

Statement by Martin Kramer

If one were to judge by past experience, your enterprise is a futile one. Before I left Washington, I refreshed my memory by delving into the major reassessments of Title VI, submitted in the past to Congress and the Department of Education. There is the report by the Comptroller General of the United States, from 1978. There is the report prepared by RAND in 1981. There is the report by the Congressional Research Service from 1989. And there is the report by the National Foreign Language Center from 2000.

Together they make sober reading. They are evidence, first, that frustration with Title VI has been evident for decades, and second, that the reforms proposed by previous panels have been largely ignored. Many of the recommendations are repeated in each assessment. If past is future, your findings will be added to this pile of forgotten paper.

The source of the frustration is well-known and well-attested. It has been partly obscured by the other testimonials you have heard in your previous meetings, so it needs to be re-emphasized. It is this: despite the achievements of Title VI--and there have been achievements--this is a program that has digressed from its original purpose.

When Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in 1958, it hoped the new program would expand the pool of language-competent Americans who would serve the national interest, broadly defined. That understanding remains at the very core of the Title VI contract between government and academe.

But despite fifty years of Title VI, such Americans are far too few in number and competence to meet the nation's needs. The academic community claims to have done everything within its power, with limited resources, to meet the need. But there are grounds to suspect that this isn't the entire story, or even the real story.

The real Title VI story is this. Many in area studies are persuaded that the United States possesses excessive power, or abuses its power. Knowledge in the service of such power is knowledge complicit in its excesses and failures. The inclination of these academics has been to separate Title VI from its original intent, and transform it into part of the academy's own reproductive system. They will not surrender the resources that Title VI transfers; but they have worked to turn the program from a contract into an entitlement, and to shift its emphasis away from hard languages and toward soft area studies, which enjoy far more academic prestige.

My time is too short to detail the resulting distortion. It is ably summarized in the National Foreign Language Center's 2000 assessment. According to that report "over the years, the original focus on language has been replaced with a much broader mandate for area and international studies." As a result, the report concludes, Title VI isn't doing all it could have done to fill the language deficit. That report recommended the "refocus [of] Title VI/Fulbright-Hays on language."

This is the same lament conveyed in the comments submitted to you by the Federal Interagency Language Roundtable--to my mind, the most important submission made to you. It gives Title VI a "fairly good" grade in promoting general area studies and curriculum development. But in preparing graduates with a full range of language competence, the grade is "considerably poorer." The Roundtable calls for "systematic objective assessment" of the program, and ends by proposing that Title VI centers "commit to delivering more instruction in language skills at higher levels."

So the question is this: why hasn't government already recalibrated the program?

The answer lies in an imbalance of political will and human resources. Title VI, on a federal scale, is a very small program--too small to command the sustained attention of Congress. And a small and overstretched bureaucracy administers it. They have not been equal to a determined coalition of provosts, deans, center

directors, and professional lobbyists. These have succeeded in massaging, tweaking, and spinning Title VI so that it meets precisely their purposes.

This "Title VI community" now greets even the most modest proposal for reform with a massive wall of denial and resistance. And they assure that every careful reassessment of Title VI is discarded in the same pile.

For a recent example of such a reaction, I urge you to read an article by Dr. Amy Newhall, executive director of the Middle East Studies Association. It bears this provocative title: "The Unraveling of the Devil's Bargain: The History and Politics of Language Acquisition." The devil, it soon becomes clear, is none other than the U.S. government. In striking a bargain with Washington, writes Newhall, academe made the mistake of justifying Title VI in terms of languages for national security. Her conclusion: "Traditionally, language programs have offered a degree of protection for the area-studies component of federally supported programs... Now the devil's bargain is unraveling."

I commend Dr. Newhall for writing so frankly, first, about the stealth use of Title VI as a language cover for area studies, and second, for dropping the usual pabulum about the "congruence of national interests and the broader interests of scholarship." (That is the boilerplate language she used in her submission to you.) No, she says, we cut a deal with the devil. This, from the executive director of this country's leading association of Middle Eastern studies, is a sudden glimpse into the kind of prejudice that has kept Title VI from reaching its full potential.

The truth, of course, is that the bargain has not unravelled at all: for example, there are more Title VI centers for the Middle East today than at any time in history. Dr. Newhall's piece is an example of the melodramatic overstatement that greets every mention of Title VI reform. The question of whether we are to get even a minor recalibration of Title VI is very much an open one. And it very much depends on you.

I would not be so presumptuous as to anticipate your conclusions. I would venture a guess that you will reiterate some of the recommendations made in the past, hopefully regarding the primacy of languages, and that you will make other original recommendations.

When it comes to original recommendations, I propose to you that you consider whether Title VI needs a mechanism to assist in the implementation of your recommendations. Once you have added to the pile of reassessments, what will assure that the one and a half million dollars spent on your exercise will have made a difference?

The obstacle to implementation remains the imbalance of will and resources I mentioned earlier--an imbalance that tilts the program away from its intent. Some weight has to be added to the other side of the scale.

The best way to keep the program aligned with evolving national need in a rapidly changing environment is to create an independent mechanism that will do, year-in-and-year-out, exactly what you are doing now. Title VI needs "systematic, objective assessment," and it should not require a 9/11 and five years of sharp polemics to get it. It should be institutionalized for Title VI, as it is for other programs. This may be the only way to restore Congressional confidence in the program, at a time when newer, focused language programs have stolen the flag from Title VI. A rough-and-ready version of this idea appears in the House version of the long-stalled reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. It is possible to imagine additional or alternative approaches.

The most important recommendation you can make--indeed, the one on which all your other recommendations depend--is the establishment of an independent, credentialed body to assist the future development of Title VI.

KramerIrvine.txt

Xx