign Language: Establishing 20 regional centers and summer institutes, reinstating foreign language requirements, additional funding and incentives for foreign language teaching, a national criteria and assessment program, and foreign language specialists in all state departments of education.
2. Kindergarten through 12th grade: A declaration that foreign language and international studies is a top priority, strengthening teacher development programs, better curriculum development, expanded international school exchange programs, and more funding for international education.
3. College and University Programs: Foreign language requirements, funding and support for undergraduate studies, national centers for advanced international training and research, federally-funded postdoctoral and graduate fellowships, additional funding for NDEA Title VI, Section 602, NEH, NSF, the Fulbright and other government-funded programs.
4. International Education Exchanges: Increased funding for exchange activities by the government and private foundations.
5. Citizen Education in International Affairs: Increased funding for community and professional organizations in support of citizen education.
6. Business and Labor Needs Abroad: Encourage international business and labor studies, internships, and have schools of business require courses in international business and foreign language.
7. Improvements in Organization Within and Outside Government: Establish the position of Assistant Secretary for International Affairs in the Department of Education, and a National Commission to monitor and report on the progress or lack thereof in foreign language education.

In total, there were some 65 recommendations made by the Commission. While a few have been implemented some 20 years later, the sad reality is that most have gone into that large graveyard of unimplemented federal studies, reports and commissions. In reviewing the status of foreign language training in the key areas covered by the Commission, the results are disappointing. They have become yet another chapter in the sad history of foreign language training in the United States.

II. ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRAINING: THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

In the United States, early language programs have had a checkered past. As with foreign language teaching in general, language programs in elementary and secondary school have been in and out of vogue depending on the political climate and educational philosophy of the time.

The first 100 years of democracy saw a multilingual society able to exist peacefully around issues of language use and language learning. Although there were concerns about immigrant groups gaining power in the early colonial days, relatively little local or federal policy was even discussed about the use and learning of another language.

Throughout those early years, immigrants and their children maintained native language skills and learned English. Native speakers of English used private tutors to study other languages. Modern language learning was seen as a skill, whereas the classics were seen as valuable disciplines to be studied in schools and colleges.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Native American languages did not fare well. Indeed, children were forbidden to speak their native languages. In spite of such negative approaches, large waves of immigration from Germany and other European countries in the late 1800's created

situations locally where even public schools were offering instruction in the native language of the immigrant group and in English.

At the turn of the century, there was a great effort to extend language programs into elementary and secondary schools. In 1893, the National Education Association established a committee of ten that set standards for language study and advocated several program models for extended sequences.

These recommendations were short-lived. Early in the 20th Century, American imperialism, World War I, and the events that led up to it created an unprecedented level of xenophobia. Not only were native speakers of languages other than English forbidden to speak those languages, but foreign language newspapers and public school foreign language programs were eliminated. A new ethic emerged in the United States, that of Americanization for national unity. For the first time, mandates made English the language of schools in New Mexico and citizenship was denied to immigrants unable to speak English.

With the advent of World War II, Americans unable to communicate in languages other than English found themselves at a great disadvantage trying to conduct a war on several fronts. During the war, a new methodology for teaching adults was developed. The Army Language Method, an intensive exposure to the language in question, proved to be successful for adults who were motivated by the need to communicate abroad. Following World War II and the Korean War, with funding from the federal government in the form of the National Defense Education Act, the Army Language Method was adopted for use in schools and colleges.

But federal funding in support of this national initiative began to decline. Local districts, with tighter budgets in the late 1960's and early 1970's, had to make hard choices in the curriculum. Foreign language programs in the elementary and secondary schools were frequently unable to be assessed, and teachers, parents and administrators determined that students had gained nothing from the experience. Within a very short amount of time, foreign language instruction in the elementary and secondary schools declined.

From the late 1960's through the 1970's, language methodology floundered. College entrance requirements for foreign language were eliminated in some major universities, and foreign language enrollments plummeted. Elementary school language programs virtually vanished.

The late 1970's and early 1980's saw a resurgence of interest in early education foreign language programs. Along with this renewed interest came enlightening new information about the way Americans in the Foreign Service and the Peace Corps developed speaking proficiency in languages. The Educational Testing Service and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages developed Proficiency Guidelines. And the 1970's and 1980's also brought a renewed interest in how to cope with the language needs of linguistic minorities in the United States.

But progress remains slow. Despite national reports detailing the need for Americans to be competent in languages and cultures other than their own, only a handful of states have mandated foreign language to be taught in the elementary schools. In other states, some initiatives are under way to prepare teachers to work with young learners and to devise pilot programs.

