Veronica Bryant (00:11):

Hello and welcome to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on issues important to higher education. I'm Veronica Bryant, Academic Affairs Fellow, and your host today. I have with me Glenn Corn. Glenn Corn is a 35-year veteran of the National Security and International Affairs Community. He served as a senior executive in the CIA's Directorate of Operations, where he held critical leadership roles overseas, and at headquarters.

(00:39):

Glenn served as the CIA's Chief of Station in four Eurasian and Middle Eastern countries. He speaks Russian and Turkish fluently, and has command in Arabic, Azeri and Uzbek. As the founder and CEO of Great South Bay LLC, Glenn also provides strategic advising, analysis and training to U.S. and international corporations and U.S. special ops community.

(00:59):

He also is the co-founder of Vector One Global and sits on several advisory boards. And because he needs to do more things with his free time, Glenn is a professor at the Institute of World Politics where he teaches graduate level courses on Russian intelligence and security issues. He's also a visiting fellow at George Mason University's Law School's National Security Institute, an expert contributor to the Cipher Brief.

(01:25):

Today, we're going to be talking a little bit about the importance, in fact, the urgency of language-enabled professionals in the U.S. national security and diplomacy sectors. Delighted to welcome you today, Glenn.

Glenn Corn (01:41):

Thank you for having me. It's great to be with you. Hello to your audience.

Veronica Bryant (01:45):

You've ended up in academia at the Institute of World Politics at IWP. Could you talk a little bit about what brought you there and what your experience is like there?

Glenn Corn (01:55):

Sure. The Institute of World Politics, which is a graduate and postgraduate degree program based in Washington, DC, a great school. When I was retiring, somebody reached out to me from the faculty and said, "We heard about you through somebody we know that works here, and we'd be interested in talking to you about teaching a course here if you're interested in teaching graduate students." I was very interested.

(02:19):

When I worked for the CIA, I spent some time as an instructor at our school, so I really enjoyed teaching. Dr. Lenczowski, who's the founder of IWP, when I met him, I was just so impressed, had so much admiration for him, what he did, why he created IWP, and the ethos of the school, which is to teach Americans how to understand other cultures, how to communicate more effectively, how to be better diplomats, and how to serve the country.

(02:51):

I have to say, a lot of the students at IWP are young Americans who want to serve the United States in some capacity. Most of the professors are practitioners, former state departments, CIA, FBI, DOW now, U.S. military retired. The philosophy is it's practitioners teaching. I always say I'm not an academic, I tell

my students. I warn them all the time. But I had a lot of practical experience and I like to share that with the students. They're great young people.

(03:23):

I teach a course on the history of the Russian intelligence services. I teach a course on a Turkish national security policy, which my students asked me to create after I started teaching at IWP because they had a curiosity in learning more about Turkey, which I was very pleased to hear. And now, they just asked me to create a course on Ukrainian history, which we're working on.

(03:44):

I have to say about the students, in both the case of the Turkish course and now this Ukrainian course, they're helping to put together the curriculum, and they will actually help me teach the course, which I find impressive.

Veronica Bryant (03:54):

That's very impressive. I know you have language knowledge in your background, and we haven't yet talked about that. One thing that ACTA has found in the course of preparing this foreign language report in particular is that it won't be any surprise to you, I think, language skills are very important to national security operations for the United States for diplomatic operations, and they have been even since before the founding, in some ways in establishing the Republic through diplomacy in France.

(04:24):

It'd be interesting to hear a little bit in these courses that you teach, do you incorporate language knowledge at all? Does that come up in the course of the content?

Glenn Corn (04:33):

Yes and no. I mean, I'm not teaching language, but I emphasize in the two courses I teach now, how important the command of a foreign language is. I've actually helped one or two students find classes to take both Turkish and Russian. I'm very impressed with the students when they hear how important it is. I don't know why they haven't heard that up until the point they're graduate students, or maybe they hear it from someone who actually served overseas for a long time, and then they decide actually it makes sense.

(05:01):

IWP does have language courses. They teach several languages, so there is a language department, but I'm not teaching there in a language department. The course I teach on Russia, most of my materials comes from Russian language materials, but I can't use those with the students, and of course I can't expect them to count on that kind of material. I tell them all the time, "If I could, you'd probably get 20 times more out of the course," because there's a wealth of information available in the Russian language.

