

**STATEMENT OF SENATOR GEORGE V. VOINOVICH**  
**Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**  
**Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce,**  
**and the District of Columbia**  
**Hearing on “Lost in Translation: A Review of the Federal Government’s Efforts**  
**to Develop a Foreign Language Strategy”**  
**January 25, 2007**

Good afternoon. Let me begin my remarks by congratulating my good friend and one of my closest partners in the Senate, Senator Akaka, on assuming the Chairmanship of this Subcommittee. I look forward to what I know will continue to be a very productive and collegial working relationship. I commend Senator Akaka for convening today’s hearing to review and evaluate the federal government’s role in encouraging foreign language education.

The United States has a very rich cultural history, and knowledge of other languages and cultures should continue to define our character as a nation.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for joining us today. I am especially pleased to welcome Dr. Diane Birckbichler, who is joining us from The Ohio State University, my law school alma mater. Dr. Birckbichler chairs the Department of French and Italian and is also the Director of the OSU Foreign Language Center, which I am proud to note comprises one of the finest language programs in the country.

The OSU Foreign Language Center includes the Chinese Flagship Program, one of only nine advanced programs in the nation devoted to advanced instruction in critical languages. This program is funded by the Department of Defense National Security Education Program. In September, I was very pleased to announce a federal grant which will allow the Chinese Flagship Program to develop a statewide system in Ohio of Chinese K-16 “pipeline” language programs, which will serve as a national model for other state school systems.

The significance of foreign language skills to our national security was emphasized after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when FBI Director Robert Mueller made a public plea for speakers of Arabic and Farsi to help the FBI and national security agencies investigate the attacks and translate documents that were in U.S. possession but which remained untranslated due to a shortage of employees with proficiency in those languages.

I was outraged that our Intelligence Community had failed to anticipate such basic workforce needs as having translators and linguists fluent in languages spoken in geographic regions of longstanding national security concern, such as Arabic. It should not have taken such a tragic event in our nation’s history to force action in this area.

In response, this Committee held a series of hearings on the needs of our intelligence workforce, and we passed the *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004*, legislation aimed at improving the federal government's ability to recruit and train skilled translators and linguists to meet our national security needs.

Several years later, it is appropriate for Congress to take stock of these efforts and monitor progress. At the same time, the need to expand our knowledge of foreign language, cultures, and regions extends well beyond the critical needs of our national security workforce. Without an educated applicant pool of Americans proficient in critical foreign languages, we cannot meet the needs of our twenty-first century workforce, nor can we maintain America's position as a global leader.

According to the 2000 Census, only 9.3 percent of Americans speak both their native language and another language fluently, compared with 52.7 of Europeans. I think the fact that so many people around the world have learned to speak English is wonderful, but it has also had the unfortunate effect of lessening Americans' incentive to learn a foreign language.

Being able to share a spoken language means so much. I speak limited Russian, and it is amazing to me when I travel abroad how flattered foreign citizens are to hear even a few words in their native language. I can only imagine how much richer my connections could be were I able to carry on fluent conversations.

The need for improved foreign language skills is not an abstract deliberation. In order to maintain our competitive business edge and keep our country safe, Americans must learn to be global citizens, and to communicate effectively with other peoples around the world.

I am deeply concerned that Americans are lagging behind much of the world in critical foreign languages, cultural awareness, and geographic knowledge. This lag can negatively impact our nation in very real ways, such as losing valuable business opportunities overseas, faulty intelligence from failing to promptly translate critical documents, or of misunderstandings in diplomatic communications.

It pains me to consider whether we could have been more successful in winning hearts and minds in Iraq and preventing insurgency had U.S. soldiers and diplomatic personnel on the ground been able to communicate more effectively in Arabic with Iraqi citizens.

Can you imagine how successful we could be if our soldiers could speak directly with the foreign citizens they are trying to protect, and did not have to rely on translators? A lack of organic language skills and cultural awareness has almost certainly hindered the efforts of our armed services in peacekeeping missions around the globe.

Our success in public diplomacy has been limited. The image of the United States abroad is at stake and is lower than any point in recent history. We sorely need to improve our ability to communicate and connect with foreign audiences and explain American identity, values, and ideals.

This country needs language and cultural expertise more than ever in order to combat the pervasive negative misconceptions about America that have been created and spread by our enemies in certain critical regions around the world.

I think the President understands this, and I commend him for taking action by establishing the National Security Language Initiative. I look forward to learning more about this initiative from our first panel.

Each of us are gathered in this room today because we know that raising the national level of foreign language proficiency is absolutely critical to ensuring American national security and economic vitality. I look forward to a productive conversation about our national strategy for achieving these goals. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.