In September, 2007, officials at St. Anne School, in Wichita, Kansas, sent home a letter announcing a new policy to ban all foreign languages at school: in the classrooms, in the hallways, at lunch, on the playground.

The ban was enacted to punish four students who used Spanish to bully other children and make fun of teachers and administrators. Such behavior was already prohibited by the school handbook, but the school failed to explain why that policy was insufficient to deal with recent incidents. Nor did it specify why the school’s 71 remaining Spanish speakers, along with its Vietnamese- and Chinese-speaking students, were being punished by having their languages banned too. Would students who misbehave in English be forced to stop speaking their language as well?
There is no federal law that makes English the official language of the United States, and so, in the past few years, more and more schools, businesses, towns, cities and states, even the White House, have begun taking the law into their own hands, declaring local English-only zones, as St. Anne school did, to express their support of a language they see as endangered, or to register their concern that people who don’t speak English represent a threat to national unity. As Yale computer scientist David Gelernter recently put it, “English is the communal, emotional, and intellectual net that holds this nation together, if anything can.” New nativists like Gelerntner, a Fellow of the American Enterprise Institute, are sending a clear message to immigrants: learn English, or go back where you came from.

St. Anne School may well be the first American school to go English-only since the U.S. Supreme Court tossed out foreign-language bans in 1923. In that case, Meyer v. Nebraska, a teacher in a Lutheran school was fined $25 for teaching German to an eighth-grader in direct violation of Nebraska’s law forbidding foreign-language instruction before high school. Striking down the Nebraska statute, the high court wrote, “No emergency has arisen which renders knowledge by a child of some language other
than English so clearly harmful as to justify its inhibition, with the consequent infringement of rights long freely enjoyed.”

More recently, in *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969), the Supreme Court reaffirmed these rights long freely enjoyed: students don’t “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.” But that didn’t stop St. Anne’s principal from inhibiting other languages, nor did it stop the Esmeralda, Nevada, County Schools from sending a note home last October banning Spanish on the school bus.

Esmeralda Supt. Robert Aumaugher made the magic school bus an English-only zone after learning that Nevada’s Spanish-speaking students have lower rates of high school graduation than English speakers. Plus the bus drivers, who don’t speak Spanish, were complaining that students used Spanish to disrespect them.
The state of Nevada doesn’t have an official language, though it’s considering a bill which repeats Aumagher’s point, “that a command of English is a critical component of the success and productivity of the children in this State.” That law would go farther, barring “any law which diminishes or ignores the role of English as the common language of [Nevada].”

To be fair, Nevada’s proposed official language law also recognizes that knowing more than one language is “a significant skill,” but apparently it’s not a skill that needs to be practiced on the school bus.

So, since Goldfield, the Esmeralda county seat, no longer has a high school, a dozen or so Spanish-speaking children must ride an hour and a half each way to attend school in neighboring Ely County, in silence, even though Ely schools do not prohibit Spanish on the bus.

Not that Ely is a bastion of liberalism. Its county seat, Pahrump, was once known primarily for legalized gambling and prostitution. But in recent years the town has become a bedroom suburb of Las Vegas, a place where you can mow your lawn, play golf, and go to PTA meetings.
Unless, of course, you do those things in Spanish. At a raucous town meeting two years ago, Pahrump made English its official language. The town also banned the flying of foreign flags – or in the case of the Mi Ranchito Market, it banned a display of the colors found on foreign flags – and denied benefits to illegal immigrants.

Pahrump has been in the national spotlight before. It was parodied as the epitome of small-town parochialism on NBC's “Studio 60,” when a TV star is arrested for
speeding and gets a taste of rough justice from a Pahrump judge who doesn’t like Hollywood liberals or their shows.

It’s also the location for the 1996 movie “Mars Attacks,” a film that depicts up close the damage that unwelcome aliens can do.