Veronica Bryant (05:29):

Certainly. It sounds like your own language background has helped you enrich understanding of cultures and history of places. Perhaps you could talk a little bit about what brought you to that understanding and also what brought you to the interest in languages?

Glenn Corn (05:45):

Yeah, that's a great question. Growing up in New York, I didn't have a lot of exposure to foreign language. In high school, I studied French. I was a terrible student. When I went to college, I started studying Russian, and I just fell in love with it. It was actually really hard and very challenging. Part of my family was originally from what was the Russian Empire, so I already had a big interest in Russia.

(06:07):

Then I did a study abroad in Moscow during the Cold War, and that was the eyeopener, and I loved it. I love being able to communicate with people. I found out I was actually a very, very good communicator in the language, and it just made it so much more fulfilling. I got just a lot of great stories from being there and being able to go off with the other students or meet people.

(06:29):

I found that Soviet citizens at the time, once they heard you speak Russian, you're a whole nother person. The Turks have a saying, "One language, one life," so the more languages you speak, the more lives you have. I really kind of saw that in my career. Then the other story I always tell people is when I was studying French, I didn't understand why it was important. Then my father was in the Army. He was stationed in Brussels.

(06:51):

One summer, we went to visit him. My brother and I were in a bar in Brussels, and there were two beautiful Belgian young ladies. I went to him and I tried to speak to him in French, wanted to buy him a drink, and they just laughed at me and they said, "Your French is horrible," and they walked away. I said, "Now I understand why I should have studied this language." So there's a practical application.

Veronica Bryant (07:10):

It sounds like it's understanding of peoples to a large extent.

Glenn Corn (07:15):

I tell my students all the time, when you can speak to somebody in their language, it's a sign of respect and it makes such a difference. I saw that over and over again. My policy was whatever country I go to, I try to learn the language, and I try and get command of the language, not just a couple of phrases, but being able to really communicate with people. I saw it just made an incredible difference.

(07:37):

I would have people tell me, "You're an American, you're from the most powerful country in the world. English is the most widely spoken language in the world, the language of business, and yet you took the time to learn Uzbek. Why?" I said, "Because I want to learn about your culture." And people just appreciated that, and it made the experiences so much more fun.

Veronica Bryant (07:57):

Glenn, you've mentioned knowing Uzbek, you mentioned knowing Russian, and having learned French. Did you ever get to become close to fluent in French?

Glenn Corn (08:08):

In fact, no, I never mastered French. I learned German early on in my career. Then from Turkish, other Turkic languages, so Azeri and Uzbek, I learned those languages. I was pretty competent in both languages. I had a pretty good command of all three of those languages. You mentioned Russian. At one point, I had to learn Serbo-Croatian in the early '90s during the Balkans War.

(08:30):

When I was in Pakistan, I started studying Urdu. Because I served in the Middle East, I learned Arabic, and that actually is a beautiful language. I mean, all the languages are fun. Something about Arabic though is just really very intriguing language.

Veronica Bryant (08:43):

Do you know what exactly about it?

Glenn Corn (08:45):

Just it's challenging, and it's beautiful, and maybe just the association with where I was in the Middle East, and the smells, and the food, the texture of everything, the art, poetry. I have a master's degree and a bachelor's degree in Russian language and literature. I read Dr. Zhivago in English when I was a student. I said, "My goal is I'm going to read this book in Russian."

(09:09):

When I was at the point where I could read it in Russian, it was just an incredible experience. I remember I did it on a weekend. My wife was working all weekend, and I just sat in our house reading by the fireplace and I was blown away. When you read it in English, it's one thing. But when I read it in Russia, it was like every line with poem and it just flowed into the next line.

(09:28):

Then you have one of these moments, you regret that you've finished it because you may never have that experience again.

Veronica Bryant (09:35):

The level of language knowledge that you seem to be saying has been really valuable to you in your career. I think it's pretty safe to say it would have to be pretty high to be intermediate out of bare minimum.

Glenn Corn (09:47):

Yeah, I mean, advanced intermediate. In the U.S. government, we have the zero to five. I would say four. Four should be everybody's goal, minimum.

