

# The History of U.S. Language Policy and Case for Official English

*[W]hen men cannot communicate their thoughts to each other, simply because of difference of language, all the similarity of their common human nature is of no avail to unite them in fellowship. – St. Augustine, The City of God, Book XIX, Chap. 7 circa 420 AD*

## Introduction and Historical Background

As St. Augustine's 5th century observation above illustrates, the critical role language plays as either a bridge or a barrier between peoples has been known for centuries. When Augustine was writing in the twilight days of the Western Roman Empire, Latin was the tongue that bound the Empire together and made Rome's rule over its vast collection of tribes and peoples possible.

The Western part of the Empire collapsed not long after St. Augustine's death. But thanks to the Roman Church's monopoly on education, the linguistic unity the Empire ushered in persisted throughout the Western Mediterranean and Europe for another thirteen hundred years through wars, migrations, plagues, and political upheavals, and well into the modern era. Until Francis Hutcheson started teaching in the local Scots-English dialect at the University of Glasgow in 1730, every university student from Lisbon to St. Petersburg had to be fluent in Latin because all classes and exams were conducted in the classic tongue.

Thus when we read that Dutch-born theologian Erasmus traveled to England where he befriended Sir Thomas Moore in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, or that they each traveled to Rome and spoke to the Pope, it was Latin they used to communicate. It may be more than an accident of history that the rise of European nationalism which so devastated Europe in successive wars during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, coincided with Latin's disappearance as the lingua franca of Europe's educated elite.

What we can say for sure is that throughout history, empires and nation states exercising political dominion over disparate linguistic groups have sought to unite their territories with a common language. Often this has meant the systematic suppression of minority languages and the imposition of a dominant tongue. At other times the imperative manifested itself in a more benign policy of official multilingualism. But the goal was always the same – to forge a linguistic bond between dissimilar peoples and facilitate efficient communication, administration, a degree of cultural unity, and thereby strengthen the state's power against outsiders.

## History of English as the Common Language of the United States

Viewed in the context of European empires and nation states, the United States is an anomaly. Except for scattered German-speaking settlements, the thirteen colonies that comprised its original territory were overwhelmingly English-speaking. John Jay, first president of the Continental Congress and a co-author of *The Federalist Papers* observed that one of the American colonists' great strengths was that they were "one united people" that were "speaking the same language."

English's role as the nation's unifying and virtually universal tongue did not go unchallenged. Nineteenth Century territorial expansion and conquest – especially the acquisition of vast sparsely-populated territories as a result of the Louisiana Purchase and the U.S. Mexican War – added significant French- and Spanish-speaking minorities to the population. But U.S. government policies such as mandating English in schools and requiring English for public office as a condition for statehood in territories like Oklahoma, Arizona and New Mexico, together with an influx of English-speaking settlers succeeded in absorbing these minorities into the larger English speaking community over time.

English's role as the national tongue was challenged again by the great wave of immigration from mostly non-English speaking European countries during the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rapid growth of the non-English speaking population and the natural tendency of new immigrants to settle among people speaking the same tongue created large and flourishing linguistic ghettos in many northern industrial cities. These ghettos had the critical mass necessary for English to be virtually displaced as the common language of the local population. Over time they gave rise to foreign-language newspapers, churches, synagogues, schools, and numerous community-based organizations.

Yet once again the country succeeded in meeting the challenge of linguistic assimilation into America's English-speaking community. This occurred for four main reasons. First, the prevailing, almost universal view of American intellectuals and cultural elites at the time was that learning English was essential. It was necessary both for the successful assimilation of new immigrants and to enable these newcomers to join unions, fend for themselves, and free themselves from the power of the industrial magnates. Institutionally the impulse was expressed in things like the Settlement House Movement in which civic associations, churches, and progressive activists taught English as well as American government, traditions and civic culture to new arrivals. Conceptually it found expression in the ideal of the 'melting pot' society in which dissimilar ingredients melted to form a more uniform whole. The task was made easier by the fact that the

immigrant flow was far more linguistically diverse then, and no one language dominated as Spanish has in recent decades.