At their town meeting, Pahrump’s villagers lived up to their fictional image, loudly booing a resident who called the English-only ordinance racist and anti-Mexican, and they shouted down an ACLU observer who warned that banning flag displays would expose the town to First Amendment lawsuits. No swing to the left for the town represented by Democrat Harry Reid, who had just become the new majority leader of the U.S. Senate. No, the mood at the meeting was all English, all red and white, with very little blue or any other color.

Pahrump joined Taneytown, Maryland, Farmers Branch, Texas, Hazleton, Pennsylvania, Bogota, New Jersey, and more than fifty other municipalities that have recently considered or implemented English-only ordinances.
It won’t be long before Michelin will be able to publish its “Guide to America’s English-only towns and cities.”

People are often surprised to learn that America has no official language. After all, English is the international language of science, technology, global capitalism, the Internet, and rock ’n’ roll.

It’s also the language of choice in the United States, spoken by 92% of the residents of this country, and the other 8% are busy learning it.

But apparently they’re not learning fast enough, so 30 states have designated English their official language, including Illinois, which made American official back in 1923. But English continued to be taught in Illinois, in defiance of the law, and so in 1969 Illinois amended the law to make English official instead.
It’s Legal—We Speak English

Residents of Illinois can stop worrying about learning to speak “American,” and revert back to English, because Gov. Ogilvie yesterday signed a bill making English the official language of the state. A state law passed in 1923 designated “American” as the official language of Illinois, but some legislators pointed out that there was no such language.

On Sept. 23, 1969, the Chicago Tribune reported this change in Illinois official language law, making English, not American, the state’s official language.

Today’s English-only movement attracts two kinds of supporters: idealists who believe that language somehow embeds not just the culture but the very soul of an ethnic group, and which further associates English specifically with democracy. And xenophobes, themselves descended from immigrants, who are convinced that immigration is what’s ruining America, but since it’s rude to attack ethnicity in public, they use language as a more acceptable way to express their bias.

McDonald’s billboards in Spanish, advertising iced coffee, drew the ire of Bogota, New Jersey mayor Steve Lonegan.
When McDonald’s put up Spanish billboards in New Jersey, Bogota mayor Steve Lonegan insisted to Fox News that such concepts as the American dream, democracy, and free trade have no equivalent in any other language, and to show how much he believed in free trade, Lonegan organized a boycott of McDonald’s and scheduled a referendum to make English the town’s official language.

But Bogota shouldn’t worry. American Hispanics are switching to English even faster than they are buying burgers. The 2000 Census reports that there are only 50 Spanish-speaking Bogotans, about 3% of the town’s population, who don’t also speak English. One third of the town’s 120 Italian speakers don’t speak English either. That means that Hispanics in Bogota are assimilating ten times faster than Italians, but apparently it’s not the language Mayor Lonegan doesn’t like, it’s the people speaking it.

English-only is an issue in the workplace as well as the town square. Federal law says that requiring workers to use English can only be justified if it’s a business necessity or a health and safety concern. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is charged with discouraging language discrimination, a form of national-origin discrimination prohibited by the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Usually the Commission brokers settlements like the one where employees at an Arizona diner recently won the right to speak Navaho on their breaks, so long as they speak English to customers, though since the diner is at the edge of a Navaho reservation, almost all of those customers speak Navaho too. But sometimes the agency goes to court.

Earlier this year, the EEOC sued the Salvation Army. In 2005, the Salvation Army fired two long-time employees of its Framingham, Massachusetts, thrift store for speaking Spanish on the job. The Salvation Army’s long-standing English-only
requirement is articulated, in English, in its employee handbook. But the rule wasn’t enforced until 2004, five years after Dolores Escorbor and Maria Del Carmen Pedromo had begun working at the Framingham store.

The Salvation Army gave the two Hispanic women a year to bring their English up to speed, and then it sacked them. Now the EEOC has stepped in to sue the charity – whose mission statement calls for it to meet human needs “without discrimination” – for discrimination.