Veronica Bryant (09:59):

I'm on board with that. ACTA says that for colleges, most students in their general education programs, that they have to teach students at a minimum, a basic intermediate level. Even that level is only provided in the general education programs at 11% of four-year arts and sciences degree programs, which is pretty crazy to think about.

Glenn Corn (10:22):

Yeah. It's always amazing to me we are the most diverse country in the world, and yet I don't think that we're very well set foreign language-wise in the U.S. government. It just baffles me.

Veronica Bryant (10:35):

Absolutely. I think we've talked about before, there's this report that the Council on Foreign Relations prepared in 2020, and at that point they had said 15% of all language-designated positions overseas were vacant due to an ability to find qualified people, and that those that were filled, of those 24% were filled with officers that they considered have insufficient training in languages. That kind of matches your sense of what things might be like?

Glenn Corn (11:06):

Yeah, I'm pretty critical of the way that the U.S. government handles language trading. We talk about diversity, but my position always was we need linguistic diversity, cultural diversity. Again, we have an incredibly diverse country. I live in Washington, DC. I can walk down the street and hear six different languages in any given day, but we're not attracting or we're not getting those people into government positions for various reasons.

Veronica Bryant (11:31):

If I could refer back to the stat about college-educated people, you'd think those would be the people that would get language training, at least at a very basic level and then start to get interested in joining the government to pursue it further. If those people aren't getting that base level to start piquing their interest, it's pretty hard for them to go farther.

(11:50):

That lack of language knowledge being said, why couldn't these officers that don't have sufficient training, why couldn't these people that are hiring for these positions that are empty just take somebody and that person could use Google Translate on his phone, or ChatGPT to fill out documents that might need to be translated and then use a local interpreter? Why couldn't they do that? What's the value in having U.S. citizens with the language training?

Glenn Corn (12:16):

Well, in terms of the technology, you can do some things with technology, but I think that's not practical for a number of reasons and depends on what type of work you're doing overseas. I won't go too far into that, but I would never count on technology alone. Of course, the people you're meeting with, as I said before, if you speak their language, that's completely different than speaking through a translator.

(12:39):

Then when you're using a translator, you lose a lot in terms of the personal connection because now you're going through somebody else. By the way, I've translated, I interpreted in my career for people, and sometimes interpreters put their own spin on things, or they lose the nuance. It's a very difficult job. And so, the interpersonal connection is completely different.

(13:00):

I used to tell my officers all the time, it's much better for you to be able to speak directly and one-on-one with somebody instead of having to go through somebody. After 9/11, I saw a lot of great Americans who came to work for the intelligence community and for the military as linguists. I don't want to denigrate them because they took great risks and they were side-by-side with the U.S. Forces, and they did a lot of great things. But I think the linguists that worked for me knew my view on this: I'd rather be able to do it myself.

(13:27):

Then the last thing is you never want to be completely reliant on another human being. You want to be able, in a crisis, to be able to communicate effectively in the local language.

Veronica Bryant (13:36):

Certainly. Even less so want to be reliant on wifi or something.

Glenn Corn (13:40):

That's right. Google Chat or something like that, it's all dependent on the internet. It's all the technology, the computer, the phone. If Murphy hits, and Murphy often strikes, when you really need the language, if you can't communicate, it's a big problem. And the device is not working or malfunctioning.

Veronica Bryant (13:58):

Absolutely. Can you think of a specific anecdote where knowing the language was beneficial, maybe not to an operation strategically if you don't want to disclose specific details, but one positive story about language knowledge of an individual?

Glenn Corn (14:13):

Well, I worked in some places where our relationships with the host government were not great. With the officials you have to deal with, the relationships were not great, but when they met somebody who spoke their language, it made a big difference and you were able to connect at a different level, and things got a little bit better.

(14:32):

Sometimes people who in one set of circumstance would never go out of their way to help somebody on the U.S. side might feel more inclined to tell you, "Okay, hey, by the way, this is going wrong, or your guy is going to do this. It's going to cause a big problem, so we're giving you a heads-up. You can protect U.S. government equity." Let's be honest too, a lot of times it was in my profession. I worked for the CIA. We were about collecting information. That's our main mission, stealing secrets.

