

WHY FLETCHER CANNOT REST ON ITS LAURELS

THEODORE L. ELIOT, JR.

The interest and involvement of the United States in international matters have always been sporadic and often amateurish. We concentrated for our first hundred years on conquering the West. Immigrants turned their backs on the nations they had fled. Until forced by events, we stayed out of European wars. We established a professional diplomatic service only in 1924. Our first graduate school of international relations — The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy — was founded only in 1933. Senior foreign policy officials in Washington and abroad are often lacking in experience and aptitude. Except for occasional spurts, such as after Sputnik in 1957, foreign language and international affairs receive little attention at any level of our educational system. Our ignorance of history has led to major mistakes in places like Vietnam, Iran and Central America. Our attention span is brief and media-manipulated: who remembers the names of the Iranian hostages or why the Marines went into Lebanon in 1982? And, finally, in the midst of all this confusion and ignorance, we search for panaceas — weapons freezes, summit meetings, “national peace academies” — as though the business of international relations didn’t require long hard work, professionalism and expertise.

Some of the problems above were illustrated for me in the 1960s when my then chief at the American Embassy in Tehran, Ambassador Julius C. Holmes, a real pro if there ever was one, exclaimed on hearing that an admiral had been named U.S. Ambassador to Portugal: “When I retire, I think I’d like to be an admiral.” The admiral in question got his ambassadorship because his Washington superiors wanted to exile him from the Pentagon. Ambassador Holmes was never made an admiral.

This state of affairs exists even now, when American involvement in international affairs and dependence on other nations have never been greater and are steadily growing. By almost any indicator — financial, trade, strategic — it is crystal clear that our nation’s future depends on our ability to protect and promote our interests in the international arena. In short, we cannot afford confusion and ignorance.

Theodore L. Eliot, Jr. is Dean of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, administered in cooperation with Harvard University. Prior to coming to Fletcher Dean Eliot reached ambassadorial rank in the United States Foreign Service.

Concern about this elementary fact is shared by many of our leading citizens. Government, business and educational leaders have published numerous reports in recent years which sound the clarion call for more foreign language and international education in the United States from the primary school level through graduate school. Yet little has been done. Government support, largely through Title VI of the Higher Education Act, has not kept pace with inflation. Major foundations like Rockefeller and Ford support their staffs' pet projects and neglect the core academic programs: teaching and student aid. Corporate support has been rising, but is still far short of putting money where corporate leaders' mouths are.

I do not think federal government support is the only answer. Too often it comes with onerous regulations, and it is subject to annual appropriations. But it should be increased. Two years ago in testimony at a joint hearing of the House Committees on Foreign Affairs and Education and Labor, where I opposed a National Peace Academy, I called for the establishment of a National Endowment for Peace and Conflict Resolution. In his annual report for 1982-83, President Michael I. Sovern of Columbia University has called for a National Endowment for International Studies. These recommendations are efforts to stimulate new federal support for international education (and I like President Sovern's suggested name better than mine). This new National Endowment would take its place alongside the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities and the National Science Foundation. Its need is clear, and its establishment overdue. Its activities should be supplemented by the major private foundations and international corporations.

The founders of The Fletcher School were farsighted. They made a remarkably significant and lasting contribution. In the fifty years since its founding, the School has done its job outstandingly well. Through its graduates and its faculty it has become one of the most important centers of international education and a leader in every aspect of international relations.

The next fifty years will be a lot more demanding. The margins for error have been reduced along with the availability of resources. Fletcher must not only look to the continuance of its own excellence but must join others in publicizing the need and supporting the idea of education of international affairs professionals.