

# Don't shortchange Swahili

By Patrick O'Meara

Drastic cuts in federal funding for foreign language and area studies have been proposed by the Reagan administration for 1983. These cuts will severely curtail teaching, research, and outreach activities and ultimately will hamper our understanding and interaction with foreign countries and thus gravely affect the US national interest.

At universities throughout the US international specialists on the languages, cultures, and politics of nearly every part of the world are a vital, if little known, national resource. For example, at Indiana University, in the heart of the Midwest, there are centers for the study of Africa, Inner Asia, East Asia, the Soviet Union, and Western Europe. They enlist well-known specialists on such subjects as history and politics as well as linguists who teach Chinese, Japanese, Swahili, Tibetan, Quechua.

This is only a small part of a vital and rich national resource. At other national resource centers, in part funded by the US government through Title VI of the Higher Education Act of 1965, international experts teach and publish and are relied upon by businesses, government, and industries for a continual flow of information and data. The centers not only inform decisionmakers at national and international levels but at the local level. They provide a window-to-the-world for thousands of Americans who might otherwise be untouched by events and cultures outside of the US. These centers have educated (and must continue to educate) generations of specialists who in turn go out to teach at high schools, universities, and community colleges, or who are employed in business and government.

The strategic importance to US national security of independent researchers who openly and freely write and debate sensitive international social and political issues cannot be overestimated. Prominent academics in the centers, who are aware of the political subtleties and intricacies of remote lands, are frequently called upon to testify before Congress or consult with the State Department. Their publications often directly and indirectly influence foreign policy or play a formative role in the views expressed in the mass media.

While the universities have invested heavily in these national resource centers, the driving force for them has come from federal funding, first under the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and subsequently under its successor, the Higher Education Act. The federal government provides on average 10 percent of the funding for the centers, which are selected in competition every two years. The remaining 90 percent is contributed by the universities themselves.

But this 10 percent is crucial. It provides for travel, the development of area studies courses, and support for language instruction. Above all, it legitimates the prominence and significance of the centers within their home universities and makes the difference between innovation and mere holding operations. Curtailment of federal funding could lead to the dismantling of 25 years of building and consolidation.

It is surprising that these centers are now threatened by proposed cuts in the 1983 federal budget. The administration has failed to realize that what the centers do is ultimately as important to the national interest and world peace as increases in the nuclear armory. In 1979 the President's Commission on Foreign Language and Area Studies considered that a minimum national need for foreign language and area studies was \$75 million and in 1980 Congress authorized \$30 million.

For 1983 the Reagan administration has requested \$8.8 million. This will reduce the 90 national resource centers to 40, eliminate 370 fellowships for graduate students, reduce Fulbright Faculty Research Abroad grants from 130 to 90, totally eliminate all 45 undergraduate language and international studies awards, and reduce Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad fellowships from 130 to 60.

As the US moves toward the end of the 20th century, it should be widening its understanding of global interaction and interdependence. It should be concerned with the growth and development of the third world, with international trade, with mutual coexistence; above all, it should be exploring the causes and resolution of international conflict. The national resource centers have played a small but pivotal role in fostering constructive international engagement.

Congress will soon have an opportunity to restore funding for these crucial centers. Let us hope that it will have the wisdom and foresight to do so.

*Patrick O'Meara is director of the African Studies Program and professor of political science at Indiana University.*