International Studies, Area Studies, and American Greatness

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The draft 2018 budget released by the Trump administration proposes devastating cuts to international and area studies. Among other cuts, the draft budget proposes to eliminate the Title VI program, under which are funded programs such as the National Resource Centers (NRCs), Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) programs, and American Overseas Research Centers (AORCs). Other programs to be eliminated include the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the United States Institute of Peace.

These proposed cuts represent more than an impending crisis for international and area studies in the United States. They would also deal a catastrophic blow to our government's ability to make effective foreign policy for decades to come. Because President Trump's proposed budget also guts the Department of State, starving it of resources, the U.S. higher education system must take a leading role in protecting those institutions—colleges, universities, professional organizations, and others—where faculty and students will retain that lost expertise.

International and area studies programs are not simply indulgences for graduate programs in the humanities and social sciences. They are also not merely funding streams through which colleges and universities can support unique course offerings in exotic languages and diverse cultures

from around the world. Rather, international and area studies play an essential role in creating the next generation of American foreign policy leaders, and in nurturing the knowledge and expertise that informs them. This has always been the case; as I have previously argued,

> The National Defense Education Act of 1958 jump-started the teaching of less commonly taught languages, and the Department of Education's Title VI framework references maintaining the "security, stability and economic vitality of the United States" as the central motivation for supporting area studies. The guiding belief behind these programs is that area studies yields practical knowledge that can be used to make better policy.

Defense, security, and foreign policy experts must now stand up for international and area studies, to make the case for why language and cultural understanding are so important for making good policy and implementing it effectively. But colleges and universities must take the lead as well.

The link between U.S. national security and foreign policy, on one hand, and international and area studies in U.S. colleges and university, on the other, has always made some scholars and academics uncomfortable. One fear is that government funding leads researchers to conduct research that can be used for ill purposes, such as the development of deadlier weapons or local expertise about how to target civilians most effectively. Another is that government funding prioritizes certain types of knowledge or research—for example, game theoretical models of conflict rather than immersive ethnography. Still another is that the very association of academic research with government priorities inevitably pollutes the scholarly enterprise, by gauging its "value" according to non-academic standards such as "policy relevance."

These criticisms have merit, but they ignore the historical reality of international and area studies in the United States and beyond. In my field of Southeast Asian studies, Title VI and related funding has been essential in funding Southeast Asian studies programs as National Resource Centers. The wording "national resource" is no accident; such programs really are essential national resources. There are no colleges or universities in the U.S. who can afford to provide language instruction in more than two or three of the Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) in Southeast Asia. The U.S. military supports language study, but the university environment uniquely pairs that language instruction with expertise on politics, history, culture, religion, and the arts. U.S. government officials and military officers comprise a large proportion of post-B.A. students in these area studies programs.

There is, moreover, nothing peculiar about the fact the U.S. has funded international and area studies education for its own strategic purposes. Take the field of "Indology," or the study of the East Indies, today's Indonesia. This field first emerged from the research and writing done by employees of the Dutch East India Company to further Dutch economic—and later national security—interests. The novel *Max Havelaar*, which shocked the Dutch population upon its publication in 1860 by illustrating the horrific conditions under Dutch rule in Java, was the work of a colonial administrator. Snouck Hurgronje, a leading scholar of Islam around the turn of the last century, was an adviser to the Netherlands Indies government.

The National Defense Education Act of 1958, which dates from the height of the Cold War, followed the same template that the Dutch, British, and other European colonial empires

followed. The NDEA recognized that a United States that aspired to global preeminence would need to understand the histories, cultures, and languages of the world—especially those countries and peoples most unfamiliar to the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Today, these funds support basic research of all types, with scarcely any restrictions on the purposes to which funds may be used. (The most cumbersome one is just that National Resource Centers share their expertise beyond the post-secondary education sector, which an unqualified good anyway.) They also fund language study in the LCTLs and what the State Department designates as critical languages such as Arabic, Russian, Swahili, and Urdu.

It is no accident that U.S. military officers regularly emphasize the importance of language and cultural study. Commenting on the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, General Stanley McChrystal recently opined

> I now believe we should have taken the first year after 9/11 and sent 10,000 young Americans—military, civilians, diplomats—to language school; Pashtu, Dari, Arabic. We should have started to build up the capacity we didn't have. I would have spent that year with diplomats traveling the world as the aggrieved party... We could have organized, we could have built the right coalitions, we could have done things with a much greater level of understanding than we did in our spasmodic response.

These comments recognize the value of both area studies—knowing more about the languages, cultures, and histories of a region of the world—and international studies—understand how U.S. interests relate to those of its allies and adversaries.

General McChrystal's comments are wise, yet they presume that the capacity to train those soldiers, civilians, and diplomats already exists. That capacity exists precisely *because* of U.S. government commitment to international and area studies in U.S. institutions of higher learning. I see many of the students that General McChrystal has in mind in my own classes on the politics of Southeast Asia. Many of them are aspiring civilian employees of the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Defense, current military officers, or former soldiers. They pursue area studies training and international studies degrees because they understand exactly what happens when the United States makes policies while ignorant of the contexts in which they are implemented.

At this moment in U.S. and global history, Congress ought to stand up to defend international studies and area studies. But it is also time for our colleges and universities to take the lead too, to recognize the critical role that their international and area studies programs play in training the next generation of U.S. policy experts. Colleges and universities commonly champion their essential role in creating an innovative American workforce in the so-called "STEM" fields. They must do the same for international and area studies. Global leadership requires globally engaged citizens, not just technically-savvy workers. The U.S. higher education system is irreplaceable in educating those engaged citizens, from whom the next generation of foreign and security experts will be drawn. With U.S. foreign policymaking under severe threat from the current administration's shortsighted budget, the voice of the American university has never been more important than now.