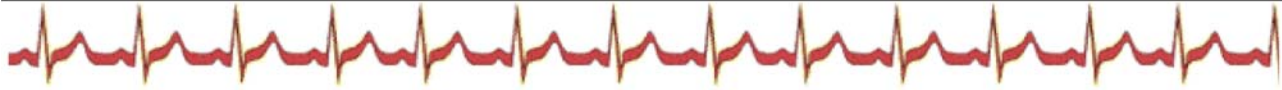


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## Untying u.s. tongues

### A Presidential push for more study of key foreign languages

By Alex Kingsbury

When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik into orbit in 1957, a shocked U.S. government quickly poured money into science and math education in hopes of winning the space race. A lesser known but perhaps equally important investment was funding for the study of foreign languages, specifically Russian. Nearly 50 years later, however, the country still has few citizens capable of speaking languages deemed vital to national security. So last week the Bush administration proposed what amounts to a new national crash course in key foreign languages.

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The disinclination of Americans to learn foreign languages is a running joke in Europe. But it's a serious matter for federal officials, who cited both security needs and the quest for global competitiveness in announcing the \$114 million National Security Language Initiative. The plan calls for students to begin studying "critical need" foreign languages, including Arabic, Farsi, and Chinese, as early as kindergarten. It also includes funding for advanced language speakers, study-abroad programs, and teacher development. Learning a language "is a kind gesture," said President Bush in announcing the program. "It really is a fundamental way to reach out to somebody and say, 'I care about you.' "

Educators say the new focus on languages is long overdue. In 2000, when the last major survey was conducted, just 44 percent of American high schoolers took foreign language classes. Of those, almost 70 percent were studying Spanish. Only 5,000 students were learning Chinese, and a mere 426 were enrolled in Arabic classes. Many schools, already struggling to teach their students basic reading and writing, lack the resources to teach foreign languages. Moreover,

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students are rarely introduced to language classes until high school, when it is far more difficult to learn pronunciation and vocabulary. "It is an embarrassment that we are the only country in the developed world whose high school graduates are fluent in one language," says Marty Abbott, director of education at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

**Concerns.** The new program would involve the Departments of State, Education, and Defense, plus the director of national intelligence. Critics fear that the Pentagon's involvement could mitigate any positive international goodwill generated by the new effort. "When the Department of Defense gets involved, there are concerns about a school deviating from its academic mission," says Jerry Ladman, associate provost for international affairs at Ohio State University. But, he says, even modest government seed money can play a key role in establishing programs.

The new proposal has yet to be debated in Congress, but there are already signs that old attitudes may be changing. This fall, thanks to popular demand, the College Board will offer the first Advanced Placement course in Chinese.

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