The Salvation Army denies breaking the law, insisting that its English-only policy “serve[s] only to protect the welfare and safety of our employees and those whom we serve.” Exactly how speaking English protects the welfare and safety of two women whose job is sorting clothes in the back room of a thrift shop isn’t entirely clear. Plus, the Salvation Army handbook explicitly encourages employees to communicate with clients and customers in any language necessary.
And its English-only rule doesn’t actually require employees to speak English like a native. Rather, they must use it “to the best of [their] abilities.” The women who were fired in Framingham spoke some English, just not enough, in the eyes of their bosses, to ensure either their own salvation or the health and safety of others. Then again, maybe the managers of the Framingham store just worried that their Spanish-speaking employees were actually making fun of them in a language they couldn’t understand.

Bilingual workers often laugh or giggle when speaking their native language, probably because they’re more relaxed than when they’re using English, or they whisper so as not to disturb others or make them feel left out. But monolingual English-speaking supervisors and co-workers frequently complain that immigrants hide behind a foreign language to criticize or ridicule the Anglos. Sometimes that paranoia turns out to be justified – not surprising, since even English-speaking employees have been known to make fun of management surreptitiously.

Even though the EEOC seems to have good reason to intercede on behalf of the fired Salvation Army employees, English-firsters from Lou Dobbs to Tom Tancredo are characterizing this lawsuit as a politically-correct attack on a well-respected charity by a government agency out of control, and conservative bloggers have begun questioning whether the women who were fired were even American citizens, as if antidiscrimination laws don’t apply to resident aliens or to undocumented workers. Leading the charge, Senator Lamar Alexander, another strong supporter of official English, introduced a bill to prevent the EEOC from suing employers for language discrimination.
For critics like Alexander, lack of English constitutes prima facie evidence of contempt for America. If the official English crowd gets their way, employees, even employees of the EEOC, will only be able to make fun of one another in English.

Sen. Alexander, who sees English as the language that made America great, seems to be forgetting that English is an immigrant language too, just like Spanish, Vietnamese, and Polish. If one of Framingham’s Natick Indians told the senator to stop speaking English and go back where he came from, he’d probably complain to the EEOC. Or if he felt that a government agency wasn’t patriotic enough to enforce the law, maybe he’d just call out the cavalry.

The Natick Indians originally spoke Wampanoag, the language that greeted the Pilgrims when they landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620. But the senator doesn’t have to worry – no one speaks Wampanoag any more – after killing as many Wampanoag speakers as they could during King Philip’s War, the British banned the language in the 1670s.

Speaking of calling out the cavalry, President George W. Bush rejected a Spanish-language version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” that hit the airwaves in conjunction with the May 1, 2006, “Day without Immigrants.” Mr. Bush told reporters, “I think the national anthem ought to be sung in English, and I think people who want to be a citizen of this country ought to learn English and they ought to learn to sing the national anthem in English.”

The president added, “One of the things that’s very important is when we debate this issue that we not lose our national soul.”
Lamar Alexander complained that we wouldn’t want the Pledge of Allegiance recited “in French, or German, or Russian, or Hindi, or even Chinese,” and he introduced a Senate Resolution “affirming that statements of national unity . . . should be recited or sung in English.”

It’s a commonly-held belief that the language of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, and the Gettysburg Address, somehow embodies the enlightened spirit of American democracy, a spirit which can’t be expressed in words from other tongues (though English is also the language of monarchists, colonialists, and members of the Ku Klux Klan).

But foreign languages were not a problem for the nation’s founders, who chose E pluribus unum, ‘from many, one,’ as the national motto and sent French versions of the Declaration of Independence north to encourage the Québécois to join the rebellion against Britain.

The U.S. Bureau of Education commissioned this Spanish translation of the “Star-Spangled Banner” in 1919.

