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GLOBAL SKILLS

Vital Components of Global Engagement

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Throughout my 35 years of commissioned service, I lived in a world where the good guys spoke English and the bad guys spoke Russian. Today, our world is a very different place. We live in a "global village" where information, commerce, and even CNN pay little attention to national borders—much to the chagrin of some nations that would try to keep those influences out. As technology brings our world closer, culture, tradition, and history remind us how we differ. Around the world today, we see regional, religious, and ethnic differences becoming more pronounced—and tensions mounting. Throughout our force, we need to establish a presence of officers proficient in foreign language and area studies—officers who can be effective in shaping events or responding to a contingency anywhere in the world on a moment's notice.

Our vision for the Air Force of the twenty-first century is Global Engagement, which mandates the capability to take immediate action—to deploy anywhere in the world, no matter how primitive the airstrip or how remote the location, in a few hours' time. In our globally engaged Air Force, there's no time for 18 months at the Defense Language Institute. We need people with language and cultural skills in place and ready, *just as we need pilots and satellite controllers. I highly commend Colonel Mueller and Lieutenant Colonel Daubach for the work they've done to show why we need this cadre of foreign-language experts and how we plan to acquire, train, and retain them.*

—Gen Henry Viccellio Jr.
USAF, Retired

Just as we were ill-equipped to deal with the technological threats of the Cold War era, today we lack the linguistic and cultural skills and resources fundamental to competing in the new international environment.

—Former Senator David Boren (D-Okla.)
Chairman, Senate Intelligence Committee

THE UNITED STATES still lacks adequate foreign-language capabilities despite the best intentions (and many dollars) of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the similar National Security Education Act of 1991. The 1979 "wake-up call" from the Presidential Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, which called this situation "scandalous," went unheard. According to former congressman Leon Panetta, "the situation is no longer scandalous, as it was described; our current national situation with regard to international skills and understanding is merely appalling."[1] Consistent with national trends, the foreign-language and area-expertise capabilities of the Department of Defense (DOD) are equally appalling:

> In every war in its history, the US Army has turned to native speakers of one kind or another to meet its language needs. Each time, it was a last-minute expedient. Desert Storm was no different. . . .
>
> In Desert Storm, all four services met their linguistic requirements in one fashion or another, yet all faced potentially crippling shortages.[2]
>
> We had to put 500,000 American men and women in our armed services in harm's way because our intelligence community failed to anticipate an impending military crisis. . . . The lesson is clear. We need policy-makers, diplomats and intelligence analysts expert in cultures and languages that encompass all regions of the world.[3]

DOD, Air Force, and other governmental-agency studies, audits, inspections, and reports have consistently criticized the dearth of foreign-language and foreign-area skills in the military services. A Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessment of 1988 found that military attachés "lacked functional language skills." A Government Accounting Office (GAO) report of 1990 determined that defense language programs "did not adequately accomplish their objective in training participants to be proficient in languages." A Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center's (DLIFLC) study of 1992 found that "short courses for contingencies were of limited value for students to reach proficiency." A Functional Management Inspection of 1991 by the Air Force's Inspector General (IG) found that "personnel with regional knowledge or foreign language proficiency were not identified or effectively utilized" and that "language training and proficiency maintenance methods were not satisfying Air Force requirements for language capability." In 1993 the DOD IG found "incomplete and unclear plans, policies, roles, and responsibilities for managing and executing the Defense Foreign Language Program." And a GAO report of 1994 noted that "the Air Force does not have a Command Language Program."[4]

These well-documented deficiencies during more predictable challenges bode poorly for the less predictable and far more diverse challenges of a new engagement-and-enlargement strategy. The Air Force's Global Engagement vision, which implements airpower and space power in support of that strategy, makes a discussion of global skills relevant, timely, and necessary. For purposes of this article, we define global skills as language proficiency within a cultural and regional context.

Former Security Environment: Old Paradigm for Language Skills

"While it takes longer to acquire minimal competence in a language than to train for most military occupations, there is less opportunity for and less emphasis placed on, the maintenance of the more expensive skill."

