

Toward Language Sanity

Proposed federal legislation in plain English

by Don Feder

Late in July, federal legislation to make English our official language was approved by a House committee. A floor vote could come as early as Thursday. [The House voted approval on August 1st.]

While the move is supported by 82 percent of voters, not everyone is delighted. The bill is "built on bias and bigotry," raged Rep. Matthew Martinez, D-Calif.

Really? Is Mexico xenophobic for making Spanish its official language? Or is America to be the only country without national pride, content to see its culture dissolve into nothingness?

"What binds us together in this country is our freedoms and ideals," declaimed Rep. Gene Green, D-Texas. "It's more than language that makes us Americans."

Still, if we can't talk to each other about these fine sentiments, in terms of drawing us together, they count for little. Besides, it's unlikely that an immigrant could share our heritage and values without speaking our language.

Finally, opponents contend

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that the legislation is unnecessary. Why, 97 percent of our inhabitants already speak English well, they maintain. (The other three percent all operate convenience stores in metropolitan areas.)

This improbable statistic is derived from unverified Census Bureau data. A respondent is asked: "Do you speak English well?" "Oh, si!" One more American is counted among the great English orators of all time.

If the overwhelming majority who reside here are so fluent in our native tongue, why are we spending \$8 billion annually to provide two million students with bilingual education?

Why does the federal government require the printing of ballots in everything from Chinese to Tongan in certain election districts?

And why do 40 states give drivers tests in foreign languages? In California, the exam is offered in 33 languages, including Assyrian, Hindi and Serbo-Croatian. Beware balkanized drivers!

America is becoming a lunatic asylum of linguistic chaos — which is just fine with a multicultural wrecking crew that despises everything which smacks of European culture, especially English.

Each year, over one million immigrants come here, legally and illegally. We are told that efforts to control our borders are cruel and chauvinistic. Is it, then, too much to ask that immigrants learn to speak our common tongue?

The legislation at issue (the English Language Empowerment Act) is modest. Its "bias and bigotry" consist exclusively in requiring that government business be conducted in the

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language of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the language in which the president takes his oath of office and in which congressional debates are conducted.

If the current situation wasn't bad enough, the future bodes ill.

In 1994, the IRS printed half a million tax forms in Spanish. In 1993, the INS conducted a *citizenship* ceremony mostly in Spanish.

Between 1990 and 1994, the Government Printing Office produced 265 different foreign-language publications. The U.S. Postal Service has printed over one million brochures to help

clerks communicate with customers in nine languages. (That three percent of the population which doesn't speak English well really gets around.)

From here, there's a logical regression. If it's unfair to ask a new American to cast an English ballot, is it not equally oppressive to allow a monolingual political debate? Perhaps politicians should be required to set forth their agendas in several languages. Then Bill Clinton could lie to us in Laotian and Bob Dole could bore us in Arabic.

Rhode Island and Washington have officially declared themselves "multi-lingual states." Sen. John Breaux and Rep. John Hayes, both Louisiana Democrats, have introduced a constitutional amendment to guarantee "cultural rights" to all Americans. Presumably, these include the right to be coddled in the idiom of the old country.

As Theodore Roosevelt observed in the early years of this century, there can be no assimilation without language uniformity. "We have room for

but one language here and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns out our people as Americans ... and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house."

Designating English our official language is a baby step away from Babel. It's a move toward unity, or at least a nation in which we can discuss our differences instead of scowling at each other behind language barriers that could easily become roadblocks and checkpoints. □

Seeking Unity in Diversity

Bilingualism promotes separation

by Rolando Flores Acosta

MADRID
After House approval this month, the English Empowerment Act of 1996 awaits a Senate vote on a similar measure in September. [The Senate has adjourned without acting on the measure.] The bill, which would require the federal government to conduct most of its business only in English, has been consistently rejected by the civil rights lobby and openly criticized by academics and supporters of Spanish. Yet its provisions have

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already been adopted separately by 23 states, and seven other states are in the final stages of legislative debate on the subject.

Mr. Clinton supported a similar measure back in 1987 as governor of Arkansas, but if one passes Congress this fall he will most likely decide to veto it. He fears not that it would divide the nation, but that immigrants and Spanish culture supporters would respond negatively ahead of the coming elections.