Most long-standing elementary programs are the result of local initiatives. Some districts provide foreign language instruction under the Foreign Language in the Elementary Schools (FLES) program. In this program, courses are offered sequentially, beginning in the early primary grades and continuing through high school.

Another common model is Foreign Language Exploratory (FLEX). In these programs, usually upper elementary or middle school students have an opportunity to study a little about two or more languages over a relatively short period of time, often less than one year. They are expected to choose one language they would like to study in depth during the following year.

Another model used in comparatively fewer – less than five percent – of schools is language immersion. In some parts of the country, immersion or partial immersion programs are presented in magnet schools for the purpose of school desegregation. In states with large populations of language-minority students – New York, California, Massachusetts – dual language immersion programs are being developed. Both native and non-native speakers are schooled together so that students can serve as cultural and linguistic resources for one another.

Recent statistics gathered by the Center for Applied Linguistics show that immersion programs have grown slowly but steadily over the last five years. Currently, 25 states and the District of Columbia are offering immersion programs.

Regardless of the type of program model adopted, districts interested in implementing language programs face challenges in finding teachers adequately prepared in foreign languages. In the case of immersion programs, some teachers have had to be recruited from abroad only to face lengthy certification and immigration battles. High school trained foreign language teachers face particular challenges if they do not have the proper training or understanding of student learners. They need to know the learners – their cultural orientation, their capacities, the most effective ways of reaching them and matching their backgrounds to the language.

What is obvious from a review of current foreign language training in elementary and secondary education is that first, the teaching and learning of foreign languages have ebbed and flowed depending on the perceived national need. In the absence of a national curriculum and national language policy, individual school districts have decided to implement or eliminate – usually due to budget constraints – programs without research and program assessment. School administrators need to be convinced that there is a relationship between language learning and cultural appreciation as well as higher-order thinking skills and language proficiency.

Although the terminology used by administrators is usually more erudite, success in academic programs is invariably defined by one of three criteria: better, faster, or cheaper. Unfortunately, budgetary pressures often force decision-makers to ignore the “better” option in favor of “faster” or “cheaper.”

Without a definition of quality, there is no defense against programmatic reductions before they occur, and no way to demonstrate their negative impact after they have been implemented. Perhaps the central lesson learned from the history of second language instruction in the United States is that without clearly stated instructional objectives, few will fight to justify the time and cost required to attain the objective of quality foreign language training.

III. HIGHER EDUCATION AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES: EVERYONE DOING THEIR OWN THING

There continues to be a strong tradition of university autonomy when it comes to foreign language planning for higher education. It takes place one institution at a time and implementation of change must occur in house-to-house, hand-to-hand combat. The problem is that while each institution likes to do its own thing, there are many common challenges that lend themselves to similar solutions throughout higher education.

The fact remains that a very substantial portion of basic foreign language instruction is carried out in our colleges and universities. In 1990, there were nearly 4.1 million students enrolled in

foreign language classes in public high schools in the United States, 548,389 in public elementary schools, and nearly 1.2 million in colleges and universities. In short, about one of every five language students enrolled in language classes is studying at the college or university level.

As a result, one of the major structural challenges in foreign language education is the articulation between the layers of language-learning systems. Ideally, language learning should be a cumulative experience and a student's passage through the various strata in the system should be seamless, incremental and principled. Our current language instructional process is not well articulated across educational levels, and the learning experience of individual students has as many side steps as it has steps forward. Too often, the various levels of the language-learning system march to different drummers.

The result is considerable slippage in language study between high school and college. Most students arrive in college already having had a substantial amount of language study. Well over 70 percent of all entering classes have already taken two years or more of foreign language. This relatively high incidence of language study is attributed to students' desires to qualify for college entrance. However, most institutions of higher education do not require foreign language study for entry. In 1988, almost 10 years after the commission report, 84 percent of all American four-year institutions did not require it.

Whatever the reasons why students study foreign languages in high school, there is remarkably little attention paid at the college level to building on that investment. Despite the recommendation of the President's Commission, most institutions do not require all of their students to study a foreign language during their college career. Only 16 percent of four year institutions required all students to do so, although 69 percent required some of their students to take language classes while in college. It is usually the science majors and the applied and professional students that get left out. Less than half of college students take foreign language instruction. The ACE survey of 40 colleges and universities indicated that more than half of college students – 51.9 percent – took no language education during their residence in these institutions. In the Department of Education's more comprehensive survey of college students, the proportion of students taking no language courses was 58.4 percent.

