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## DOES A PRESIDENT'S ABILITY TO SPEAK A SECOND LANGUAGE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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Few U.S. presidents have had second language skills. Does it matter? Beyond appealing to the Hispanic vote in the 2008 elections, is a second language important to our global leadership and competitiveness?

Thomas Jefferson, onetime envoy to France, spoke French well. Did his language skill and understanding of the French people help in negotiating the Louisiana Purchase? We may never know; but since Jefferson no U.S. president has had a command of a second language.

Jimmy Carter, who as Georgia's governor supported Partners of the Americas programs between Georgia and Costa Rica, spoke limited Spanish. Ronald Reagan was fond of saying "*Mi casa es su casa*," and named his home "*Rancho del Cielo*" (Ranch in the Sky). But he did not speak Spanish. Bill Clinton connected easily with people around the world, sometimes uttering a word or two of Spanish or another language, but he spoke only English.

George W. Bush, raised among Hispanic workers in west Texas oilfields, has convinced some who know no better that he can communicate in Spanish; but after the pleasantries – as his recent Latin American tour illustrated – he is sorely limited.

Enter Bill Richardson, an honest-to-goodness Hispanic candidate for the Democratic nomination for president. With a Mexican mother and a U.S. father who was born in Nicaragua, Richardson was born in Pasadena, Calif., but spent much of his youth in Mexico City with his family. He speaks Spanish and speaks it well.

A second announced candidate in the Democratic primary, Sen. Chris Dodd of Connecticut, a former Peace Corps volunteer, speaks Spanish fairly well.

The question, again, is does it matter?

Richardson says it does. Biculturalism, he believes, is an attribute that enables him to penetrate others' psyches, to appreciate others' values and perceptions. Four times nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, he has negotiated the release of prisoners and confronted "Axis of Evil" bad guys "up close and personal." Early this year he negotiated a cease fire in the Sudan that allowed people in Darfur to obtain help.

He did not speak Spanish in Korea, Iraq, Syria, Darfur and other places. But with a combination of bonhomie and steely resolve, he has shown an unparalleled ability to engage tyrants and autocrats and work the will of humanity. He was an extraordinarily effective ambassador to the United Nations, crediting his biculturalism with the ability to cross political and linguistic barriers.

Richardson is a big, slightly overweight, self-deprecating, back-slapping, hand-shaking, joke-making kind of guy who relates to people of any station. He can work a room like nobody's business, connecting with everyone from waiters to

prime ministers. But behind the smile and the warm embraces is a man who communicates effectively across cultures.

A few years ago, Richardson negotiated the release of Cuban political prisoners. At first cold and distant, Castro warmed to him as they discussed baseball. "Baseball diplomacy," as Richardson calls it, facilitated communication. He found a way – quite beyond his language skills.

Given an increasingly complex and shrinking world, will skill in engaging foreign leaders be recognized as an important attribute for a 21<sup>st</sup> century president? And can cross-cultural communications be useful within our own increasingly multicultural society? Will language and culture be factors in debates and in the minds of voters?

Bill Richardson is just beginning to get the attention his résumé merits. A Sunday morning talk show pundit predicted recently – a sign of the times – that debates on Spanish language television are going to be part of this election. That may be good for the Hispanic vote, but the United States needs to communicate well internationally to earn the respect of leaders and people around the world. The skills Governor Richardson offers should be taken seriously.

*(Frank Gómez is a retired career Foreign Service Officer and former adjunct professor of international relations at New York University.)*

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