

Statement of Senator Daniel K. Akaka
“Lost in Translation:
A Review of the Federal Government’s Efforts to Develop a Foreign Language Strategy”
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia
January 25, 2007

Today’s hearing, “Lost in Translation: A Review of the Federal Government’s Efforts to Develop a Foreign Language Strategy,” will examine a critical issue for both our national and economic security—what is the federal government’s strategy for addressing the shortfall of Americans with foreign language proficiency.

The Federal Workforce Subcommittee has been looking at the federal government’s ability to recruit and retain language proficient individuals since 2000. For the last six years, I have tried along with colleagues on both sides of the aisle to encourage the Administration to address the government’s foreign language needs. It has become clear that while agencies can offer incentives for individuals with language skills to work for the federal government, it is increasingly more difficult to do so when there is a severe shortage of language skills in the American workforce. That is why today we are discussing the federal government’s efforts to address this challenge from all fronts.

We know that proficiency in other languages is critical to ensuring national security. The inability of law enforcement officers, intelligence officers, scientists, and military personnel to decipher and interpret information from foreign sources — as well as interact with foreign nationals — presents a threat to their mission and to the well being of our nation.

I remember FBI Director Robert Mueller, shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, making a plea for speakers of Arabic and Farsi to help the FBI and national security agencies translate documents that were in U.S. possession but left untranslated because there weren’t enough employees with the right language skills. In 2003, the House and Senate Intelligence Committees found that prior to September 11th, the Intelligence Community was unprepared to handle the challenge of translating the volumes of foreign language counterterrorism intelligence due to a shortage of language specialists.

Unfortunately, this is not surprising. The United States is well known for lagging far behind much of the world with respect to emphasizing foreign language education. According to the 2000 Census, only 9.3 percent of Americans speak both their native language and another language fluently, compared with 56 percent of citizens in the European Union.

What is alarming is that five years after 9-11, we are still falling behind. In December, the Iraq Study Group reported that of the 1,000 embassy employees in Baghdad, there are only 33 Arabic speakers, of which only six are fluent, and recommended that language proficiency and cultural training be given the highest possible priority by the Directorate of National Intelligence and the Secretaries of Defense and State.

However, strengthening national security should not be the only reason for improving the country's language proficiency. The basic economic and career security of many Americans is now tied to foreign language capability. Increased globalization allows Americans to compete for jobs in a marketplace that is no longer confined to the boundaries of the United States. One basic skill required to thrive in this new economic environment is fluency in foreign languages.

According to the Committee for Economic Development, the lack of foreign language skills and international knowledge can result in embarrassing and costly cultural blunders for individual companies. For example, when Microsoft Corporation developed a time-zone map for its Windows 95 operating system, it inadvertently showed the region of Kashmir lying outside the boundaries of India. As a result, India banned the software, and Microsoft was forced to recall 200,000 copies of the offending product. In fact, American companies lose an estimated \$2 billion a year due to inadequate cultural understanding.

Although the federal government has worked to address language needs in the U.S. over the past 40 years, these efforts appear to be in reaction to international events. We do not have a proactive policy. In 1958, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was passed 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. NDEA was a great success, but in the late 70's NDEA's foreign language programs merged into larger education reform measures and lost their prominence.

The results are clear. In 1979, the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies said that "Americans' incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous, and it is becoming worse." After 9-11, Congress and the Administration once again took action to address language shortfalls, but I fear that these efforts will prove to be only a band-aid and not a complete cure to the nation's recurring foreign language needs.

To me, the most interesting aspect of this problem is that both the 1979 Commission and the participants at the 2004 Department of Defense National Language Conference called for naming a senior government official to lead the government's foreign language education effort and establishing a council or commission, representing a broad spectrum of stakeholders, to report on the nation's language needs and propose actions to address them. In fact, both groups note that all interested parties must be involved as all sectors — government, industry, and academia — have a need for language proficient individuals and no one sector has all of the solutions.

Despite the Administration's efforts to implement new programs and policies to address our language shortfalls, I fear that without sustained leadership and a coordinated effort among all federal agencies, state and local governments, the private sector, and academia, the U.S. will remain where we are today: scrambling to find linguists after another major international event. The United States cannot afford to wait. The failures of communication and understanding would have already done their damage.

Together we must commit to build and maintain language expertise and relationships with people from every walk of life all across the world, whether or not the languages they speak are considered critical today, and to ensure that we have the infrastructure in place to prevent such cataclysmic events, or at least be prepared to respond to them. To this end, there needs to be one person in the Executive Branch who will lead the cross-cutting efforts to better understand America's language needs for the next 5, 15, or 20 years, and to figure out how to address those needs.

I am pleased that the Administration's National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) is coordinating efforts among the Intelligence Directorate and the Departments of Defense, Education, and State to address our national security language needs. However, I believe we must ensure that this effort will continue into future Administrations, bring in the advice of all federal agencies and stakeholders, and address our economic security needs.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how the Administration is meeting these objectives and addressing our broader language needs in both the short- and long-term. Only through a coordinated plan of action and long-term leadership will we accomplish our goal.