It turns out that the American government has always recognized the practical need to communicate with nonanglophone residents in their languages. As early as 1919,
during the hey-day of Americanization, the U.S. Bureau of Education commissioned a translation of the national anthem into Spanish. And at the very moment that Pres. Bush was voicing his support for an English-only national anthem, four Spanish translations of the “Star-Spangled Banner” appeared on the Spanish-language version of the U.S. State Department’s website.

Not only that, but Pres. Bush himself often joined in the singing of Spanish versions of patriotic songs during his first presidential campaign, and a pop singer performed the national anthem in Spanish for the president at Mr. Bush’s first inauguration.

Lately everyone from Bogota’s Steve Lonegan to Harvard’s Samuel P. Huntington to Tennessee’s Lamar Alexander has been insisting that American ideals don’t translate, that our nation’s most important documents can’t be understood in any language but English.

But it’s ironic that those who want to build an English-only bubble around sacred civic documents like the Constitution freely translate their sacred religious texts into the
vernacular, since most of the world’s faithful can’t read the original Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, not to mention Sanskrit or Arabic.

And despite the controversial Spanish “Star-Spangled Banner,” English remains the language that immigrants to the United States strive to acquire. Because without official language legislation, the U.S. has managed to become one of the most monolingual countries on earth.

Even so, the idea that English needs defending is nothing new. Earlier generations of English-speaking Americans were suspicious of the nonanglophones of their day, too. Benjamin Franklin and other 18th-century nativists targeted German as the greatest threat both to English and to national stability, but like today’s, their attacks on language hid a deeper prejudice. These English Pennsylvanians accused their German neighbors of taking their jobs, of refusing to learn English, of not even speaking standard German.

Franklin considered Germans to be racial “others,” calling them “swarthy” in contrast to the pale-faced English. Other Anglos accused the Pennsylvania Germans of laziness, illiteracy, clannishness, a reluctance to assimilate, excessive fertility, and Catholicism. They were even blamed for Pennsylvania’s harsh winters.

Today’s new nativists see as their enemy not the Germans but the growing number of Spanish speakers. The new nativists argue that unlike previous immigrant groups, Hispanics show more language loyalty and resist assimilation. Samuel Huntington warns that “the values, institutions and culture” of the creators of the United States — white Anglo-Protestant speakers of English — are rapidly losing ground to Latino immigrants, who retain their Spanish and imperil not just the American language
but also American unity. As Huntington sees it, there is no “Americano dream.” There is only the American dream. And the group that Huntington fears most, the Mexican Americans, will share that dream only if they dream in English.

Actually, English has never been the undisputed property of Anglo Protestants. It’s a language that began in heathen Europe, traveled to Celtic Britain, was leavened with the Latin of Irish monks, the Norse of Viking raiders and the French of Normans bent on regime change, and it has absorbed vocabulary and idiom from every language it’s come in contact with, from Inuit and Cree, to Hindi, Japanese, and Thai.

And claims that today’s immigrants are less likely to switch to English than previous generations are also wrong. According to the Pew Hispanic Survey, while only 23% of Spanish-speaking immigrants speak English particularly well, over 88% of their children born in the U.S. are fluent English speakers, a figure that rises to 94% in subsequent generations. Plus we’re seeing significant numbers of second-generation Latinos who have no Spanish at all, who can barely speak to relatives back home, can’t follow the telenovelas their grandparents watch on Univision, some of them can barely navigate the menu at Taco Bell.

The one major difference between today’s immigrants and those of yesteryear is that the rest of America has forgotten what it’s like to have immigrants around. That’s because, after World War I, the U.S. effectively shut down immigration and didn’t reopen it again until 1965.

Foreign language instruction in American schools dropped drastically after World War I as well, and for a good chunk of the mid-20th century, the only contact most Americans had at home with speakers of other languages consisted of brief encounters
with tourists or business people. So dealing with immigrants and their languages is something new, something that the U.S. seems – once again – unprepared to handle.