DOD's language-training efforts of the cold-war era mirrored the prevailing containment strategy and focused on the language of potential adversaries. "Our unfortunate experience has been that foreign language capability in the American armed forces has been restricted primarily to only one sphere of military activity. . . . The military significance of foreign language competence is pigeonholed into the category of military intelligence—strategic and tactical."[5]

Military language programs reflect the American mind-set on language skills, which accounts in large measure for our national failure in the language and area-studies arena. Unlike most other nations, the United States has traditionally attributed a "short-term, mechanical value to foreign languages" and neither understands nor appreciates (and therefore does not accept) the relationship between language and culture. In 1989 a survey of 32 American international business leaders, for example, found that these leaders believed that

- language is divorced from its cultural context;
- cross-cultural understanding is important for doing business in the global economy, but few considered foreign language as a key element in this understanding; and
- foreign language was not a problem since it could be "managed"—when needs arose, appropriate skills would be located.[6]

Relying on the "managed" model, the military has scrambled in contingencies to locate the necessary skills in groups as diverse as Kuwaiti exchange students and cabdrivers from New York City and Washington, D.C. Because military leaders have accepted this short-term, mechanical view of language skills and because we have been able to manage this problem, we largely ignore language-maintenance programs. "While it takes longer to acquire minimal competence in a language than to train for most military occupations, there is less opportunity for and less emphasis placed on, the maintenance of the more expensive skill."[7]

The misguided American mind-set on foreign-language skills also drove us to the prevailing "just-in-time" language-training model used throughout government. Although we successfully managed our way through the cold war and recent contingency operations, this model is destined to fail in a long-term, engagement-oriented national security strategy.

New Security Challenges, Missions, Strategies, and Skills

In *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force,* the Air Force leadership profoundly and directly redefines the service's mission in light of a new international-security arena, stating that "the ability of the Air Force to engage globally, using both lethal and non-lethal means is vital to today's national security of engagement and enlargement. At present almost a quarter of USAF personnel are deployed overseas at any one time."[8] Humanitarian, peacekeeping, and peace-enforcement missions; security assistance; coalition building and maintenance; treaty enforcement; and drug interdiction account for many of these deployments. Rooted in the political, economic, and military realities of emerging global-security concerns, the Air Force's new strategic vision is cogent and compelling.

Moreover, implied but not stated in the vision is an unprecedented need for global

skills to enhance the engagement process and to support the shift from cold war to Global Engagement strategies. Purely mechanical language skills that served—albeit poorly—strategic and tactical intelligence purposes, for example, will not serve the broader requirements of emerging engagement strategies. As Samuel P. Huntington has pointed out, "In the post–Cold War world, the most important distinctions between peoples are no longer ideological, political, or economic. The distinctions are cultural."[9] Future Air Force leaders must recognize the importance of these cultural distinctions in order to implement effective engagement strategies, especially at lower levels. In a bygone era, Air Force people raining down fire and steel had few motives for cross-cultural understanding. In the future, a lack of cross-cultural perspective will, at best, create obstacles to Global Engagement and, at worst, lead to disengagement and isolation—fostering the kind of regional instability we seek to combat.

As the only true superpower in today's multipolar world, the United States is the only power with a national identity, clearly defined political and economic values, and the capability of exercising international primacy and influence.[10] For the Air Force in the late 1980s and early 1990s, building US influence meant controlling and policing former Soviet client-protectorates turned regional renegades. A national security strategy paradigm shift began for the Air Force with "forward presence," "global reach," and "global power projection" supplanting age-old, cold-war, forward-based, nuclear-readiness posturing.[11]

DOD's *Bottom-Up Review (BUR)* of 1993 framed the baseline for the further evolution of our national security strategy paradigm.[12] It remains today the doctrinal underpinning of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's *Joint Vision 2010* and the Air Force's new strategic vision. The *BUR* is clear on DOD's core values: the promotion of democratic governments and human rights, the peaceful resolution of regional conflicts, and the maintenance of open international economic markets stand at the heart of defense guidance. Moreover, US national security strategy hinges on expanded political, economic, and military engagement around the world. Further, according to the *BUR*, our Global Engagement must be conducted within a twofold goal: reducing dangers to our national interests (threat prevention) and enlarging international cooperation (partnership) for freedom and peace.[13]

Foreign-language/area skills must be developed—over the long haul, not overnight—as necessary tools for the Total Force.