Second, government policy favored English. Scant public resources were devoted to accommodating the linguistic needs of the new immigrants. The prevailing government view was expressed by political leaders like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson who made no bones about immigrants' responsibility to learn English, assimilate, and reassign their political loyalty to their adopted country.<sup>1</sup>

Third, although many immigrants failed to adapt and eventually returned to their native countries, the large majority who remained were determined to learn English or make sure their children did. They were eager to adopt a new identity as Americans, and cast off the social, class, and ethnic identities that had barred or limited upward mobility in their homelands.

But the fourth and decisive blow to the linguistic balkanization of the country was the government's decision in the early 1920s to sharply curtail immigration. This cut the flow of new arrivals to a trickle. Deprived of new additions, the large, non-English speaking ghettos of Italians, Germans, Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, and other mostly Eastern European nationalities ceased to grow. As time passed successive generations learned English in public school, joined the armed forces or took jobs in government or business. As they gained affluence, they married or moved outside their communities. It did not happen overnight, but eventually the old ghettos faded away. Most of what remains today are cultural rather than linguistic markers, i.e. foods, architecture, festivals and religious affiliations.

In the 1970s, however, things began to change. Propelled again by mass immigration from non-English speaking countries English's place as the unifying and almost universally spoken language in the United States began to erode. Whereas in 1980 some 11 percent of U.S. residents spoke a language other than English at home, by 2007 that figure leaped to 20 percent, representing 55.4 million people. More ominously for the nation's linguistic unity, of those 55.4 million, 62 percent, or 34.5 million people spoke a single language at home, Spanish.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Naturalization Act of 1906, signed into law by President Roosevelt, required immigrants to learn English in order to become naturalized citizens.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census, American Community Survey Reports, "Language Use in the United States: 2007," p. 3, issued in April 2010.

The rapid increase in the non-English speaking population has once again created large linguistic ghettos and the critical mass necessary for English to be virtually displaced as the common language of the local population.

These demographic trends and the reemergence of linguistic diversity and linguistic – cultural segregation have been reinforced and facilitated by other trends. One has been a decided shift in the attitudes of most American intellectuals and cultural elites away from assimilation into the prevailing American culture and the ideal of the ‘melting pot,’ toward ‘multiculturalism’ and its closely related manifestation in multilingualism, in which maintaining group identity is the overriding goal. Metaphorically the competing ideal is described as the ‘salad bowl’ in which different ingredients are mixed, but instead of blending retain their separate identities and distinctiveness.

This shift in elite opinion was accompanied by a gradual but pronounced reversal in government policy. Whereas before the 1970s government policy had discouraged multilingualism, by 2000 it had changed to one in which the use of foreign languages is encouraged and even demanded. Today for example the U.S. Department of Justice uses the threat of civil rights prosecution to force state and local government agencies to provide services in multiple languages.<sup>3</sup>

Another change occurred in education policy starting in the early 1970s. The 1968 Bilingual Education Act required schools to give special help to children lacking English language ability. The new approach the Act called for was to teach such children core subjects in their native language while giving them supplemental help learning English. This was promoted as a way to help children keep from falling behind their peers while they strove to learn English, and was called bilingual education. In the words of the law’s sponsor, U.S. Senator Ralph Yarborough of Texas, its purpose was “not to create pockets of different languages throughout the country...but to make these students fully literate in English.” Federal money was appropriated and although the federal government never mandated bilingual education, many states passed strict laws requiring bilingual education in their public schools for several years.

Despite the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars, these programs failed to teach English effectively and ultimately lost support from natives and immigrants alike.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Executive Order 13166 signed by President Bill Clinton, August 11, 2000, requires federal fund recipients and federal agencies to use a four-part test to determine when the provision of foreign language translation and interpreter services are mandatory. Violators are subject to penalties and or civil rights prosecution.