Yet to reject this bill before weighing its advantages, as the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes has also done, is quite wrong. Mr. Fuentes has erred seriously, I believe, in describing it as racist, xenophobic and fascist. Spanish speakers should disregard such paternalism and the instinct to overprotect our

language. In the end, such attitudes can only harm those Hispanics they ostensibly seek to defend.

Of course, Spanish speakers all over the world should join constructive campaigns to promote our [Spanish] language. However, we cannot — and should not — see the English Empowerment Act as an anti-Spanish measure that seeks to discriminate against Hispanics or the Spanish language. Rather, this legislation would only help the Hispanic minority, and others, to integrate into American society.

To see why opposition to efforts like the English Empowerment Act leads to unworkable and ultimately discriminatory policies, consider the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Lau v. Nichols*. Ever

since 1974, it has required that each educational district offer classes and special programs for non-English-speaking students. Tiny schools all over America have therefore been forced to take on the enormous financial burden of hiring Spanish-speaking instructors, and of modifying their school programs to facilitate an easy transition for non-English speakers to the Anglo system. Similarly, in states with large numbers of Hispanics, unemployment offices and other public offices must follow strict quotas mandating Spanish-speaking staff to allow everyone access to government

are more Mexicans than in any city other than Mexico City, and more Koreans than any place in the world but Seoul. In one L.A. school district alone, teachers have to gather and instruct students from 80 different nationalities, just 13% of whom speak English as their first language.

The inescapable questions, then, are these: In how many different languages should classes be offered? And public services? Would we not be discriminating against other minorities if only one or two languages were on offer? Should government adapt to the multitude of new languages and ethnic groups? Or should the

bilingual education at schools has retarded, rather than expedited, the movement of Hispanics into the English-speaking world. Placing students in transitional bilingual classes, ostensibly to move them as quickly as possible into mainstream English classes, has instead promoted segregation. This de facto apartheid generates antagonism and separatism, which only serves to emphasize racial differences and animosity among different groups — including, all too frequently, deadly gang violence.

Misplaced concern with identity politics has also

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services, as well as to prevent any imaginable discrimination. Every form, document and item of official information must be available in Spanish as well as in English.

But can we ignore the fact that more than 300 languages are spoken today in the U.S.? In Los Angeles, for example, there

new generations of minorities and immigrants learn English in order to integrate fully into American society?

Before answering these questions, supporters of official bilingualism need to consider their past failures. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. explained in *The Disuniting of America* how

corrupted university campuses, so much so that now Hispanic and black professors have laid claim to the teaching of Hispanic or black history, respectively. It's easy to imagine how this will inevitably lead to the absurd conclusion that only Hispanics can teach Hispanic history, only blacks African-American history,

and only women women's history. No longer would students in America learn a sense of nation, of community, of *e pluribus unum*.

Wouldn't it be more advisable to seek unity in diversity, without dispersal, segregation or discrimination? Unity should not be seen as tantamount to rigid uniformity — which is rightly feared and rejected — but rather as an innate feature of American life, one that should exist in any pluralist society without the assistance of social engineers.

According to a document signed by the attorney general and the treasury, education and health secretaries recommending the presidential veto,

the English Empowerment Act will not only be discriminatory but difficult to implement in those states where many immigrants cannot read English.

That can only be seen as self-discrimination. The federal government would not be leaving out non-English speakers by not using their languages. Immigrants, on the contrary, would be the ones discriminating against themselves by not speaking English.

The only reasonable way to achieve the necessary compromise is to implement a unifying linguistic policy similar to that which has inspired the English Empowerment Act. This would be a law that would

enable minorities to protect their political and legal rights and represent their freedoms, as well as their social and labor rights.

America's long-standing multilingual tradition is a natural, spontaneous phenomenon, a private practice encouraged by the state and exercised freely by society, not an artificial creation imposed on citizens by politically correct bureaucrats. The study of our language, and of Hispanic culture generally, can and should be encouraged in a number of other ways. Yet to claim that every citizen has a right to communicate with the institutions of the state in his native language would only lead us back to the Tower of Babel. □

The Culture Clash in South Central L.A.