DOD's commitment to Global Engagement as a national security strategy acknowledges that US military forces will increasingly be called upon for operations short of war such as peacekeeping and peace enforcement.[14] Furthermore, the Office of the Secretary of Defense posits that "defense by other means"—namely targeted economic aid, cooperative military education and training, and robust military-to-military contact programs—fosters mutual understanding and cooperation through engagement. Finally, the *BUR* establishes several "global cooperative initiatives." In addition to cooperative international threat reductions and counterproliferation programs, the US military is seen as having an increased role in providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to counter the rise of regional instabilities that could lead to armed conflicts.[15] In short, our national security strategy employs US military forces in an unprecedented global way to which this decade's military-deployment record and operations tempo bear witness.

Flowing from our "new National Security Strategy," *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force* recognizes the changing global-security environment, with projection of forces based in the continental United States, unpredictable missions, and

constabulary-humanitarian roles becoming the operational norm. Moreover, the strategy mandates that the Air Force's future lies in a capability for "immediate action, operations in non-traditional environments" and the capacity to operate "as partners in regional (coalition) operations."[16] Clearly, many of these operations will be in non-English-speaking regions and with non-English-speaking coalition partners, making a level of global skills mission-essential.

We must consider these [language] skills as part of the accessions decisions and create incentives for those members who have the skills.

Implementing a New Plan

Recognizing the need to review the Air Force's foreign-language capabilities, the commander of Air Education and Training Command and the Air Force's deputy chief of staff for personnel commissioned a 13-agency Total Force process action team (PAT) in 1994. The PAT completed its report in December 1995, and the Air Force leadership endorsed many of the team's recommendations in early 1996. Some of the recommendations have already been implemented; others are currently in Air Staff coordination. According to an article in *Air Force Times*, "increased deployments overseas, whether for war or peacekeeping, have the Air Force taking new stock in the foreign language capabilities of its members."[17]

The PAT suggested one overarching consideration and 31 specific recommendations falling into four broad categories. Of foremost importance is the notion that foreign-language/foreign-area skills are required to do Air Force missions in the twenty-first century. The Air Force should create no new specialist career field—for enlisted or officers—from which the service could plug linguists into contingencies. That is not the nature of Global Engagement. Further, everybody doesn't need to be a linguist—that's overkill for many Air Force people with a growing myriad of technical and professional responsibilities. Instead, a fresh look at the missions of engagement and a commensurate change in the Air Force attitude regarding these skills will best serve our needs.

Specifically, foreign-language/area skills must be developed—over the long haul, not overnight—as necessary tools for the Total Force. It is difficult to incorporate a skills-development model in a requirements-based training system wherein one cannot predict the requirements accurately. The "create 'em overnight" tactic is no solution; instead, it contributes to the problem. To meet the long-term needs of our engagement strategy, the PAT proposed building a pool of resources across all Air Force specialties in the Total Force. Moreover, by carefully tracking and managing language-skilled Air Force people, we can reduce unnecessary training costs. Again, new missions equal new thinking. Within expected funding constraints, a "pool-building" model would likely serve us better than the traditional requirements-based model.[18] Toward that end, the PAT also made specific recommendations in four general areas.

First, we should *identify and track* the skills we already have, as well as those coming through the accession door. Currently, the system tracks only those members who have taken the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT): personnel who demanded to be tested, those who filled a language-designated position, and those who graduated from the Defense Language Institute. From the PAT-recommended Foreign Language Self Assessment (FLSA) survey, completed in November 1996, of all active, Guard, and Reserve members, the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC) identified over 72,000 people with skills in 207 languages or dialects. Thus, the FLSA identified new language resources enabling rapid identification of individuals with language capabilities to respond to mission needs. Clearly, this new

database will help to identify personnel for special training, assignments, and contingencies.[19]

Second, our foreign-language, just-in-time training model is all wrong. Language proficiency comes with time. We simply cannot train people quickly to be proficient in a foreign language. For difficult languages, we can not do it in even two, three, or more years. Just-in-time language training follows a requirements-based planning model that just does not fit. For example, when AFPC has a requirement for somebody with foreign-language skills for a normal assignment rotation, it reviews the force for verified DLPT scores. In rare cases, a person with the skills volunteers, and the mission is complete (warm space, warm face). More often, a volunteer or nonvolunteer is sent to just-in-time training, reports to the assignment unable to speak the language, and the mission is complete (warm space, wrong face). It's even worse in a contingency (hot space, no face), when there's no such thing as just-in-the-nick-of-time language training. Instead, we must change the model to *find them if we can, train them only if we must.* That means home-grown foreign-language skills from the accession points. We must consider these skills as part of the accessions decisions and create incentives for those members who have the skills. It is far more sensible, effective, and efficient to identify language-proficient people at the door than to train them years later.[20]