<sup>4</sup> An April, 2007 McLaughlin & Associates poll of 1,000 likely voters (margin of error +/- 3.1 percent), and 300 likely Hispanic voters (margin of error +/- 5.6 percent), found an identical 88 percent of both groups in favor of placing limited English proficient children in English-immersion style classrooms.

attitude of many Hispanic parents toward bilingual education was best expressed by South Texas ranch foreman Ernesto Ortiz who said, “My children learn Spanish in school so they can grow up to be busboys and waiters. I teach them English at home so they can grow up to be doctors and lawyers.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1975 Congress amended The Voting Rights Act to mandate the provision of foreign language ballots in political jurisdictions in which certain thresholds were met. Because knowledge of English was required for naturalization,<sup>6</sup> the justification used was to help remedy the unequal access to education experienced by certain minority language groups. Thus American Indian, Spanish, and Asian languages were included, but not others such as Middle Eastern, African, or Eastern European languages.

An example of the government bureaucracy’s bias in favor of multilingualism occurred early in the implementation of the bilingual ballot laws. Counter-intuitively, and with little credible justification the Census Bureau chose to include citizens who describe themselves as speaking English “well” in the group of citizens needing language assistance to vote.<sup>7</sup> By doing so, Census Bureau bureaucrats were able to triple the number of jurisdictions subject to the law.<sup>8</sup>

Supporters of bilingual ballots said the provisions were only temporary remedial measures. But despite a government report showing such ballots were rarely used,<sup>9</sup> and polls indicating widespread public opposition,<sup>10</sup> Congress lacked the political will to let them expire. So Congress renewed them for the third time in 2007, extending the so-called temporary measures for another 25 years.

Under pressure from various ethnic interest groups and advocates, government agencies increasingly act on their own and without specific authorization to provide signage, translations, and interpreters in foreign languages, especially Spanish. So, for

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Straight Shooting; What’s Wrong with America and How to Fix It*, John Silber, Harper & Row, New York, 1989, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, Sec. 312 [8 U.S.C. 1423] (a) “No person...shall...be naturalized as a citizen of the United States...who cannot demonstrate (1) an understanding of the English language, including an ability to read, write, and speak words in ordinary usage in the English language:”

<sup>7</sup> Defined as either 5 percent of the total number of citizens within in a state or county who fall in one of the protected language classes, or 10,000 such citizens whichever is less.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Paul Seigel, Chief, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Education and Social Stratification Branch, Population Division, (February 4, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, Briefing Report to the Honorable Quentin N. Burdick, U.S. Senate, Sept., 1986, Bilingual Voting Assistance: Costs of and Use During the Nov. 1984 General Election.

<sup>10</sup> A March 2006 Zogby International poll of 1,007 likely voters found 63 percent favored printing ballots in English alone, while 35 percent favored bilingual ballots.

example, the Social Security Administration makes information available online not only in English, but in sixteen other languages.

The Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC) provided more evidence of the bureaucracy's ideologically-driven determination to transform the U.S. into a multilingual/multicultural utopia, even at the expense of fundamental civil rights. In 2002 the EEOC filed suit against the owners of a single, family-owned drive-in restaurant in Page, Arizona, charging them with "national origins" discrimination for implementing an English-on-the-job policy to stop some of their Navajo employees from sexually harassing other Navajo employees in the Navajo language.<sup>11</sup> In true rogue fashion the EEOC continues to file such lawsuits notwithstanding the fact that the courts have ruled repeatedly that employers have the right to have such workplace policies and have told the EEOC that its actions are "ultra vires," i.e. outside the scope of its legal authority.