Thus, while more than two-thirds of students entering college have taken high school language instruction, more than half take no language classes whatsoever at the college level. The system is discontinuous.

Not only is our foreign language educational system disjointed, but it is focused overwhelmingly on the lower skill levels. In both our high schools and our colleges, there is a characteristic dropout rate of about 50 percent from one year to the next in the language study. In terms of enrollments at various levels of instruction, our language-learning system is a series of ups and downs. In both high school and college, the bulk of enrollments are in the first or second-year courses. In the autumn of 1990, of the 3.2 million public high school students reporting language course enrollments by level, 48 percent were in a first year course, 32 percent in a second year, 13 percent in a third year, and seven percent in a fourth year or above. Similar enrollment gradations are apparent in higher education. In the 1989 ACE survey, at the university level 62 percent of the enrollments in Spanish were at the introductory level, 23 percent at the intermediate level, and 15 percent at the advanced level. The same situation obtained in French and German.

In part, this drop off in enrollment reflects the different levels of language requirements. A national cross-sectional survey of higher education institutions found that half of our four year colleges and universities that had any foreign language requirements for graduation demanded only one or two semesters of courses, and the rest stipulated two years.

Even more telling are the data indicating the highest level of study attained by different proportions of graduating seniors. With the exception of schools like the Monterey Institute of International Studies, that provide successful and specific training for advanced degrees in languages, both the proportion and quality of foreign language training differs considerably by institutional type. At research universities, 46 percent of the students took no language courses at all. Of those who did, 43 percent of those who graduated had taken only elementary courses, 43 percent had taken intermediate courses, and only 14 percent had taken an advanced language class. Students in baccalaureate institutions tended, on the average, to take more language courses than did university students, but in two year institutions, where more than 50 percent of college students are enrolled, 73 percent of the students took no language courses at all, and of those who did, 60 percent took only elementary language classes and only two percent took any advanced courses.

College language learning is only loosely tied to language acquisition at the secondary school level. Few would argue that such a limited amount of foreign language education takes learners to a level of competency that enables them to use the language as a vehicle for communication.

Perhaps at the heart of the problem is the fact that most American adults do not expect to use a foreign language, or, if they do, the time commitments required to achieve and retain a high level of skill, weighed against expected use, do not favor language learning in school. Given the widespread perception in the United States, reinforced daily by innumerable personnel officers in the hiring marketplace, that foreign language skills are not of great utility, the motivation for foreign language learning will remain weak. Until this situation changes, it will be very difficult to radically alter our foreign language system. Were adult demand for language skills to increase, student and faculty commitment to lengthening the training process would surely follow. Without it, the persuasiveness of arguments for increased language learning will continue to fall short, and everyone will continue to take refuge in doing their own thing.

IV. BUSINESS IN A GLOBAL WORLD: USE ENGLISH OR BUY WHAT YOU NEED

In a world in which international trade and finance is expanding every day, it would be assumed that our businesses would do better if they had the expertise to communicate in the languages of the world. And yet, recent studies of the foreign language needs of U.S. corporations have all confirmed that corporations view these skills as of only secondary importance in hiring and promoting U.S. managers.

In general, U.S. corporations feel that their need for foreign language-trained employees has decreased, as the role of English in international business has increased. While in the past, U.S. citizens who headed international subsidiaries might have needed to speak the language of the nation in which they were doing business, today those positions are being occupied by local nationals.

What are the reasons for this change in the style of international operations? It's just good business: 1) A global and international company has to respond to local needs known only to local nationals; 2) many of these local nationals have been schooled in the United States and are thus deeply familiar with U.S. culture; 3) the local national is bilingual and able to communicate fully not only with the U.S. managers but also with the rank and file; and 4) hiring local nationals is cost effective, since it is much cheaper than paying benefits to U.S. expatriates.

U.S. corporations invest heavily and aggressively in teaching English in other countries. For example, the large corporations hire teachers of English as a Second Language and run English language classes abroad.

It is instructive to realize that although English continues to grow as the international language of business, U.S. corporations have started to face the problem that international business cannot be done in English alone. In fact, their current business practices actually confirm their need for foreign language training. But this need has been largely filled by hiring others because of the language ignorance of our highly educated holders of MBAs. U.S. corporations have merely reaped the benefits of the heavy investment in English language education that other countries have financed.

