

## Learning Languages

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WITH A CERTAIN amount of fanfare Thursday, President Bush launched the National Security Language Initiative, designed to expand Americans' knowledge of critical foreign languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hindi and Farsi. Before a group of 120 university presidents, he described learning foreign languages as a "kind gesture" toward other cultures, as well as an important facet of American security: "We need intelligence officers who, when somebody says something in Arabic or Farsi or Urdu, knows what they're talking about."

We applaud Mr. Bush's sentiments, though the lateness and modesty of this initiative are perplexing. It has been clear for more than four years, since Sept. 11, 2001, that Americans are horrifically deficient in knowledge about those parts of the world that now most threaten us, as well as about those that may pose important security challenges in the future. Yet the initiative will receive funding only in the 2007 budget -- if, of course, Congress approves. Although the State Department issued a fact sheet describing the new program's impressive goals, department officials conceded that only 15 public schools in this country teach Arabic at the moment. Although 200 million Chinese students study English, there are also only about 2,000 teachers of Chinese in the United States. There's a long way to go.

Department officials also referred to the launch of Sputnik, the first Soviet satellite, whose appearance in the sky inspired national concern about the "knowledge gap" between the United States and the Soviet Union and a new emphasis on science and Russian-language education in this country. Sputnik was launched in 1957. President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the National Defense Education Act, which funded science education, in 1958. He also set up the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in 1958 -- a year after Sputnik, not four or five. The administration should move as fast as possible to make up for lost time.

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