Nonetheless the widespread and often unauthorized about face in the direction of government language policy did not satisfy multilingual advocates. In 1999 a high-ranking Health and Human Services (HHS) Department official in the Clinton Administration held a private meeting with a number of multi-lingual advocacy organizations who wanted to force health care providers to provide interpreter services and translations for non-English speaking patients.<sup>12</sup> The meeting led to a letter signed by sixteen advocacy groups urging HHS to "strengthen and enhance" its language policy guidance to require health care providers to provide language assistance to patients regardless of the size of the language group involved.<sup>13</sup>

The legal theory put forward by the interest groups was to equate language with a person's national origin, and thereby make the failure to provide multilingual services a violation of federal civil rights law. It did not matter that the attempt to equate national origin with language under the 1964 Civil Rights Act had been rejected in numerous court decisions at the federal and state level for thirty years.<sup>14</sup> The groups wanted action.

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<sup>11</sup> *EEOC vs. Kidmans*, 2002

<sup>12</sup> May 13, 1999, San Francisco, California, Thomas E. Perez, Director of the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) for the Department of Health & Human Services, holds private meeting with representatives of various advocacy groups including the Mexican Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), the National Immigration Law Center, Chinese for Affirmative Action, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Letter dated July 13, 1999 to Thomas E. Perez, Director of the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) for the Department of Health & Human Services.

<sup>14</sup> It is self-evident that the language someone speaks does not equate with national origin. French or Spanish for example are the principal languages of dozens of countries. Conversely a native of India could speak any one of dozens of different tongues.

What they got exceeded their expectations. On August 11, 2000, President Clinton signed Executive Order 13166 (E.O. 13166) which claimed to merely “interpret” existing civil rights law instead of creating new law, which is exactly what E.O. 13166 did. The order applied the disputed “language equals national origin” formula to all recipients of federal funds including federal, state, and local government agencies, government contractors as well as to medical providers such as doctors and hospitals participating in the Medicaid or Medicare programs.<sup>15</sup>

E.O. 13166 gave ideologically-minded government bureaucrats an extraordinarily powerful new tool to advance their multicultural agenda, notwithstanding the opposing views of the vast majority of U.S. citizens,<sup>16</sup> or the Order’s suspect legal authority.<sup>17</sup>

The wholesale change in the prevailing views of intellectual elites and government policy was greatly assisted by technological advances. The computerization of communications technology for example made it far more feasible for a whole range of institutions from government agencies to medical providers, businesses, and social welfare organizations to provide multilingual services either in person, via telephone translation services, or over the Internet.<sup>18</sup>

Yet there could hardly be an example in a democratic society of a more unpopular policy being imposed on the majority by a willful, ideologically-driven, minority. Not surprisingly it has led to popular resistance.

## **The Rise of the Official English Movement**

S.I. Hayakawa, a Canadian-born naturalized U.S. citizen of Japanese descent and former professor of English and president of San Francisco State University, who was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1976, is widely acknowledged as the “father” of the official English movement in the U.S.<sup>19</sup> In 1981, alarmed by the drift toward linguistic

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<sup>15</sup> Fearful that a new administration would rescind E.O. 13166 the Justice Department ordered federal agencies to begin their implementation within 120 days – warp speed by government standards. They need not have worried. Soon after President George W. Bush was sworn into office in January, 2001 his administration signaled that it would not revoke E.O. 13166, which remains in effect today.

<sup>16</sup> A Rasmussen Reports poll (margin of error of +/- 3 percent) of 1,000 adults in May, 2010, for example, found 87 percent of respondents favored making English the official language of the U.S.

<sup>17</sup> In 2001 the Supreme Court vacated *Sandoval v. Alexander*, the solitary case that had upheld the language equals national origin formula. But federal courts in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Circuits subsequently protected Executive Order 13166 from direct legal challenge by subjectively and inconsistently applying Department of Justice procedural objections to avoid a trial.

<sup>18</sup> A common example of this technology is the ubiquitous bank automatic teller machine (ATM) that offers services in multiple languages.