Two clippings from the New York Times, in 1918, show effects of anti-German-language sentiment in U.S.
Today’s official English advocates treat foreign languages like American patriots treated them in 1917, they were something to shun. When the United States entered World War I, Gov. William Harding of Iowa banned the use of foreign languages in public: on the street, in streetcars, and in schools and churches.

First. English should and must be the only medium of instruction in public, private, denominational or other similar schools.

Second. Conversation in public places, on trains and over the telephone should be in the English language.

Third. All public addresses should and must be in the English language.

Fourth. Let those who cannot speak or understand the English language conduct their religious worship in their homes.

Detail from the second page of Iowa Gov. Harding’s “Babel Proclamation,” showing the four areas in which English was to be the only language permitted

The governor further insisted, “There is no use in anyone wasting his time praying in other languages than English. God is listening only to the English tongue.” (this was long before Vatican 2.) Harding banned foreign languages on the telephone as well, a more public instrument then than it is now.
Colonel For “Knockout.”

Wants the War Carried to Berlin—
One Language for America.

DES MOINES, May 27.—English as the sole language for schools, newspapers, and other usage in this country, was urged by Theodore Roosevelt in an address here tonight, under the direction of the National Security League.

The former President reiterated his contention for universal obligatory military training, and pointed out “our duty to speed up the war and get through,” and “so to prepare ourselves that the peace we are to gain shall be a permanent gain for righteousness.”

“We have put our hand to the plow,” he shouted, “and we will never turn back until we have driven the furrow up to Berlin. Unless we knock out Germany, we will have to fight again probably within the lifetime of men now old, certainly within the time of those now young.”

In voicing his approval of the recent proclamation by Governor Harding, ordering that English be the only medium of instruction in public or private schools in Iowa, Colonel Roosevelt said:

“This is a nation—not a polyglot boarding house. There is not room in the country for any fifty-fifty American. There can be but one loyalty—to the Stars and Stripes: one nationality—the American—and therefore only one language—the English language.”

Report on former Pres. Roosevelt’s support of Harding’s English-only proclamation

Visiting Des Moines five days after Harding issued his “Babel Proclamation,”

former Pres. Theodore Roosevelt endorsed Harding’s English-only rules, adding the comment often echoed by English-only supporters today, “This is a nation, not a polyglot boarding house.”
Chicago Tribune reports on remarks of Mary McDowell, of the Univ. of Chicago community, at a meeting of the Americanization Committee

But a few enlightened Americanization workers saw that the best way to assimilate immigrants was to communicate with them in their own language while they worked to acquire English. For example, in June, 1918, Mary McDowell remarked, “We can’t teach a man who works ten to fourteen hours a day in a factory English in fifteen minute noon lessons . . . . We can’t crush the foreign languages out, or the foreigners will not understand what we are trying to tell them about this country.”

Iowa’s governor actually reversed his foreign-language ban after the war ended. But undeterred by their history, in 2002, Iowa voters panicked over the doubling of Spanish speakers to 2.9% of the state’s population and made the state English-only once again, even though most of Iowa’s 80,000 Hispanics speak English as well as Spanish.

According to Census figures, fears that English is losing ground elsewhere in the country are similarly misplaced. Nationally, about 3 million U.S. residents report that they don’t speak any English, and while that seems like a large number, it’s still only about 1.3% of the population.
One goal of official English legislation, whether local or federal, is to convince immigrants of the importance of learning English, something that the evidence suggests they’re already aware of. But another, more curious aspect of official English laws has been the clamor to protect the English language, which is surely not endangered, and to protect the rights of English speakers, which are in no danger either.

Take, for example, the English Language Unity Act of 2007 (H.R. 997), introduced by Iowa Rep. Steve King, who also offered to have his construction company build the electrified fence between the U.S. and Mexico, and who sued the governor of Iowa for continuing to provide election ballots in languages other than English, a violation of Iowa’s official language statute, despite the fact that federal law requires Iowa to provide such ballots.
The purpose of King’s English Language Unity Act is,

To declare English as the official language of the United States, to avoid misconstructions of the English language texts of the laws of the United States,

. . . and to establish a uniform English language rule for naturalization.

