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MANDATORY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRAINING FOR ALL MILITARY MEMBERS

By

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally recognized that future U.S. military operations will be multinational. As the Naval War College instructs: “There is no reason to believe American military forces will ever undertake a major operation alone without some other nations participating.”¹ As the Army states in its field manual on *Training for Full Spectrum Operations*, leaders must prepare to operate at the tactical level in operations involving multinational forces.² And as Joint Publication 3-16 states, “US forces cannot assume that the predominant language will automatically be English”³ in coalition operations.

Recognizing that multinational operations are the inevitable way of the future, the Department of Defense (DOD) acknowledges the importance of language capability among all ranks across the full range of military operations. DOD also recognizes the reality that only “some” servicemembers will be familiar with the language of coalition partners or local nationals.⁴ In its 2005 *Defense Language Transformation Roadmap*,⁵ DOD concedes that “[l]anguage skill and regional expertise are not valued as Defense core competencies” even though “they are as important as critical weapon systems.”⁶

Given the critical need for proficient foreign language speakers, the military services offer bonuses to members who are proficient in high-demand languages. They also encourage already-proficient foreign language speakers to take advantage of abundant multinational educational and training opportunities. Yet DOD has done virtually nothing to develop foreign language proficiency among all of its members. Unlike other agencies such as the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), DOD has instituted no programs to develop home-grown foreign language speakers. It meets only its immediate needs with linguists and local nationals.

THE INADEQUACY OF CURRENT DOD FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

DOD recognizes the importance of foreign language capability across all ranks in all future operations, but it continues to rely on and reward servicemembers who are already proficient in a foreign language when they enter the military. However, Americans are not naturally foreign-language proficient or capable unless they are immigrants or second-generation immigrants. Even college-educated Americans tend to lack foreign language skills because U.S. colleges and universities, including the service academies, require only minimal foreign language ability to graduate.⁷ Because of the dearth of foreign language speakers among recruits, the military services reward speakers of high-demand foreign languages with bonuses,⁸ and DOD has cutting-edge technology for testing proficiency.⁹

DOD also encourages staff officer education in foreign countries¹⁰ and gives officers the opportunity to satisfy their educational requirements at foreign schools through the Department of the Army's School of other Nations (SON) program.¹¹ Multinational warfighter exercises, such as those available at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, provide brigade combat team training in the context of a NATO headquarters for U.S. and coalition forces.¹² In addition, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) has extensive international training liaisons.¹³

But these multinational schooling and training opportunities are available only to a select few officers who happen to be foreign language proficient. DOD's Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) classroom instruction is limited "to DoD language professionals," namely servicemembers who can demonstrate that a foreign language is a skill required for their particular military specialty.¹⁴ And even the DLI Broadband Language Training System is designed for "*post-basic* learners seeking to refresh, sustain or enhance their

proficiency skills with the goal of reaching Interagency Language Roundtable Level 3 or higher.”¹⁵ For several years, the Army had contracted to make Rosetta Stone[®] available to all servicemembers, starting at the basic level. But there were no career incentives to using the resources, and the contract expired on September 24, 2011.¹⁶ The Army has proposed foreign language training for “non-linguists,” but notes that “[e]xisting education and training programs and initiatives are helping to meet some needs, particularly for specialists, but do not meet the full needs of the Army.”¹⁷

DOD’S CURRENT DOOMED FOREIGN LANGUAGE STRATEGY

In the Strategic Planning Guidance for fiscal years 2006 through 2011, DOD was directed to develop “a comprehensive roadmap for achieving the full range of language capabilities necessary to support the 2004 Defense Strategy.”¹⁸ In the January 2005 Roadmap, DOD recognized that “[b]asic language skills are needed within many facets of the DoD mission.”¹⁹ And in an October 2005 DOD Directive, the secretaries of the military services were directed to ensure that “all military units deploying to or transiting foreign territories have an appropriate capability to communicate in the languages of the territories of deployment or transit” by providing “basic language familiarization, and language aid, in coordination with DLIFLC.”²⁰ On January 5, 2006, President Bush introduced the National Security Language Initiative, which funds the teaching of critical foreign languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, and Farsi from kindergarten through university.²¹ The Initiative does not, however, have a military component.