<sup>19</sup> Senator Hayakawa died in 1992 at the age of 85.

balkanization and segregation he saw taking place in his home state of California, the Senator introduced the first official English legislation ever introduced in the U.S. Congress – a constitutional amendment declaring English the official language of the United States. The Senate failed to take up the legislation, but after retiring from the Senate in 1983, Senator Hayakawa continued the battle and co-founded the first national organization dedicated to making English the official language of the U.S.<sup>20</sup>

The Senator's action capitalized on growing concerns in the public at large. When he introduced his amendment only five (5) states had made English their official language of government.<sup>21</sup> But beginning in the 1980s, successive citizen petition campaigns succeeded in passing official English laws by overwhelming margins despite determined opposition from business, political, and media elites. More and more states joined the bandwagon until by 2009 thirty-one states, or 62 percent of the total had adopted official English laws of various descriptions.

The widespread move to adopt official English laws spread to cities and counties. In 2006 the city of Hazleton, Pennsylvania, made national headlines following its adoption of an official English ordinance. The city's action inspired a flurry of copycat efforts by cities, towns, and counties across the country.

A similar manifestation of the public's opposition to the government's undeclared policy in favor of multilingualism was the movement to get rid of bilingual education programs, long considered a sacred cow in the field of education, notwithstanding their thirty-year record of failure. The movement started in 1996 when a group of Hispanic immigrant parents in Los Angeles, outraged that their children were being placed in Spanish language classrooms year after year, organized a boycott of a Los Angeles County elementary school.

The boycott attracted national attention and led Silicon Valley entrepreneur Ron Unz to bankroll a petition campaign that succeeded in putting a referendum on the California ballot in 1998. Proposition 227 called for the elimination of bilingual education programs and replacing them with assisted English-immersion style classrooms. Despite opposition from the two major political parties, newspapers, unions, business leaders, religious leaders, ethnic interest groups, and a lavishly-funded media campaign to defeat it, Proposition 227 passed with a landslide 60 percent of the vote.

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. English, co-founded by Sen. Hayakawa and John H. Tanton. Tanton and three former U.S. English board members later founded ProEnglish, an organization that also advocates for official English.

<sup>21</sup> Hawaii, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Nebraska.

Overnight the nation's largest state, home to over 27 percent of the country's foreign-born population, had resolved to eliminate bilingual education.<sup>22</sup> Rising test scores for non-English speaking school children transferred to English immersion style classrooms convinced even some former opponents, and California's example was followed by Arizona in 2000, and Massachusetts in 2002, where similar measures passed by even greater margins.

But a statewide referendum to eliminate bilingual education in Colorado failed by 49 percent to 50 percent in 2002 following a multi-million dollar media campaign by opponents. They warned that if the referendum passed, majority white suburban school districts would be overrun by non-English speaking Hispanic children. The opposition's race-baiting campaign and misleading TV ads were so egregious they were condemned by the state's major newspapers, even though the newspapers opposed the measure.

At the national level, legislation to make English the official language of the U.S., has been introduced in every Congress since Senator Hayakawa first introduced his amendment. Proponents succeeded in passing bills in the House of Representatives in 1996 and in the Senate in 2006 and 2007. But each time the legislation failed to be taken up by the other chamber before Congress adjourned.

### **What Official English Means**

Making English the official language simply makes it the standard language of government operations and says that whenever government acts in its official capacity, i.e. with legal authority, it has to use English. It would not prevent government from using other languages whenever there is a general public interest in doing so. So exceptions would include things like teaching foreign languages; printing documents or taking actions necessary for national security; foreign relations; the promotion of commerce, tourism, and international trade. Protecting public health and safety would be exempted, for example, in the distribution of information to warn people about the dangers of diseases like HIV/AIDS, etc. An official English law also would have no effect on how the Census Bureau gathers information, or on actions that protect the rights of victims of crimes or criminal defendants, or on many other common sense needs government has to use other languages.

On the other hand, if properly implemented, official English laws would bar driver's license exams in multiple languages, taxpayer-paid interpreter services in civil lawsuits,

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<sup>22</sup> Federation for American Immigration Reform ([www.fairus.org](http://www.fairus.org)): See Immigration Facts/State & Local Data/California, Aug. 30, 2011.

foreign-language signs in government offices, and numerous other instances in which no public interest is being served for the wider community.

