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To Understand a Culture, Learn Its Language

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Some educators were politely enthusiastic when, in January, the Bush administration announced a new program to support student and faculty exchanges with foreign countries, as well as increased teaching of foreign languages in the United States. But others in academe greeted the news with a certain amount of cynicism, or even outright suspicion. They felt that, had such a program been started years ago, we might be in a better situation today vis-à-vis the Middle East, Muslim nations, and even our allies. Some thought that the \$114-million set aside to support the teaching of "critical" languages like Arabic, Chinese, and Farsi was only a drop in the bucket. Some were uncomfortable about the defense-related agenda that was driving this new internationalism.

As a private citizen, I have a considerable degree of sympathy for all of those objections. However, as a professional involved in foreign-language education, I am concerned that a debate over motives and agendas, hidden or overt, may itself prove to be an obstacle to language learning.

It does not matter whether the primary purpose of the program is to provide the U.S. intelligence agencies and military with better linguistic expertise, which might conceivably be used to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries or to support American global hegemony. Studying other peoples' languages and cultures will be a positive force in history, no matter what the intentions of those who support the program. That is part of what Hegel, in his *Philosophy of History*, called "the cunning irony of reason" — the notion that putting enlightened ideas into practice, for whatever purposes, will ultimately result in enlightened ends.

Twice in the past, the United States mounted a sweeping effort to enhance Americans' language skills for primarily military reasons. The results in both cases were such that even the most liberal academics would have to approve of the measures in retrospect.

First, during World War II, the military made a huge investment in training specialists in German and Japanese, both for intelligence purposes and in preparation for postwar occupation and "re-education." That is one of the major and decisive differences between the aftermaths of the two world wars. In contradistinction to the spirit of the Treaty of Versailles, whose primary purposes were to humiliate Germany and recoup the financial cost of the war from the Germans, after World War II, the Allies realized that helping the

Germans and Japanese build more-stable democracies would be a better strategy for preventing future wars.

That strategy, carried out with the help of thousands of trained interpreters and cultural experts who spoke German and Japanese, succeeded beyond anybody's wildest imagination at the time. Germany and Japan have since become solidly democratic nations and respected members of the international community. That would not have been possible without the help provided by German- and Japanese-speaking Americans, who were able to show the people in the defeated countries a genuine vision of democratic change and the benefits of including all members of society in the political process.

Second, after the Soviets launched *Sputnik*, the U.S. government made a large investment in the training of Russian linguists and professionals in other disciplines with expertise in the Soviet Union. Those experts probably made a significant contribution to keeping the cold war from heating up at various times, and perhaps even to nurturing perestroika. They certainly have been heavily involved in building strong political and economic links between the United States and Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Both those projects were driven primarily by military agendas; both produced results that even dyed-in-the-wool pacifists should applaud. That was no coincidence, given that in both cases the defense agenda was driven by a foreign-policy agenda that had learned an important lesson from the end of World War I: Without the ability to communicate with people who (as was the case in Germany and Japan during World War II) have a radically different mind-set from your own, genuine changes in the geopolitical landscape will not be possible.

Many of us who are involved in foreign-language teaching have, at some point or another, made the argument that just learning a foreign language contributes to intercultural understanding. The reason is that with our comprehension of another people's linguistic makeup comes a better understanding of their mentality; the two are inextricably interwoven. We should not suddenly lose faith in that argument just because this latest opportunity to enhance intercultural dialogue comes from a source with an agenda that many of us may disagree with.

I prefer educated military and intelligence officials to uneducated ones, and foreign-language skills are definitely part of the education I support. A soldier who speaks the language of the foreign country in which he or she is stationed — whether the reason for the U.S. military presence there is good or bad — is more likely to ask questions first and shoot later than a soldier who does not. An officer who has undergone the kind of training in language or area studies that the Bush administration is now proposing will almost certainly make wiser decisions with regard to the civilian population than one who relies solely on his or her own set of cultural parameters.

In addition, many members of the military join the civilian work force after their retirement from active duty. Those who have acquired and practiced foreign-language

and area-studies skills could contribute enormously to foreign-language education in the United States and, thus, to intercultural dialogue.

Those retired officers would make a quantitative difference, increasing the numbers of foreign-language teachers in this country. They would also probably make a qualitative difference because they could pass on to their students (whether inside the military or not) the intercultural skills they had acquired. Retirees who never learned such skills would pass on a very different set of tools, more likely geared toward traditional military purposes.

At the Middlebury College Language Schools and our new affiliate, the Monterey Institute of International Studies, there is a long tradition of teaching members of the military and intelligence agencies and traditional students in the same courses on foreign languages and foreign-language pedagogy. At Middlebury we ask those who normally carry side arms to put them aside for the duration of their training with us, but that is the only way in which we treat them differently from our (more numerous) civilian students.

We are proud of that tradition because we believe that teaching foreign languages and cultures, and other subjects in area studies, will inevitably lead to long-term improvements in communication among countries. That is a strategic aim all Americans should be glad to support, no matter how we feel about the economic, political, or military interests that drive the initial effort.

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