In 2009, the Army responded to the DOD Roadmap and Directive with an ambitious strategy (ACFLS) “for *all* leaders and Soldiers to achieve some level of proficiency in both culture and foreign language for some portion of the world.”²² TRADOC is the Army’s lead to implement the strategy, but TRADOC’s 2012 plan is less ambitious.²³ TRADOC describes new

“cultural” training, and has little new to say about language training. It boasts that “all USMA Cadets receive at least two semesters of foreign language training,” which is not new. Furthermore, only 20% of officers come from the service academies,²⁴ and two semesters of foreign language education is wholly inadequate. TRADOC also describes the Army’s foreign language proficiency bonus program, which is not new, and language “familiarization” training for deploying Soldiers. Familiarization is a far cry from proficiency, and waiting until imminent deployment to provide foreign language training will achieve only superficial results. TRADOC intends to satisfy the minimal goals set forth in the DOD Directive and has no plans to achieve the Army’s more ambitious goal of achieving some level of language proficiency “for all leaders and Soldiers.”

In 2008, the Navy also developed a foreign language strategy, but it does not contemplate foreign language training for all Sailors.²⁵ The Marine Corps envisions a “Marine Corps manned with a mixture of language-capable and language professional Marines ready to support any Marine Air Ground Force (MAGTF) mission,”²⁶ but foreign language training for non-linguists will be only “familiarization training.”²⁷ The Air Force envisions a limited end-state of Airmen “with appropriate and timely language ability development to meet tactical mission requirements.”²⁸ And the Coast Guard foreign language program develops a “pool of interpreters and linguists” but does not contemplate any foreign language training for non-linguists.²⁹

In a 2011 strategic plan, DOD states its vision to “invest in basic and continuing language . . . training and education while maintaining a cadre of personnel with higher language, regional, and cultural proficiencies.”³⁰ However, the plan does not envision the expansion of DLI or any other agency’s language program such as the State Department’s Foreign Service Institute.³¹ The

strategic plan is merely to create a “repository” of foreign language training opportunities for those who “want to acquire and further refine their knowledge and skills.”³²

RECOMMENDATION

It’s about time that DOD expanded its foreign language programs to include mandatory foreign language instruction at every level of training for all servicemembers. Basic foreign language should be incorporated into initial entry training, and advanced schooling for each military specialty should include foreign language training that is tailored to the student’s anticipated area of responsibility.³³ Likewise, the current DLPT should be modified to test language abilities that are unique to servicemembers in their respective specialties and anticipated areas of responsibility. Incentives should also be introduced such as ribbons for each language and devices that indicate the level of proficiency.

The U.S. Border Patrol, the State Department and FBI provide working models. The U.S. Border Patrol, which is a subagency of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, is a paramilitary organization whose agents come into direct contact with foreign nationals who have unlawfully entered our country. Spanish language training is essential, because “over 90% of the more than one million undocumented aliens apprehended each year speaks only Spanish.”³⁴ Non-Spanish-speaking agents are therefore required to spend an additional 8 weeks of Spanish language training at the Border Patrol Academy in Artesia, New Mexico. The U.S. Border Patrol requires that students understand “law enforcement-specific language unique to the Border Patrol Agent’s work environment as well as be able to solicit information and use colloquial phrases and idiomatic expressions.”³⁵ The State Department’s Foreign Service Institute “provides more than 600 courses—including some 70 foreign languages—to more than 100,000 enrollees a year from the State Department and more than 40 other government agencies and the military service

branches.”³⁶ And the FBI offers “foreign language training not only to develop proficiencies of language analysts, but also to stimulate career-long language learning among *all* FBI employees.”³⁷

Among the obstacles to implementing this recommendation are cost and culture. Providing basic language instruction to all servicemembers will require significant funding to expand DLI and to contract for outside instruction. And because foreign language skill is not valued as a core competency,³⁸ there will likely be resistance among the services and servicemembers. The average American is not raised to believe that it is important to learn a foreign language, so the desire to learn a foreign language is not instilled, and foreign language capability is underdeveloped. English is not the official language of the United States, but immigrants are expected to assimilate, and naturalization applicants are required to pass an English examination.³⁹ English has become the lingua franca throughout the world in business, the arts, science, and diplomacy.⁴⁰ DOD will therefore be faced with the challenge of teaching a skill to many students who lack the interest and/or capability to learn it.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

For too long now, DOD and the military services have been paying lip service to the need for foreign language capability across all ranks. It’s about time that DOD made real progress by mandating foreign language instruction at all levels of military training and schooling and by obtaining the funding needed to expand DLI’s mission to include meaningful language instruction for all servicemembers, both linguists and non-linguists. And by the way, shouldn’t the service academies make foreign language proficiency a requirement for graduation?

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⁶ *Id.* at 3.

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³⁹ *See* 8 U.S.C. § 1423(a)(1).

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