## **Opposition Arguments**

Dismayed by the overwhelming success of official English initiatives and bans on bilingual education, opponents of official English have tried to counter with a variety of arguments including harsh rhetoric and outright distortion.

Initially the opposition sought to downplay the size of the problem, citing data to prove the United States is overwhelmingly monolingual and asserting that immigrants are indeed learning English. But Census Bureau reports revealing a sharp rise in the number of “linguistically isolated” households and the day-to-day experience of ordinary Americans who come into contact with non-English speaking residents have undermined those arguments.

So opponents have turned to distortions and inflammatory rhetoric. For example official English laws are unfairly accused of criminalizing the use of other languages, not only when used informally by government officials, but also when used by people in their private conversations. Such characterizations are false. None of the 31 states with official English laws already on the books prohibit the use of other languages by private individuals or businesses, or for many legitimate public needs. Yet opponents continue to make such unfounded charges.

If anything, government officials in states with official English laws already on the books err on the side of being too lax in enforcing them. So for example Alabama, which has a constitutional amendment making English the official language that specifically directs state officials to “take all steps necessary to insure that the role of English as the common language of the state of Alabama is preserved and enhanced,” nonetheless continues to offer driver’s license exams in thirteen other languages.

Despite this, official English opponents continue to spread totally unfounded fears – especially in non-English speaking communities – about the impact of official English.<sup>23</sup> A more subtle form of the same distortion is frequent use of the term “English only” by the media and others to characterize official English laws. In addition to being false, the description conveys a sense of linguistic exclusivity that is entirely alien to the

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<sup>23</sup> A common falsehood is that official English will outlaw the use of other languages in private conversations.

leadership of the official English movement, many of whom like the late Senator S.I. Hayakawa, are multilingual first generation immigrants.<sup>24</sup>

Opponents also have resorted to the age-old strategy of ad-hominem attacks, demonizing supporters of official English, using guilt by association and similar smear tactics. Senate Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid even went so far as to say on the Senate floor that he thought an official English amendment being offered by Republican Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma, who speaks fluent Spanish, was “racist,” notwithstanding the fact that 11 of Reid’s Senate Democratic colleagues later voted for it.

Polls show that the American people do not buy Senator Reid’s characterization. When asked if official English is a form of racism or bigotry, the public disagrees 84 percent to 10 percent.<sup>25</sup>

### **Why We Need Official English**

The history of linguistically divided societies is not a peaceful one. As an anonymous philosopher is reputed to have said, religion and language are the two great dividers of mankind. In the past decade countries as diverse as Belgium, Canada, Sri Lanka, Kenya and the Ukraine have been torn by linguistic-cultural conflict that often resulted in murderous inter-communal violence.

Today the United States is one of the few countries in the world without at least one official language.<sup>26</sup> Fifty-four countries located mainly in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, have made English an official language including 27 that have designated English as their sole official language.<sup>27</sup> Many of those countries were created with numerous language groups within their boundaries and have deliberately chosen English as a neutral ground in the hope of avoiding inter-communal strife and conflict.<sup>28</sup> As educator and author E.D. Hirsch notes, “...multilingualism enormously increases cultural fragmentation, civil antagonism, illiteracy, and economic-technological ineffectualness.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The two major national organizations that advocate for official English are both headed by bilingual or trilingual, first-generation immigrants.

<sup>25</sup> See footnote 17.

<sup>26</sup> At least 85 percent of UN member states.

<sup>27</sup> See [www.proenglish.org](http://www.proenglish.org) / official English / official English in the World, Aug. 30, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, this has not always solved the problem as recent inter-communal conflict in some East African countries demonstrates.

<sup>29</sup> *Cultural Literacy, What Every American Needs to Know*, E.D. Hirsch, First Vintage Books Edition, May, 1988, p. 92.