Third, "home growing" is useless if we don't "home groom." We must *maintain and use* the foreign-language skills of Air Force people. We need robust foreign-language maintenance resources in the Base Education Office and undergraduate and graduate academic-degree programs in foreign languages and foreign-area studies. We need command-sponsored foreign-language immersion programs as well as a flexible and responsible personnel-assignment system in which otherwise qualified people who have language skills receive priority for foreign-language-related assignments.[21]

Fourth, we must *create and support institutional incentives* for Air Force people to identify, acquire, and maintain foreign-language/area skills. We must explore monetary increases in foreign-language proficiency pay, with parity in pay for Guard and Reserve personnel and bonuses for successive years of higher DLPT scores. We need to give assignment priorities to language-qualified people for foreign locations. Finally—and this is an emotional issue—we should look at factoring language proficiency into the promotion process.[22]

Taken at face value, *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force* guarantees a future for more and more Air Force people acting as ambassadors and interfacing with other nations for the good of our country's national objectives. This means that change is in the air for the Air Force. Of course, there will be resistance to this change, and some of it will come from the top. With only 11 serving general officers (out of three hundred in the active Air Force) and 185 colonels (out of four thousand) fluent in a foreign language,[23] the importance of yet another capability and demand on our Air Force people is bound to be questioned. But *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force* is exactly about change, and by 2025 a new Air Force crew, highly capable of dealing with a new Air Force culture, will never doubt that Global Engagement requires Global Skills. □

Notes

1. Quoted in *Strength through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability: A Report to the President from the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; Education Division; Office of Education, November 1979), 6.

2. Maj James C. McNaughton, "Can We Talk?" *Army*, June 1992, 25, 20.

3. George Lardner Jr., quoting Sen. Sam Nunn in "Language Education for National Security," *Washington Post*, 19 July 1991, A19.

4. See DIA, "Assessment of Attaché Language Training," July 1988, 12; GAO Audit Report 90-036, "Defense Advanced Language and Area Studies Program," 15 February 1990, 7; DLIFLC January 1993 Report 92-04, "Desert Shield's 24-Week

Arabic Program," 6; DLIFLC Report, "Patterns and Trends in Post-Training Foreign Language Use," January 1993; USAF/IG Functional Management Inspection of Air Force Foreign Area Studies Program, PN 89-263, 3 April 1991, 3–4; DOD IG Inspection Report 93-INS-10, "Defense Foreign Language Program," June 1993, i; and GAO Report, "Review of DOD Training of Linguists Engaged in Intelligence-Related Activities," July 1994, 11.

5. Kurt E. Muller, "On the Military Significance of Language," *Modern Language Journal*, Winter 1981, 361.

6. Carol S. Fixman, *The Foreign Language Needs of US-Based Corporations*, National Foreign Language Center Occasional Papers (Washington, D.C.: National Foreign Language Center, May 1989), 2.

7. Muller, 365.

8. *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, January 1997), 11.

9. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 21.

10. Samuel P. Huntington, "Why International Primacy Matters," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993): 68, 82–83.

11. Gen John M. Loh, "Advocating Mission Needs in Tomorrow's World," *Airpower Journal* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 6.

12. Les Aspin, *The Bottom-Up Review: Forces for a New Era* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1993).

13. Ibid., sec. 1, p. 3.

14. Ibid., sec. 2, pp. 8–10.

15. Ibid., sec. 6, pp. 71–76.

16. *Global Engagement*, 1, 5.

17. Bryant Jordan, "Linguistic Skills Grow in Importance," *Air Force Times*, 4 November 1996, 6.

18. "Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team Report and Recommendations" (Colorado Springs, Colo.: USAF Academy, 1 December 1995), 6, 7, 34, 35.

19. Ibid., 63–76; and Headquarters USAF/DPPE, Talking Paper on Foreign Language Proficiency Requirements, 22 December 1996.

20. "Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team Report and Recommendations," 47–62.

21. Ibid., 77–89.

22. Ibid., 77–79.

23. AFPC/DPS, DIN PDS Report, 31 December 1996.

There are people who strictly deprive themselves of each and every eatable, drinkable, and smokable which has in any way acquired a shady reputation. They pay this price for health. And health is all they get for it. How strange it is. It is like paying out your whole fortune for a cow that has gone dry.

—Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens)