



## Empowerment through English

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Colaboraciones n° 994

May 26, 2006

A reader responds to an animadversion of mine against affirmative action by e-mailing me President Lyndon Johnson's famous argument in favor of racial preferences: "You do not take a person who for years has been hobbled by chains, liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race, and then say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair."

In reply, I e-mail back the words of Frederick Douglass, a runaway slave who became the foremost black spokesman of his age. In a speech in Boston in 1865, Douglass said:

"What I ask for the Negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply justice. The American people have always been anxious to know what they shall do with us ..... Everybody has asked the question,

and they learned to ask it early of the abolitionists, 'What shall we do with the Negro?' I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us. Do nothing with us! If the apples will not remain on the tree of their own strength, if they are worm-eaten at the core, if they are early ripe and disposed to fall, let them fall! I am not for tying or fastening them on the tree in any way, except by nature's plan, and if they will not stay there, let them fall. And if the Negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone!"

This is not a column about affirmative action. It is a column about the English language, which has always been indispensable to the American identity, and without which no citizen can fully participate in Ameri-

can life. It is a column about the power of English literacy, thanks to which, Douglass wrote in his autobiography, he first "understood the pathway from slavery to freedom." And it is about the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of leftist elites like Senate minority leader Harry Reid of Nevada, who last week denounced as "racist" a bill declaring English the national language of the United States.

"This amendment is racist," Reid said. "I think it's directed basically to people who speak Spanish."

Racist! As if Americans who speak Spanish aren't as capable of learning English as any other linguistic minority. As if it is bigoted and mean-spirited to want all Americans to be able to follow their nation's political debates, read its founding documents, and take part in its civic life. Racist to embrace English as the common American tongue! If Douglass were alive today, Reid's words would make him burst out laughing.

Reid is hardly the first to see something wicked in designating English as our common language. When an Arizona ballot initiative proposed to make English the state's official language, opponents likened it to Nazism.

"One television ad featured pictures showing 'Official English' signs and a voice warning, 'It always begins like this,'" Linda Chavez, who supported the initiative, later recalled. "Slowly the images on the screen transmogrified, first into pictures of

Senator Joseph McCarthy, then Adolf Hitler, and finally into concentration camp victims being led into the gas chambers. How could anyone suggest that requiring government to operate in English was equivalent to the slaughter of 6 million Jews? I could barely believe my eyes when I saw the ad the first time."

Despite such demagoguery, an overwhelming majority of Americans support making English the official language. The amendment condemned by Reid went on to pass the Senate, 63-34; but that actually understated the level of public support. In a Zogby International poll in March, 84 percent of respondents -- including 71 percent of Hispanics -- favored official English. The only reason English was never formally denoted the national language before now is that it was generally considered too obvious to need mentioning.

Early in American history, so many households were German-speaking that Congress briefly considered a proposal to publish federal laws in German as well as English. Benjamin Franklin fretted that the inflow of German immigrants "will soon so outnumber us, that . . . we will not in my opinion be able to preserve our language." Two centuries later, 43 million Americans identify their ancestry as German -- more than ever before (and far outnumbering any other ethnic group, including Hispanics). Yet who still worries that Germans won't assimilate into the English-speaking mainstream? Conversely, what German-

American alive today considers himself worse off -- or the victim of racism -- because he is proficient in English?

Some years ago John Silber, who was then the president of Boston University, told a congressional committee about his father, who had immigrated from Germany in 1903 to work as a sculptor at the St. Louis World's Fair. After the fair closed, he went to look for work, and saw a building with a sign reading "Undertaker." Thinking this meant the same thing as the German word "Unternehmer," or contractor, he went in to apply for a job -- only to discover that the room was filled with coffins.

At which point he concluded that it was time to learn English.

Note that he didn't have to. St. Louis in those days had a large German community, and the elder Silber could have found work despite his lack of English. "But as he often said, he came to America because it was the land of a thousand possibilities," his son recalled 93 years later, "and without English these would have been reduced to a very few.

It is not "racist" to insist that English is our common language. It is empowering and enriching -- and as essential to success in America today as it has been for 200 years.

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