In contrast, unless it takes intentional steps to preserve its linguistic unity and immigration continues at current levels, the U.S. may be the only nation in history that deliberately transforms itself into a linguistically divided society. De-facto government policies that encourage multilingualism and discourage immigrants from assimilating into a common American culture, means that United States policy makers are effectively abandoning the formula that enabled it to become the most successful, multi-ethnic country in the history of the world, and replacing it with a balkanized model of society that endangers social cohesion and national unity wherever it exists.

As the late Barbara Jordan, a former Congresswoman and civil rights leader who chaired the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform observed, “Cultural and religious diversity does not pose a threat to the national interest *as long as public policies insure civic unity* (emphasis added). Such policies should help newcomers learn to speak, read, and write English effectively.”<sup>30</sup>

Making English the official language would have the practical effect of stipulating that while government could act in other languages, for its actions to be legally binding and authoritative, they would have to be communicated in the English language. It also would clarify that whenever a conflict in meaning occurs between laws, regulations, or government communications in more than one language, the English language version is the authoritative meaning.

Adopting official English would align federal government agencies with other government institutions like the armed services and the federal court system, which for practical reasons have decided to conduct official business in English alone.

It would also save money. Providing translations and interpreter services in even a handful of the 322 languages now spoken in the U.S. adds significantly to the cost of government operations.<sup>31</sup> The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) estimated the cost of providing language assistance services was as much as \$1 to \$2 billion annually.<sup>32</sup> But OMB says its estimate may not reflect the full cost, because government agencies are not required to account for the cost of such services. A more accurate estimate might be derived from Canada: a country roughly one tenth the size of the U.S. in terms of population, which spends an estimated \$1 billion annually to provide

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<sup>30</sup> Testimony to Congress, June 28, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Census for 2000.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Office of Management and Budget, Report to Congress: Assessment of Total Benefits and Costs of Implementing Executive Order No. 13166: Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency, March 14, 2002.

translation and interpreter services it needs to conduct government business in two official languages.

Barring translations and interpreters for standard government services also would encourage immigrants to learn English. This would not only save the government money in the short run, it would help immigrants to become self-sufficient by improving their job skills and raising their income. Research shows immigrants with a low degree of English fluency earn only half as much as those with moderate fluency and only a third as much as those who are highly fluent.<sup>33</sup> So encouraging immigrants to learn English strengthens the economy, boosts tax revenue, and helps the U.S. remain competitive in the global economy. Government policy that provides incentives rather than disincentives for immigrants to learn English is a “win-win” situation for both the United States and the immigrant.

Symbolically, declaring English our official language would send this important message to new arrivals: if you aspire to avail yourselves of all the opportunities in this society, you have a responsibility to learn English as your very first priority. At the same time it would reassure native-born English-speaking Americans that immigration is not going to transform the United States into a country they do not recognize and where they no longer feel at home. It would signal that the United States intends to remain unified as an English-speaking country and not plunge headlong down the path of a linguistically divided society with all the dangers and conflicts that entails.

Last, such a decision would be responsive to the principles of democracy and the will of the American people, overwhelming majorities of whom according to polls, want English to be the official language of the United States.<sup>34</sup> This desire cuts across all lines and reflects a degree of unanimity not known to exist on any other major policy issue.<sup>35</sup>

To preserve our incredibly successful ‘melting pot’ society and protect the opportunity the United States offers to people from every country on earth, we need to make English our official language.

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<sup>33</sup> Education Testing Services, *A Human Capital Concern: The Literacy Proficiency of U.S. Immigrants*, March 2004. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics; *English Literacy and Language Minorities in the United States*, August, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Rasmussen Reports poll (+/- 3 percent), 1,000 adults, May, 2010: 87 percent favor official English

<sup>35</sup> A Harvard University poll of 2,923 young adults, ages 18-24, in March, 2007 (margin of error +/- 3 percent) found 72 percent favored making English the official language of the U.S., including majorities of Hispanics and Asians. A McLaughlin & Associates national survey of 300 Hispanic voters in April, 2007 (margin of error +/- 5.6 percent) found 62 percent favored making English the official language of the U.S.

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