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**English: The Language of Liberty**

As of this writing, seventeen states have passed resolutions proclaiming English as their official language. At least twenty other states are considering similar measures.

Most of us have heard the standard arguments for and against establishing English as the official language of the United States. Invariably, those opposing the idea insist the primary motivators for making an issue out of language rest with racism, ethnic bigotry, cultural insecurity, and economic exploitation. Those supporting English language amendments talk about tradition and how critical it is for Americans to have an accepted national standard of communication in business, education, law, and politics.

The wrangling has become increasingly nasty as peripherally related matters—such as bilingual education, bilingual ballots, foreign-language library books, foreign-language classes, and privately owned commercial signs—are tossed into the melting pot. There is no question that a great deal of the energy behind the “English as the official language” movement is generated by fear, hatred, and old-fashioned xenophobia. However, that observation does not make the concept invalid; it only serves to discredit some of the advocates.

Significant numbers of Americans have a justifiable concern about citizens not being able to comprehend what is being said at public meetings or in a court of law. Under current law, thirty-three states can legally hold city council meetings and state court proceedings in languages other than English.

Dollar realities cannot be ignored either. Attempting to accommodate bilingual programs for millions of children, within the framework of educational systems that are already severely underfunded, extends the financial resources of states and local school districts far beyond their capacity. For example, the 1.3 million students in the public schools of Los Angeles speak more than ninety distinct languages.

Opponents respond that it is patently unfair to expect a child unfamiliar with English to compete with English-speaking students. Bilingual programs allow non-English-speaking children to assimilate successfully while maintaining their grade levels.

Foreign policy professionals, linguists, and those involved with international trade are concerned that “English amendments” will discourage students from mastering languages other than English, an area of study in which Americans are already sadly deficient. Without question, if Americans want to successfully compete in world markets, as well as communicate with each other, U.S. school curricula must emphasize foreign language instruction in the same way as curricula in Europe, Japan, and the Soviet Union do.

Clearly, there are solid arguments on both sides. Unfortunately, in the babble generated by the conflict, the most telling factor for supporting the proposal has been essentially ignored by all factions: English is the language of our political freedom. Under Napoleonic law, the power of the state is given greater weight than the rights of individuals, and criminal defendants are considered guilty until proven innocent. In Mexico, suspected criminals are not guaranteed the right to question their accusers in court. Freedom of speech and press in the American context is a rarity anywhere, but in Asiatic and Middle Eastern cultures it is a restricted privilege limited to isolated segments of the ruling classes. Religious liberty and the separation of church and state do not exist as concepts in countries controlled by Islamic fundamentalists.

Even though language, culture, politics, and custom are always in a process of change and evolution, they are inseparable.

Seven hundred seventy-four years ago, King John of England signed the Magna Carta, guaranteeing and confirming legal rights the nobles had traditionally held under Anglo-Saxon common law. The king had attempted to abrogate those rights, and the nobles would have none of it.

The Magna Carta was written in English, and so was Britain’s 1679 Habeas Corpus Act and the English Bill of Rights of 1689.

The American Declaration of Independence, Virginia’s Bill for Religious Freedom, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights were all direct descendants of that tradition. And so was the Emancipation Proclamation, the Fourteenth Amendment, and the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

In order to preserve America’s political values for our posterity, it is time to legally affirm the language in which those principles were framed. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said in 1841, “We infer the spirit of the nation in great measure from the language. . . .”

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