In continuing to accept the failure of U.S. foreign language education, however, U.S. corporations have started to pay the price for not being totally in charge of their own resources. Some executives have complained that foreign languages for U.S. managers will be increasingly needed in the future because someone will have to determine if the hired nationals are doing the job.

The reality is that the countries of the world have drawn their boundaries tighter, using their language capability as linguistic capital with which to negotiate economic advantages for themselves. Although English is widely used in European international business, it is not seen as the international language. In France and Germany, it is necessary to use French and German. In a survey of leading executives in 10 European countries, only 31 percent reported using English for professional purposes. Increasingly, English alone cannot be used to penetrate the non-English speaking markets.

This pattern is also evident if one looks at Japan, a lucrative, yet difficult, market. Japanese society invests heavily in English-language education. Six years of English are required before high school graduation. All Japanese corporations provide tuition for English language classes and invest greatly in language training and other international management training. Yet the difficulty in doing business with Japan lies precisely in their insistence that business be conducted in Japanese. While some argue that Japanese are just poor English learners, the argument may be made that the Japanese are using their difficult language as their most prized capital, ensuring thereby their own self-regulation and self-control.

But as long as elite U.S. schools and universities continue to put little emphasis on the acquisition of foreign language capabilities, American executives will be monolingual and U.S. corporations will have to try and use English or buy foreign nationals who have the language ability where the business is located. A sad commentary for the strongest and most competitive economy in the world.

V. THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT: "THE CHILD OF EVERYONE IS THE CHILD OF NONE"

The President's Commission determined that serious efforts had to be undertaken to coordinate and focus the national effort. But as it concluded: "The subject of foreign language and international studies is the proper preoccupation of many government departments and agencies... but the child of everyone is the child of none." That remains the case today.

In view of the extreme dispersion and disaggregation of decision making, it is no easy task to know where and how to intervene to make substantial changes in language instruction in our educational system. Yet, unless intervention strategies are specified and coordinated, policy planning is solely an academic exercise with little impact on foreign language education.

The federal government has authority only for its own foreign language schools. It invests immense amounts of money in language instruction for government employees and members of the military, including tens of millions of dollars annually in directed change and innovation. The technology level of most government language-teaching schools is considerably higher than

in the proprietary sector or the formal educational system. Most of the federal government's very substantial investment in the development of fresh teaching material and research on pedagogical methods occurs within or for the federal government's own language schools.

It is, in fact, a pity that there is so little coordination within the federal government and so little spillover effect on the private sector.

As an example, the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey has done an outstanding job of providing expertise in languages not commonly taught in American schools and colleges. Its intensive methods have served to augment existing programs at schools around the country in more common languages, and it has reacted quickly to changes in international relations as demands for language proficiency in different languages have fluctuated. In 1992, I called for the transformation of the Defense Language Institute into a National Federal Foreign Language and Areas Studies Institute. It made sense then. It makes even greater sense now.

DLI has the capability to transform the many small fragmented federal programs in the various government agencies and translate them into a coherent, unified system to serve all national interests. Just consider the variety of foreign language training programs dispersed throughout government: The Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Peace Corps, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture all have individual foreign language training programs and capabilities to meet their respective needs for intelligence or basic language training. It is long past the time to bring our federal language instruction programs into the 21st Century. The transformation of the Defense Language Institute into a broader Institute for the federal government would not only be cost efficient, it would fortify our national economic security and our intelligence community's preparedness for the new age. Such an Institute would also provide a focal point for improving and sharing information with the private sector and the educational community.

In addition to having small fragmented programs in the various government agencies, broader federal programs suffer from a number of limitations: 1) project support suffers from what might be called "pilot projectitis," that is, it is constantly investing in small-scale pilot projects that are assumed to serve as models for others to copy. Often they do not; 2) there is tendency for a large number of funders all to discover a particular point of intervention, for example, teaching training, at the same time so that funding moves in seemingly coordinating lurches; 3) support is usually for a fixed, brief period of time, with only limited expectations that the costs will be picked up at the end of the project; 4) the peer review process acts as a conservative force, limiting the degree of radicalness of the proposed change; and 5) a project is a poor vehicle for fundamental architectural change, and it is such structural changes that may be of the highest priority.

