

National Language Has to Begin at the U.S. Borders

By Richard Estrada

As proof that the 1996 election is promoting the open discussion of issues that presidential hopefuls have in recent elections handled with tongs, Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, the GOP's leading presidential aspirant, has now staked out his position on the role of English in American society.

Though not in total command of his subject, Dole was right to speak out on a cluster of related social issues that fellow Republican presidential contenders Pat Buchanan and Pete Wilson in particular have also addressed, to one degree or another.

The remaining Republican contenders should step up to the plate and ignore those who counsel silence on these matters. Let's also hope President Clinton, the presumptive Democratic nominee, is carefully preparing his own views, as well.

This is what Dole told American Legion conventioners in Indianapolis on September 4: "Yes, schools should provide the language classes our immigrants and their families need, as long as their purpose is the teaching of English ... But we must stop the practice of multilingual education as a means of instilling ethnic pride, or as therapy for low self-esteem or out of elitist guilt over a culture built on the traditions of the West."

He continued: "With all the divisive forces tearing at our country, we need the glue of language to help hold us together. If we want to ensure that all our children have the same opportunities in life, alternative language education should stop and English should be acknowledged once and for all as the official language of the United States."

Dole is not wrong to favor making English the nation's official language, but neither is he altogether right. Why? Because it misses the point. Polls have found that newcomers understand the importance of learning English and are desirous of doing so.

Since 1970, nearly 23 million immigrants, legal and illegal, have entered the country. Seventy-five percent of them settle in a handful of urban areas in just six states, but those particular urban areas are America's largest: Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Miami and Houston chief among them.

Juxtapose such trends with an electorate that is frustrated not only with the fraying of the social fabric, but with being taxed for government assistance to immigrants, and you have a recipe for ethnic and racial tension.

In Miami today, where 60 percent of the population and 26 percent of Dade County's 330,000

schoolchildren are foreign-born, the total expenditures on behalf of immigrant students in the three school years leading up to and including the 1994-1995 school year was over \$938 million. Of that figure, nearly \$290 million was not reimbursed to the local school district by the federal or state government.

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— Bob Dole to the American Legion***

Such challenges would be greatly reduced by: ending illegal immigration at the borders, airports and work sites; eliminating unskilled labor categories from our legal immigration regime; rejecting new proposals by California fruit and vegetable growers to revive the agricultural guestworker program that ended in the mid-1960s; and establishing a meaningful English language requirement for those who are admitted specifically to work, either permanently or temporarily.

Public policy should also rigorously enforce labor standards and promote Americanization through public-private partnerships among government, businesses and education, partnerships that encourage the teaching of English, civics and U.S. history. Immigration can and has helped America, but the cumulative levels of immigration must be weighed against the authentic labor force needs of the country at any given time.

Certainly, that is not occurring at a time when the nation already has a surplus of low-skill workers that includes between 20 million and 40 million function-ally illiterate or subliterate adult workers. As for public budgets and immigration, listen to Dr. Henry Fraind of the Dade County public schools: "Either fund U.S. immigration policy, or change it."

Bob Dole's speech was not only about language, but also about various aspects of nationhood and the sovereign right of a democratic people to define the elements of their nationhood, none of which is more important than the glue of a common language.

But just as Dole deserves credit for noting that, he might also consider serving the national interest much more by offering genuine solutions that target not effects, but causes — that is, not language policy, but immigration policy. ■