

## Press 1 for English



Recently one of Philadelphia's best-known cheese steak joints, Geno's Steaks, instituted an English-only ordering policy.

And in June, a Los Angeles talk show host tried to close down a charter school in a heavily Mexican commu-

nity for, among other things, providing classes in Spanish, Mandarin, and Nahuatl (an indigenous language linked to the Aztecs).

Like Geno's and that talk show host, our elected officials have been getting into the "English Only" act.

During the Senate's jousting with a sweeping new immigration package, lawmakers also approved an amendment to make English the country's national language.

Already more than two dozen states have variants of "English Only" laws. In one such state, North Carolina, I visited a classroom where a teacher had to sneak Spanish words onto a chalkboard so that her mostly Spanish-speaking students could learn. A student served as lookout to make sure no administrator happened by.

What's going on here?

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OK, I'll try to be generous. Some fear that today's immigrants don't want to learn English, or that American "culture" will be watered down and eventually destroyed, or that other tongues and cultures will break up what unites us as a nation.

Hogwash (not the Queen's English, I'm afraid).



JING TSONG

First of all, where are the hordes opposing English to warrant any of this?

From living in predominantly Spanish-speaking communities all my life, I can testify that most immigrants want to learn English.

My own family arrived from Mexico in the mid-1950s. In a generation, English became the dominant idiom, which is generally true for most Mexicans and other non-English speaking peoples in this country. Latino immigrants are more

likely to insist on English than native-born Latinos, according to surveys by the Pew Hispanic Center. And close to 60 percent of Latinos questioned say immigrants should learn English to stay in this country. Learning English is apparently not the problem.

Nor is diluting the culture—unless, by culture, people exclude all the contributions made by people who didn't learn English as their first language. America is made up of many tongues, many heritages, many voices. The organic coming together of cultures and languages is what America is all about, and we don't need laws to do this, thank you very much.

We enjoy rock & roll, martial arts, cowboys, and chewing gum, all with roots outside of Anglo culture (e.g., African, Asian, Spanish, and Native, respectively). Hey, if we end up with an official language, we

may have to reconsider place names like Chicago, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Miami, Michigan, Los Angeles, San Francisco, California, Florida, or San Diego. All of these have Native or Spanish-language origins.

And if unity is the issue, well, what unites as a country is not the language that we speak but the ideals that we hold dear: democracy, civil liberties, separation of powers, the self-evident truth that all people are created equal.

The "English Only" campaigns are designed not to bring unity but to

suppress other languages—particularly Spanish—and impose the supremacy of English on our tongues.

I, for one, love the English language. I've spent years trying to master it. But I'm also for having Spanish, Japanese, Hmong, Navajo, and Nahuatl (still spoken by millions of people in Mexico and Central America) wherever these may apply. There are 329 languages spoken here, 154 of which are indigenous. Other reports claim the United States is cur-

## America is made up of many tongues

rently the third largest Spanish-speaking country in the world.

That is not something to be ashamed of or worried about. It's something to celebrate. The ability to speak Spanish is becoming a necessity in today's America. We all might as well face up to that. Plus, isn't it better to know more than one language? Many other countries put us to shame in this regard.

"English Only" laws harken back to a time when Spanish-speaking or Native-speaking children in the Southwest were forbidden to use words other than English (even if they knew no other words). As a result, they were forbidden to speak in this country that reveres free speech.

A friend of mine once told me how she was looking at one of my books while standing at an airport newsstand. Two white males nearby perused the name on the book, whereupon one of them remarked, "That's the problem with bilingual education. They learn a little English and now they want to write books."

Yes, *y sabes que* . . . I didn't have to lose my Spanish to do so. ♦