(15:04):

We would have people say, "I trust I can tell you this because you're going to understand what I'm saying, and I'm going to share this with you," and it would be very valuable. There were cases where even when I was a younger officer, senior people in the government would hear me speak language and they'd be like, "Wow." You just develop a relationship with someone much more senior than you just because they felt comfortable communicating, and they were almost in fascination like, "How did you learn this language?"

(15:33):

I know it's all very general, but I have a lot of specific cases I probably can't go into. I was working in one country, and I took my kids camping one weekend with another family from Norway. We stopped in this field and we just set up our camp stuff, and there were some shepherds in the field. They came by and they stood at the edge of the camp. So I went up to them and started to speak to them in their language, and they looked at me like I was from out of space. They couldn't understand.

(16:00):

It was really interesting. Then they disappeared, and next thing, 200 people from the village came to the camp and then the local Imam came and he said, "Oh, come with me. You speak this language, come." They took my sons and I to the village and they had food and local music. They were just super proud and they were super excited that they could speak, we could communicate. They wanted to know why I spoke their language, and what we thought about the country.

(16:28):

They wanted to share their culture, and not a very wealthy place, but literally when they say they take their shirt off their back, they brought everything to the table, hospitality-wise. It was just a great experience.

Veronica Bryant (16:39):

How beautiful. It's cultural diplomacy at its height, really. I was a Fulbright fellow, and probably the main purpose that we were given for the program was being cultural ambassadors. We were required to know a certain level of, in my case, Spanish to participate, I think in large part because you could engage with people at that deeper level that is more meaningful in the end.

Glenn Corn (17:06):

Yeah. The other thing about language, if you understand you are in a foreign language and you can exchange jokes with people or make silly comments, it is just a huge icebreaker.

Veronica Bryant (17:15):

Absolutely. I'm sure, especially in tense situations. I heard this anecdote in researching the report on foreign language education, and I think they couldn't disclose the country in question, but about an American delegation from an unnamed diplomatic mission in Africa that went to speak with people at the embassy, I think, of the country.

(17:38):

We came there knowing French, which was a language which that country people are pretty fluent generally, but it's not their native language in many cases. We had a 30-minute interview with them, and then the Chinese delegation came and they had prepared officers who had known the local African language. They got a two-hour plus hearing with that same diplomatic mission.

(18:02):

I'm sure that the level of work that was able to be done in that case was much deeper with the Chinese than it was with the Americans as a consequence of the sort of linguistic nuance that they were able to bring to the table.

Glenn Corn (18:16):

Yeah. I just can't stress enough, one, how much more fun it makes your life, and two, how much more educational it is. Sometimes when I say educational, if you're a U.S. diplomat, one of your jobs is to understand what's going on in the country where you're working, and to understand not just what's happening on the surface, but the undercurrents, and having the language, that capability, it allows you to do that.

Veronica Bryant (18:40):

What would you say the stakes are at this point, or at any point, learning languages or lack of learning languages in American's national security interests?

Glenn Corn (18:51):

I'm a member of a organization called the Diplomatic Studies Foundation. It's a nonprofit that we're trying to help the U.S. Foreign Affairs community do their job and maybe do it a little bit better because there were three ambassadors that created it, and they all came to the conclusion that our diplomacy was failing. They came to that conclusion because one of them is a member of the Special Operations Fund Board.

(19:11):

He said, "I got tired of meeting widows and children without parents because they died in combat and we're using force to resolve issues that in some cases we should have probably been able to solve diplomatically." That's not always the case, but we need to do a better job diplomatically. I personally believe one of the ways that we need to do that is through language. Our inability to communicate with people in their languages is a problem.

(19:34):

Even if it's 10% of the solution, that's a really important 10%. I got to give the CIA credit. They had a lot of programs for language. They had incentives. We had a director. She was a great linguist. She's really invested in learning language. She was an inspiration for me when I was a young officer. I really admired seeing her even when she was in a senior level studying a foreign language, using the foreign language.

(19:57):

What I saw over time is a lot of the officers didn't really take it seriously. The government's paying them to go study a language, and they just don't put 110% or 100% into it. That was a little disappointing. Then what I also saw is people study a language and they go overseas, they don't really use it because it's not

comfortable. It's comfortable to speak with other Americans or speak with people that work in the embassy who speak English, or have them go do stuff for you.

