

BARRIERS OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION

By the Editors of *American Legion Magazine*

Imagine a combat situation where an artillery strike is vital to your survival, but the soldier operating the 155mm howitzer doesn't understand English. Picture yourself as an employer. The applicant facing you can neither read nor speak English fluently. Would you hire him?

These scenarios may seem far-fetched, but unfortunately they underline a growing problem within the United States. "English is the key to economic opportunity in the United States," said Gary Sammons, Chairman of the Legion's Americanism Commission. "But our government does very little to encourage young immigrants to learn English. This tends to discourage them from entering the mainstream of American culture."

The American Legion has long been aware of this problem and has adopted a resolution addressing the situation. Res. 576, passed during the 1990 National Convention in Indianapolis, encourages legislation making English the official language for government in the United States.

Language barriers affect some regions more than others. Florida, Texas and California, where Spanish is commonly spoken, are especially aware of the problem. These states and others spend millions of dollars each year to hire bilingual teachers for their schools. The federal government has laws stating that ballots and other government documents must be printed in other languages, especially Spanish.

If the government demands that a school system hire bilingual teachers, why are children leaving school without the ability to communicate in the English language? "The problem is adult education," said sociologist Jim Boone, past Post Commander of Post 37 in McAllen, Texas. "Our teachers try to teach English to these young people, but when the student goes home, Spanish is spoken. It's a situation of 'this is the way my father spoke, and his father before him and you will speak this way, too.' The problem is, when that child leaves school to enter the job market, he or she won't be able to communicate. You can't develop much of a career if you can't communicate."

Another problem is the government's "Transitional Bilingual Education" program. The title is misleading. As the National Americanism Commission noted in Res. 576, foreign-born young people are not being taught English, but instead receive long-term education in their native languages, which may span from kindergarten through the high school years.

Citizens of Hispanic background are not the only

victims. Vietnamese refugees, Chinese and other ethnic groups face similar problems. But by far, the largest segment of the American population today battling language barriers are the Spanish-speaking groups.

"Adults are afraid their children will lose sight of their ethnic heritage," Boone said. "By refusing to communicate or learn English, they are forcing their children into a situation that will not allow them to compete effectively in the job market."

Oddly enough, though based on good intentions, the federal government may share the blame for the difficulties facing immigrant Americans. "Bilingual education funded by the U.S. Department of Education tends to provide long-term instruction in a student's native tongue, while English is either ignored or secondary," Sammons said. "Programs like this encourage separatism that can set the stage for discrimination. At the same time, it costs the taxpayers in many ways."

Presently, federal law mandates a certain number of minority citizens from every labor pool must be hired by companies and institutions. Thus, if a job applicant is hired simply on the basis of ethnic background, but does not understand English, quite often that worker is ineffective on his job. Often, a non-English-speaking person cannot find work because of the language barrier, and the taxpayer once again foots the bill through welfare programs.

The American Legion believes many of these problems could be overcome if English were made the official language. The Legion is not alone; 18 states have passed legislation recognizing English as the official language. ■