This article appeared in The American Legion *magazine and is reprinted with permission from Vol. 136, No. 2, February 1994.*

The Campaign Against English

By Gary Turbak

On July 2 last year, 76 Hispanic immigrants gathered in Tucson, Arizona city council chambers to become naturalized Americans. Although the brief citizenship oaths and naturalization documents were in English, most of the ceremony took place in Spanish — including the pledge of allegiance, a message from U.S. District Judge Alfredo Marquez and a welcome from the Daughters of the American Revolution.

In essence, these immigrants received their U.S. citizenship in Spanish, the first ever to do so.

"This is multiculturalism run amok," says George Tryfiates, executive director of the English First advocacy group, and the son of Greek immigrants. "Will the Immigration and Naturalization Service now conduct ceremonies in Farsi, Serbo-Croatian and Laotian, too?"

The Tucson incident is but one shot in an ongoing fight over the primacy of English in this country. In schools, government offices, voting booths and scores of other places, English in America is rapidly giving ground to other tongues. Inexorably, foreign languages find new ways to replace the mother tongue that gave us the Constitution, Declaration of Independence and [the] Gettysburg Address.

English has long been the glue holding multicultural America together, but now that unity is threatened. Daily, the battle to keep English as America's language becomes more heated.

"America is fast becoming a society divided by language." says Representative Toby Roth of Wisconsin, chief sponsor of a bill to make English the official language of the United States. Although 14 other nations — from India to Uganda to Vanuatu — have declared English their official language, the United States has never done so.

Naturally, some Americans who speak other languages see things differently. They believe the American government should speak in a multitude of tongues. To their ears, the mingling of languages creates a symphony, not a cacophony. America, they say, is not a homogeneous melting pot, but rather a salad bowl, where each ingredient should retain its distinctive qualities.

"Ethnic communities and their languages and cultures add something unique and very positive to the flavor of the United States," says Steven Carbo, spokesman for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF). "We should promote multilingual policies, not English-only policies."

The United States has always been a land of immigrants. Most learned English in a "sink-or-swim" acceptance of their new home's mother tongue. That attitude still prevails, but many modern newcomers — or at least some of their vocal leaders — believe America should adapt to them instead of the other way around.

This may explain why there are growing numbers of foreign-speaking families in the United States. According to the 1990 census, the number of people living in America who speak a language other than English in their homes jumped more than a third during the 1980s — to nearly 32 million, or one out of eight U.S. residents. America is home to at least 150 different tongues.

The erosion of English is most apparent in America's public schools since the 1960s, when the federal Bilingual Education Act directed millions of children to be taught in other languages — mostly Spanish.

Theoretically, children with limited English proficiency (LEP) will be better students if they study science, math and other subjects in their native languages while learning English on the side. After a year or two, they are supposed to switch to an all-English curriculum.

The only problem with bilingual education is that it is generally considered a failure. The program "is a flop at what we have asked it to do — teach students English," say Congressman Roth.

LEP students often remain in native language classes for several years, and some never do learn English. According to the English First organization, it's possible for a teenager to graduate from a public high school in New York City without ever gaining English fluency.

Before the bilingual program started, half of all Hispanic students dropped out of high school. Today, after 25 years of bilingual education, a report by the American Council on Education says the Hispanic dropout rate is still 50 percent — a rate much higher than for either whites or blacks. Recently, *The Boston Globe* reported that the Hispanic dropout rate in that city is actually higher for students in the bilingual program than for those who don't participate in it.

In California, a 1993 report by the Little Hoover Commission called bilingual education "divisive, wasteful, and unproductive." The commission said the number of non-English speaking students in the state today has doubled to more than a million since 1987.

However, the commission said the bilingual program annually turns out the same number of fluent English speakers — 60,000 — as it did a decade ago.

Christine Rossell, professor of political science at Boston University, has evaluated 79 different studies of bilingual education's effectiveness. None of these, she says, found bilingual education to be any better than the sink-or-swim method of immersing children in English.

According to the LEAD (Learning English Advocates Drive) organization, some schools even put children into bilingual classrooms solely on the basis of their Hispanic- or Asian-sounding last names — regardless of the youngsters' English skills. One Hispanic mother in Glenwood, California, made five trips to her school before she got her English-speaking daughter out of a class taught in Spanish.

The program even angers parents it is supposed to please. In the book, *Straight Shooting*, by Boston University President John Silber, Texas ranch foreman Ernesto Ortiz expresses his dismay: "My children learn Spanish in school so they can grow up to be busboys and waiters," he says. "I teach them English at home so they can grow up and be doctors and lawyers."

In one Florida poll, 98 percent of Hispanic parents thought it was important for their children to read and write English "perfectly." In another, Hispanic parents rated 70 items of importance to their children's education. Teaching them English ranked third, and teaching Spanish ranked 67th.