An example of this hit and miss federal funding is the Foreign Language Assistance Act, which provides grants to states based upon the size of their school age populations. States were asked to submit to the U.S. Department of Education project proposals that, once accepted by the federal government, would be funded. In practice, the new procedure worked out to be a style of federal funding intervention whose purpose was dictated by the states. But one of the limitations of the program was that no one could be sure that these funds would continue into the future. Furthermore, given the federal government's preferences for shiny new projects, even if the overall funding continued, the implementers of the individual project could be fairly certain that the future cost of any changes they introduced into the system would, in the long run, have to be borne locally. The result was the kind of piecemeal, enclaved innovations that often become part of the normal pattern of extensive transitory innovation so characteristic of the language instructional system today. Once the new funding is gone, it is difficult to find traces of its presence.

The longest running federal support program for foreign language education is Title VI of the Higher Education Act. In its original form in 1958, it was called the National Defense Education Act and the impetus for it was a linguistic one. When the Russians gave the nation a surprise by launching Sputnik without our prior knowledge, it convinced the federal government that the United States needed more civilians who were fluent in Russian to keep us from being surprised again. By extension, all of the other languages our schools and universities rarely taught were added. What started as a funding program for the teaching of less commonly taught languages was almost immediately broadened to include area studies, and once that camel's nose was in the tent, other nonlinguistic purposes soon followed.

Today, the specific language portion of Title VI has lost more and more of its central purposes. Now, in addition to language and area studies, Title VI supports international business education, undergraduate international studies, research and materials preparation, and overseas teacher training and conferencing.

Title VI was also aimed at providing general support for the activities of campus-based centers, National Foreign Language Resource Centers, that coordinate and facilitate language and area studies activities scattered throughout the institution. The purpose of these new centers illustrates the intrusion of the consideration of administrative convenience within the administering agency. In spite of stated congressional intent, the administrative staff interpreted the program to make it like its other projects—the emphasis was focused on collections of discrete research projects, materials development, teacher training, and test design, and the centers were viewed as institution-specific rather than as national resources.

A few other federal programs provide occasional project support for foreign language education. Moreover, over the past few years, Congress has introduced a number of omnibus bills specifically dedicated to providing support for many items on foreign language teachers' developmental agendas. As yet, none of these bills has been funded.

In general then, federal government intervention in foreign language education, with the possible exception of HEA Title VI, is generally in the form of project grants. They tend to give short-term seed money for experimental programs that are intended to take root and grow on their own. Moreover, the content and quality of the programs chosen for funding is limited to what comes in the application pile, making intervention for specific purposes difficult to achieve. In addition, mandatory peer review systems tend to limit the extent of change that is likely to be funded. In a word, the strong, coordinated leadership envisioned by the President's Commission for the federal government just has not happened. The federal government continues to diffuse its efforts in ways that ensure that foreign language training is the "child of none".

VI. FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND THE 21ST CENTURY: DO WE REALLY CARE?

While this is by no means the kind of in-depth study of the status of foreign language education undertaken by the President's Commission, it is clear that in a review of the primary areas of proposed action—elementary and secondary, higher education, business and the federal government—the results remain disappointing.

That is not to say that there has not been any progress. There are a number of positive trends: 1) the amount of foreign language instruction in the last decade has increased by nearly 10 percent in the elementary school level and has stayed relatively stable at the secondary level; 2) the language classes for native speakers have increased dramatically at both elementary and secondary levels; 3) the teaching of less commonly taught languages has increased at the elementary level 4) computer-based instructional materials were used by a significantly greater

percentage of schools in 1997 than in 1987; 5) staff development and in-service training has increased significantly in the past decade in both elementary and secondary schools; 6) teachers at the secondary level are using the target language more in the classroom; 7) about half the schools teaching foreign languages said that their teachers were aware of national and/or state language standards and of those, over half the schools changed their curricula due to this awareness; and 8) foreign languages have been recognized as part of the “core” curriculum in the Goals 2000 Educate America Act.

But despite these positive trends, there is still cause for concern. Funding shortages, inadequate in-service training, poor sequencing from elementary into secondary schools, lack of quality materials, poor academic counseling remain problems. Well-articulated elementary and secondary programs are still the exception rather than the rule, and intensive instruction that aims at a high level of proficiency is scarce.

The bottom line is that what is lacking is a fundamental national commitment to foreign language training. There is a need for bold and innovative approaches to language training at every level of education. The same extends to federal language instruction programs. These programs are aimed at preparing Federal personnel and other Americans for the kinds of competition and global responsibilities that America must face in the new century. But the reality remains a patchwork of programs among our agencies and a disturbing lack of coherence in language instruction. There is little coordination. Each agency fends for itself and there seem to be no thought given to the possibilities for extending federal programs to institutions beyond the federal government in order to maximize cooperation, lend assistance and achieve the synergy we hope to realize in the years ahead.

