

Opinion

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Speaking In Tongues

Foreign Language Need Lost On Students

By Robert B. Adolph Jr.

Even a cursory review of the Fortune 500 companies reveals that the overwhelming majority have overseas interests. According to Dr. Humphrey Tonkin of Potsdam College in New York, "Business people remind us that it is important to know other languages, particularly the languages of our major trading partners..."

With our burgeoning trade gap, the need for language-trained business people will have to increase as we struggle to remain the world's pre-eminent economic power.

Japan, South Korea and the European Community are reaping profits by selling in our marketplace. They benefit enormously from school systems that stress mandatory language training starting at an early age.

This early training later provides a large pool from which to draw cadres of young business people eager to practice what they have learned — thus enabling the corporate bodies of foreign nations to come here, examine our needs, discuss marketing strategies with

potential American partners, and negotiate contracts without the help of interpreters.

These competitor nations have been successful because they understand us, and they understand us through the best available means: our language.

Unfortunately, language studies have seldom fared well in the United States; but the advent of the information age driven by explosive new technologies must bring change in how we, as a nation, view the relative importance of this training. For example, at the University of Rhode Island, language studies were reinstated as an undergraduate requirement in 1981.

According to Dr. Joseph Morello, associate professor of French at the institution, "since that time it has been under attack by students who have lobbied for its removal."

At no time in our nation's history has the need to stress language studies been greater, yet the point seems to be lost on many students. How do we demonstrate the relevance of these crucial studies to college-bound students?

In fact, a young student of busi-

ness, manufacturing or engineering could place himself, or herself, at the forefront of potential job applicants, in a shrinking job market, with corporations that have international concerns, by learning to speak a second tongue.

A tremendous number of technological breakthroughs are being made overseas. America is no longer the world's undisputed leader in electronics and computer science. The phenomenal growth of our service sector over the last 20 years has bled talent away from industry and technology. We now have much to learn from those we formerly taught.

The Japanese, in particular, have much to teach us if we would only learn to speak their language.

We can no longer remain smugly confident that the world will come to us.

Even considering the end of the Cold War, the United States still faces the specter of what is now known as low-intensity conflict. President Bush has called such conflicts "wars in the shadows." Insurgency, terrorism, and civil war still rule parts of the Third World.

The requirement for language-trained soldiers to work in this environment is an absolute necessity, and a recognized priority within the Defense Department. Unfortunately, there is an extremely limited population base of people trained in language skills upon which the military can draw. This situation will remain static into the foreseeable future.

On a more idealistic note, I am compelled to add that there is another great benefit derived from the study of language: an increased understanding of peoples and cultures dissimilar to our own. All cultures have a tendency toward ethnocentricity. Ours may be one of the worst offenders.

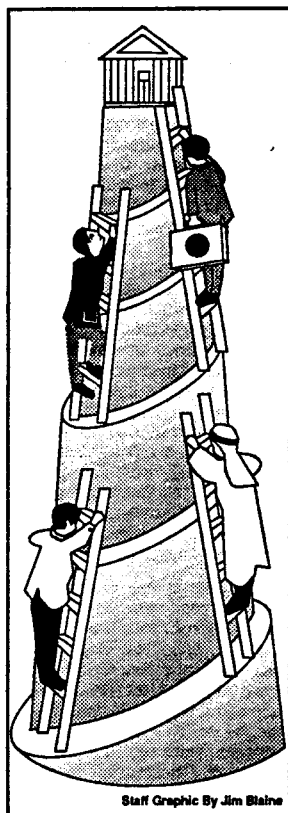
The "ugly American" overseas

is well-known and never appreciated. By the simple act of attempting to speak another's native tongue we demonstrate a capacity for something much more profound than our words might convey. We demonstrate a capacity for understanding another people's cultural perspective, and respect for their values and way of life.

Foreign-language studies improve our international commercial opportunities, our national security and ourselves. With such studies comes a growing understanding of our common humanity, a sensitivity to cultural differences, and a medium through which disagreements can be peacefully resolved.

Although language studies are not a panacea for our international ills, they are an extraordinary means by which to improve our national competitiveness and our understanding of a world that is no longer exclusively our apple.

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Staff Graphic By Jim Staine