Critics say bilingual education continues only because it enjoys an entrenched constituency of bureaucrats, administrators, teachers, ethnic activists and other adults who benefit from it. The program provides jobs for bilingual teachers, and each enrolled child nets the school about $400 in federal funds. Nationally, bilingual education costs taxpayers an estimated $1.5 billion annually.

"I call it bilingualgate," says Sally Peterson, a long-time California teacher who is the president of LEAD.

English is in retreat on other fronts, too. A federal law requires election ballots and other voter information to be printed in languages spoken either by 10,000 people or by 5 percent of the population in a voting jurisdiction.

Currently, 375 jurisdictions in 21 states run elections in English and at least one other language. Voting materials in San Francisco are available in seven languages. In Los Angeles, the $6 million cost of the 1993 city election included $900,000 — 15 percent of the total — for printing multilingual materials. When Long Beach, California spent $6,200 preparing bilingual voting materials for four ballot measures, officials received only 22 requests for the publications — a cost of $281 per non-English voter.

Federal statutes also require government-funded document translations and courtroom interpreters for non English-speaking defendants in criminal trials. Some jurisdictions extend this service to civil cases.

Hawaii and New Mexico have even granted official status to Hawaiian and Spanish. Although unenforced, New Mexico has a constitutional requirement that all the state's teachers be fluent in Spanish and English.

Nearly 40 states give written and sometimes behind-the-wheel driver's license exams in languages other than English. Michigan offers its written test in 20 tongues, including Arabic, Finnish and Portuguese and, if necessary, will provide an interpreter for the actual driving exam. Its road signs, of course, are not written in 20 different languages.

Nationally, the GED high school equivalency test is available in English, Spanish, and French, and plans are underway to add more languages. Some American colleges also conduct classes for non-English speakers.

California state agencies must accommodate speakers of other languages — even by hiring bilingual employees, if necessary. Depending on the linguistic preferences of local populations, printed information about food stamps, workers' compensation, taxes and other subjects in California must be available in English, Spanish, Vietnamese and other tongues.

In 1988, Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis even delivered part of his acceptance speech in Spanish.

Although most Americans probably don't care what language people speak in their homes and other private places, it is difficult not to notice the changing tenor of the marketplace. Everything from Burger King menus to the phone book Yellow Pages have been printed in languages other than English, and many retailers advertise in their primary tongue.

In Arizona, Connecticut, Illinois, Colorado, California and several other states, radio and television stations broadcast primarily or exclusively in Polish, Greek, German, American Indian, Portuguese and other languages. There are nearly 350 Spanish radio stations in this country. The Los Angeles Dodgers broadcast their games in Spanish, Korean, Chinese and — yes — English.

In the workplace, more and more employees are demanding the right to speak — and be spoken to — in their native tongues. Last year, the Nebraska legislature considered a bill to require every employer with four or more non-English-speaking workers to provide a translator. The bill was tabled.

Jose Fabilia, the son of Mexican immigrants, disagrees with this approach. His California food company employs 103 people. "You don't have to speak English to work for me," he says. "But if you want to be a salesman, front office worker, route supervisor or a driver on our best routes, you have to know English. If I did not speak English, my business would not be as prosperous as it is."

If there is an epicenter to the language earthquake, it is Miami and Dade County, Florida, where more than half the people consider Spanish their first language.

In 1973, the area's governing body — the Metro Commission — ruled that Dade County would henceforth be bilingual and bicultural. Translators annually turned thousands of pages of English public documents in Spanish and vice versa. Interpreters' voices echoed at meetings and conferences. Radio stations even aired Spanish public service announcements — prepared at taxpayer expense — encouraging better use of Spanish by Miamians.

In 1980, Emmy Shafer, an immigrant and survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, became upset with Miami's extensive use of Spanish. She organized a drive to reinstate English as the only official language, and Dade County voters approved the measure with a 59 percent majority.

But that's not the end of the story. In May 1993, a Hispanic-dominated Metro Commission threw out the 1980 English-only ordinance, returning Dade county to bilingualism. One commissioner has even proposed that many government services be provided in up to six additional languages.

The increasing use of other tongues has triggered a substantial backlash among Americans who think English should be *the* language of the United States. Various polls indicate that more than three-fourths of all Americans believe English should be the official language of government and anyone who wants to live in this country should learn English.

Eighteen states have made English their official language, and 20 others have considered similar measures. In 1987, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton signed into law a statute making English the state's official language. In most cases, however, these designations are largely ceremonial, since official English laws often lack enforcement teeth, and bureaucrats seem universally reluctant to implement English-only policies.

H.R. 739, a bill currently under consideration in Congress, would make English the nation's official language. In addition to requiring that all business of the federal government be conducted in English, the measure would repeal statutes that mandate bilingual education and multilingual ballots. A House-Senate proposal, H.J. Res. 171, would amend the Constitution to make English America's official language.

English proponents hope that Congress will at long last heed the advice of President Theodore Roosevelt when he wrote in 1917, "We have but one flag. We must also have but one language, and that language is English." ■