In line with the effort to better coordinate the federal effort in language training is the need to upgrade the college and university programs. These programs continue to face serious difficulties. The universities have always been the major source of support for costly interdisciplinary programs of this sort, but because of their increased financial constraints they themselves now face agonizing problems of priorities.

The international studies programs do not involve enough students. The percentage of undergraduates enrolling in these fields is not enough, and advanced international studies programs have been slow to respond to changing academic or national needs and opportunities. They have not recognized the need for greater cooperation of their resources and activities on a local, regional and national basis.

The paradox is that the United States is showing signs of de-emphasizing internationalism in higher education as the rest of the world’s universities are becoming more international. If this continues, we will clearly lose our competitive edge in the international marketplace.

Other nations recognize that they operate in a global economy and that understanding other societies and cultures is both valuable in its own right and necessary to be competitive. They are investing heavily in international education. A decade ago, Japan declared the goal of hosting 100,000 foreign students by the year 2000 and this goal is likely to be achieved. Most of Japan’s foreign students come from its major Asian trading partners. Japan also is building dormitories and other facilities for its foreign students and scholars and is investing both in teaching Japanese to foreigners and in developing additional courses of study in English. Currently, 43,000 Japanese study in the United States, while only 1,800 Americans study in Japan. Japanese universities are rapidly internationalizing their curricula and every Japanese high school and university student studies English.

Western Europe has long recognized the need to internationalize higher education, not only to solidify European integration but also to position Europe in the global economy. The European

Commission stimulates cooperation in research and education through well-funded programs to promote the mobility of students and scholars within Europe, to advance the study of European languages, and to foster university-industry links.

While some outside Europe have feared that a “Fortress Europe” mentality was developing, focused exclusively on the European Union, this has not happened. In fact, the European Union authorities, national governments and individual academic institutions have stressed the importance of global cooperation and exchange.

For a half-century after World War II, America has been the undisputed leader in higher education internationally. Cold war competition, a booming U.S. economy, and a rapidly expanding student population were contributing factors. While American higher education remains strong, it is not as trained, prepared or capable as others in the international marketplace. The slide has begun and our nation’s growing insularity will only further dull our competitive edge. Internationalism and foreign language training is the key to helping us understand the rest of the world as well as to function in the new international economy of the 21st century. If other nations understand this, so should America.

If these are the lessons to be learned, then what are the actions that must be taken? In 1979, the Commission listed some 65 recommendations. But perhaps, the Commission should have done a better job of convincing the nation that our vital interests were at stake and that specific action should not just be encouraged, but mandated. If we don’t care as a nation, all of the recommendations in the world will not make a difference. If we do care, then we must be willing to require action tied to resources. If our national security is at stake, then we are obligated to approach this issue with all the conviction and commitment necessary to confront a national security crisis.

The choice is clear: We can follow the historical precedent that English is sufficient enough to get by in dealing with the military, diplomatic and economic challenges of the next century or we can do what other nations are doing and mobilize our nation to promote competence in foreign languages as a matter of national security and survival. My fear is that for all of the studies, reports, conferences, commissions and articles concluding that the interest of the nation is at stake and that effective leadership requires competence in foreign languages and international understanding – that deep down, both those in education and government really don’t believe it. How else can one explain the hit and miss approach to implementing strong steps to advance foreign language training? But if that’s not true, then the nation simply must commit itself to two fundamental goals:

- 1) That by 2010, 100 percent of all school, colleges and universities should require all of their students to study a foreign language; and
- 2) This requirement should be a condition for the receipt of federal funds for education.

Strong medicine? You bet. But this is based on a belief that this nation cannot cross the threshold into the era of globalization unless we can fully communicate with that world.

Every part of the world is tied together through an increasing array of common interests: from information and technology to finance, trade, diplomacy and security. Although the United States is the single most powerful superpower in the world militarily, we have witnessed only too clearly in recent months that its capacity to use that force will be largely determined by its ability to convince others that action is necessary. That will not happen by pounding our fist on the table. It will only happen through effectively communicating our views.

Yet, as citizens of a historically and geographically isolated giant, Americans remain far behind nearly every other nation’s populace in their foreign language abilities and in their knowledge of

the world around them. If our incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of “scandalous”, then it would be even more “scandalous” to proceed as we are now. But if we care, and if we are willing to take strong action, America can not only be a partner in this new world, it can be a leader into the 21st Century and the new global era.