

TALKING POINTS FOR COMMISSIONER ERNEST L. BOYER
ON THE NEED FOR EXPANDED PROGRAMS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES
AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AT EVERY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

FOR DELIVERY AT A PRESS CONFERENCE PRESENTING RESULTS OF
THE MICHIGAN STUDY ON AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD FOREIGN
LANGUAGE

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 6, 1:00 P.M.

Dr. A. Bartlett Giamatti, President of Yale University and former English teacher, speaking to the Modern Language Association recently, said: "The demise of foreign languages is part of a larger assault on literacy, part of a larger decline in the capacity to handle any language at all." He goes on to say: "It is, I believe, a fact that in the last 15 years -- certainly the last 10 -- any American college student who knew anything about the dynamics of English....knew it by analogy from the grammar of a foreign language."

The College Entrance Examination Board reports that a clear parallel unquestionably shows up between students' SAT-Verbal scores and the number of foreign language courses they have taken in high school. We need young people who will take a world view. If we expose children in the elementary grades to languages and dynamic knowledge of the world around us, they will want to continue to develop these studies later on. If colleges demand a language for admission and require more than two years of language and/or foreign affairs study for graduation, the parochialism that has overtaken us can be reversed.

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In spite of increased American business and travel abroad, we are the only industrial Nation that has fallen far behind in foreign language study. Only 9 percent of our degree credit college students and approximately 4 million of our high school students are enrolled in foreign language courses.

Lack of familiarity with other languages creates problems for the Nation, as well as for its individual citizens. As individuals, we are awkward in communication with people from other countries, depriving ourselves of the stimulation of new ideas and personalities -- the products of other environments. We miss half the fun of travel abroad, and all the fun we might be gaining from a reading of the literature of other civilizations.

Lack of language is losing Americans a sense of mastery in doing business abroad because of our lack of cross-cultural awareness, sensitivity, and knowledge. When a major American auto manufacturer went looking for American public relations people who spoke German or French to work for a European plant, only 5 people in the entire country were found to have the language skills and the necessary background in communications.

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In his book, "The Silent Language," Edward T. Hall says: "As a country we are apt to be guilty of great ethnocentrism. In many of our foreign aid programs we employ a heavy-handed technique in dealing with local nationals. We insist that everyone else do things our way. Consequently we manage to convey the impression that we simply regard foreign nationals as 'underdeveloped Americans.' Most of our behavior does not spring from malice but from ignorance, which is a grievous sin in international relations."

In 1978 only 6 of the 60 U.S. Foreign Service Officers in Iran were minimally proficient in Farsi, not including the Ambassador.

In Pakistan, only five of America's 32 diplomatic officials are required to be minimally proficient in Urdu.

In Kenya, only 1 officer of 22 in the U.S. Mission is required to speak Swahili.

We do not have a single bilingual interpreter of Chinese or Japanese.

Meanwhile, there are some bright signs. Here and there, schools are bringing languages back into their curriculums. There is a high school level exchange program called "Youth for Understanding," which enables a high school youngster with some French, Spanish, or other language to change

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places with his counterpart in another country for a year....and the government is not paying for this program. There are also booming adult language courses.

What is needed is a coordinated national effort to assure us an informed citizenry, led by experts who have had the advantage of cross-cultural training and languages. Training must start early and must accompany every step of the education process.

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