Urban Blacks witness takeover by newcomers

by Terry Anderson

Pro-immigrant groups say

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the jobs immigrants are taking are jobs that black Americans don't want. Why is it then, that when you go outside Southern California or Texas — to Phoenix, say, or Washington — you see black people holding the same jobs they used to hold here in Los Angeles? Black people want to work. But the jobs they used to have, paying \$5 to \$7 an hour for unskilled labor, now go to immigrants for \$3 an hour.

In the late 1970s, I used to sell parts to body shops, and I knew Americans who were making \$20 an hour repairing

dented fenders. Now 95 percent of South-Central L.A. body shop jobs are held by recent immigrants making \$7 or \$8 an hour. People claim these savings are passed on to the consumer, but in most cases the savings go in the shop owner's pocket. In the meantime, taxpayers are footing the bill for services to immigrants, including education, which costs an average \$5,000 a year per child in California.

Pro-immigrant groups avoid the subject of real jobs like those at body shops. They invariably bring up the question

“We have schools here that used to be 80 to 90 percent black and now ... are 80 to 90 percent Latino. As this trend spreads, blacks either can move to other neighborhoods or watch their children stuck in schools listening to Spanish all day.”

of who will pick the grapes if you stop immigration. It's true that Americans won't do that work for slave wages. If we tightened up the welfare system and paid Americans decent wages, those immigrants would not have to be brought in at all. There would be plenty of Americans who would either want those jobs or have to take them.

Today, teenagers can't get after-school or entry level jobs — something to put on a resume. When I was 16 and 17, I had jobs at McDonald's, Burger King, Jack in the Box. Now these jobs in L.A. are held by 30- or 40-year-old immigrants — 100 percent Spanish-speaking and probably 90 percent from Mexico.

We have schools here that used to be 80 to 90 percent black and now, after a period of 10 years, are 80 to 90 percent Latino. As this trend spreads, blacks either can move to other neighborhoods or watch their children stuck in schools listening to Spanish all day. Yet nobody speaks up for our children the way the pro-immigrant organizations do for

immigrant children. As a result, our children are getting the equivalent of half a day of school. Why should our children be deprived?

My two-bedroom house near the Coliseum is worth about \$100,000. A comparable house two doors away sold for \$135,000 and the buyers put five

immigrant families in it. A black family can't pay that and can't live like that. In the American culture, we have one family to a house. Each of my immigrant neighbors has seven or eight children, while we Americans have two or three. Before long, all these children are going to need a place of their own. Does a black homeowner have to put four families in the house and a fifth in the garage in order to survive? A for-sale sign in our neighborhood causes panic. We know who will get that house.

There will be 20 to 30 people living in it, they will keep goats, they will grow corn in the front yard, they will hang their wash on the front fence. It's a culture clash.

If you speak up, you're called a racist. I am an American; I happen to be black. Immigration is a problem for all Americans whether Latino, Asian, white or black. We are all adversely affected.

In a New Yorker magazine poll published last month, 58 percent of blacks surveyed say conditions for black Americans are getting worse, and 59 percent agree that the American dream has become impossible for most to achieve. This situation can only worsen with every passing day under our present immigration policy.

Immigration is not an issue of race; it's an issue of numbers, and they must be drastically reduced. The only way to accomplish this is through an immigration moratorium. □

Immigrant Crashes

Four people were killed and 27 hurt in two crashes of vans packed with people suspected of illegally entering the U.S. Border Patrol agents in Honey Springs, Calif., 20 miles north of the Mexican border, watched a van filled with at least 20 people run a stop sign, officials said. Agents let it go, citing no-pursuit rules intended to prevent fatal crashes. Still, the driver missed a turn 5 miles west, smashed into three parked cars and went through a window at a service station. One person was killed and twelve were hurt. Seven people were arrested.

Three people were killed and 15 hurt after the driver of their Chicago-bound van fell asleep at the wheel while driving near Blanding, Utah, 10 miles north of Arizona, police said. The driver said the occupants were Mexicans who illegally crossed the border and were en route to Chicago.

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