(20:23):

You're out of your comfort zone. In a lot of the places I've served, it's very foreign culture. Some people just do the language, but then they don't want to go out and mix it up with the locals. I saw over time because of security considerations, because of terrorism, we started to isolate our diplomats from the local communities, which was also a tragedy because then you're not getting the opportunity to develop your language and you're not learning really what's going on, again, what the undercurrents are in the culture, in the country, in the politics.

(20:54):

This is my personal assessment. I have no data to back this up. This is what I saw over the years. I think that really hurt our diplomacy in a really bad way. By the time I retired, I told the ambassador where I was overseas. I said, "Did you have a problem because we have this beautiful embassy, but everything's on the compound. It's like a little resort, and a lot of your people don't want to get off the compound. And so, they're not exposed to what's going on outside the walls of this fortress."

(21:21):

Security's important, but I think we need to get in a little bit more of an expeditionary mindset again. United States, we used to be like pioneers, pilgrims.

Veronica Bryant (21:31):

Exactly. Yeah.

Glenn Corn (21:32):

And get out and just talk to people. Even in the most dangerous places where I worked, what I found is if you can talk to people, it really makes a big difference.

Veronica Bryant (21:42):

Makes a lot of sense. Hopefully we are able to gain the courage to engage with others linguistically, interpersonally in all the different ways.

Glenn Corn (21:52):

I always tell my students, there's a great book I recommend anybody who's interested in government service, and especially in the intelligence business, it's called The Good Spy. It's the story of Robert Ames, who was a CIA officer. He was an Arabist. When I read the book, it just struck me that he used to, on the weekends, instead of hanging out at the British club and drinking gin and tonics with all the English speakers, he would go off into the desert.

(22:15):

He was stationed in Yemen and he'd go hang out in the desert with the Bedouins. He'd practice his language, and he'd learn about the culture, and he learned about the different tribes. He did that wherever he went. He became so good that he ended up playing a key role in negotiations with a terrorist group really at the time, the PLO. He was so good, and you have to understand the way the CIA is, but he was an operator, but he was made the head of all analysis for the Near East because he had so much direct experience.

Veronica Bryant (22:46):

Wow.

Glenn Corn (22:47):

He died tragically in the Beirut embassy bombing. He was there on a visit. He had served multiple times in Lebanon, but he went back on a visit for work and that's when Hezbollah blew up the embassy. Tragic story. But his spirit, his ethos, I thought was inspiring. I tell young people, that's who you should want to be, who should aspire to be that person. Don't get a year or two years of language training, or six months, and then study French and then go to Paris and spend all your time in the embassy.

(23:16):

Go out and speak to people. Don't be afraid. Don't be ashamed. Don't be comfortable.

Veronica Bryant (23:21):

That's not the purpose of these jobs, I would think.

Glenn Corn (23:23):

Right. Yes.

Veronica Bryant (23:24):

And really, if you're striving for excellence in anything, you shouldn't be comfortable.

Glenn Corn (23:28):

Right.

Veronica Bryant (23:29):

How do you ever improve?

Glenn Corn (23:30):

We had some great officers that worked for me that had great skills, and they really invested, and they took it very, very seriously. Locals would tell me, "Oh, if I heard that person speaking and I didn't see her face, I'd think she's a local." I'd go back and tell that officer like, "You should be super proud."

Veronica Bryant (23:49):

Yes, that's quite the compliment in language land, and incredibly valuable, I'm sure, for cultural diplomacy and intel gathering.

Glenn Corn (23:58):

Robert Ames, not to be mixed up with Rick Ames, who was the guy that was a spy for the Russians.

Veronica Bryant (24:02):

No, he's the good spy.

Glenn Corn (24:03):

You don't want to be that guy, Robert Ames. I think the author of the book is Kai Bird, B-Y-R-D (sic).

Veronica Bryant (24:10):

Great recommendation. I'd love to check this one out. Thank you. Well, I think you've laid out some really good reasons for America to try to invest more in language education formally and informally. Do

you see any other solutions that the U.S. government can help to improve the situation? Or maybe it's not so obvious what we can do right now, but I think it is obvious that we need more language education.

Glenn Corn (24:37):

Right. I would say two things. One, you mentioned technology before. Technology has enabled us to communicate with anybody in real time in a foreign language or listen to a foreign language. I spend every night before I go to bed, I listen to YouTube videos and foreign languages, the news. When I was younger in the '80s studying Russian, for example, there was only one Russian language newspaper, and it only came out on the weekends and that was it.

(25:03):

Now you can get anything online, but they have all these different programs where you can sign up and do... You and I could be halfway around the world speaking Urdu, or Swahili, or Tagalog and having a language lesson. So remote language lesson. During COVID, a lot of people were doing that to fill up their time. Those opportunities, you longer have to actually be in the country to have some contact with the language, a lot of contact. You can watch it on TV, movies, radio stations. It's all out there. Take advantage of it. That's one.

(25:36):

Then the other thing is, again, this is my assessment, but the U.S. government has gone through a lot of downsizing in the last year, probably for good reason. In my opinion, because I think the government got too big, but it's going to have to start hiring again. The people that are doing the hiring, my suggestion would be, look, let's think about two things. One, diversity. When it comes to the foreign affairs community, the diversity, again, should be linguistic diversity, cultural diversity. And of course, intellectual diversity is super important.

(26:05):

You need people that can go to foreign countries and put themselves in the shoes of the locals to try and figure things out. You can't be an American all the time in your mentality. That's one. And so, you have to have that intellectual diversity. If you can hire somebody that has a foreign language or near-native language capability, then you save the government a lot of money from having to teach them another language. Usually, if you speak a hard language when you're a child, it's easier to learn other languages.

(26:33):

I think that's been demonstrated scientifically. I just think that we would probably have an opportunity. Then the last thing is when I first started working for the government in the late '80s, I got hired into a program through the Army called the Defense Fund and Language Area Studies Program. Congress had set up this program where they paid me... I was working full-time, so I was on the job training, but then they also paid me to study a language. They sent me to school at night, and they sent me overseas to a place called the U.S. Army Russian Institute and Garmisch Partner Group. They're no longer there, but it was a great experience.

(27:09):

That was all part of that program. And so, I don't know if that program still exists, but we should have programs like that because the idea was get people to real proficiency in a language. I had to speak Russian at a certain level before they would accept me into the program, but they saw I had a very good base and then they gave me the opportunity to build on that base. We should be doing that. If we're not doing it, we should start doing it again. I think that was a product of the Cold War.

(27:35):

Maybe we got out of this habit after the end of the Cold War, but we should think about it again.

Veronica Bryant (27:40):

I know after 9/11, we did try to beef up some of that same type of programming for the Middle Eastern languages you mentioned earlier, some of which you learned. But yes, I think there was some downsizing the last year, and one can hope that that will be reversed in prudent ways that are strategic for U.S. national interests.

Glenn Corn (27:58):

Now for the young people listening, if you get into a program like that, if the government pays you to study a language, then you got to serve the country for a while. Because I saw this trend too where people would come in, they'd get a language, and they'd want to leave and they go work somewhere else. You got to give back to the country.

Veronica Bryant (28:14):

Other countries have an obligation. I think if you're trained by the government [French 00:28:18] in France, you have to stay in government service for a number of years, kind of like the military contracts. We're a more voluntary country. People should opt into it.

Glenn Corn (28:30):

It shouldn't be indentured servantry. When you get language training in the government, you do have an obligation for a year of service afterwards. What I'm saying is stay in it for 10 years because the American taxpayers are funding that, and they're expecting you to go overseas and use it, not just to get it and go overseas, and then sit in an embassy, or hang out with Americans on the weekend, or Canadians, and there's nothing wrong with the Canadians, but just get out of your comfort zone. That's my advice.

Veronica Bryant (28:57):

That's great. I think we can end there.

Glenn Corn (28:59):

Okay.

Veronica Bryant (29:00):

Thank you so much, Glenn, for your time today, and your insights.

Glenn Corn (29:01):

Thank you.

Doug Sprei (29:21):

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(29:45):

I'm Doug Sprei. Thanks for listening. Stay safe, take care of yourselves, and we'll share more episodes with you soon.