The bill reminds us that the English-language version of any law is the only one that has any legal force, a principal that has never been in doubt. And it requires that anyone seeking to become an American citizen demonstrate a working knowledge of English, a provision that has long been part of naturalization law, but that sponsors of these official-English laws would like to see toughened up.
H.R. 997

To declare English as the official language of the United States, to establish a uniform English language rule for naturalization, and to avoid misconstructions of the English language texts of the laws of the United States, pursuant to Congress’ powers to provide for the general welfare of the United States and to establish a uniform rule of naturalization under article I, section 8, of the Constitution.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
FEBRUARY 12, 2007

Mr. King of Iowa (for himself, Mr. King of New York, Mr. Sall, Mrs. Bachmann, Ms. Foxx, Mr. Burton of Indiana, Mr. Pence, Mr. Doolittle, Mr. Sam Johnson of Texas, Mrs. Blackburn, Mr. Feeney, Mr. Price of North Carolina, Mrs. McMorris Rodgers, Mr. Gingrey, Mr. Sessions, Mr. Broun, Mrs. Cubin, Mr. Saxton, Mr. Miller of Florida, Mr. Shuster, Mr. Westmoreland, Mr. Linder, Mrs. Capps, Mr. Hall of Texas, Mr. Lewis of Kentucky, and Mr. Culberson) introduced the following bill, which was referred to the Committee on Education and Labor, and in addition to the Committee on the Judiciary, for a period to be subsequently determined by the Speaker, in each case for consideration of such provisions as fall within the jurisdiction of the committee concerned.

A BILL
To declare English as the official language of the United States, to establish a uniform English language rule for naturalization, and to avoid misconstructions of the English language texts of the laws of the United States, pursuant to Congress’ powers to provide for the general welfare of the United States and to establish a uniform

First page of H.R. 997, the English Language Unity Act of 2007
Currently, the law requires that candidates for naturalization demonstrate “an ability to read, write, and speak words in ordinary usage in the English language” (INA, sec. 312 a.1). The English Language Unity Act requires instead that

all citizens should be able to read and understand generally the English language text of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the laws of the United States.

[H.R. 997, sec. 164]

This requirement ignores the fact that the meaning of the Constitution and the laws is regularly disputed by highly-trained specialists, who argue over it all the way to the Supreme Court. And that one of the crimes that the Declaration of Independence accuses King George of is “obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners.”

Excerpt from first printed version of the Declaration of Independence, showing charge that King George has obstructed Laws for Naturalization of foreigners

The English Language Unity Act further requires that all ballots be in English, and only in English, and it requires the federal government to promote the use of English, without specifying how this is to be done.
The bill permits the teaching of foreign languages, even praises it as desirable in this age of globalization. It allows government employees to use foreign languages to further diplomacy, commerce and tourism; to ensure public health and safety; to protect the rights of criminals and victims of crime. And it protects the right of government employees to use “terms of art” – technical terms that may be in a foreign tongue, as when Congress adjourns for vacation sine die, or when conservatives remind new immigrants to join the one formed out of the many: e pluribus unum.

But the bill also guarantees that: “a person injured by a violation of this chapter may in a civil action . . . obtain appropriate relief” (H.R. 997). In other words, if someone won’t let you speak English, you can sue!

It is not clear that anyone in the United States has ever been injured by an agent of government simply for using English. In 1990 an English-speaking nurse charged that her supervisor discriminated against her by speaking Tagalog, but her suit was dismissed on other grounds, and so the question of reverse language discrimination was not tested. But the right-to-sue provision of the English Language Unity Act reinforces the common fear that foreign languages threaten the right of Americans to go about their lives in an English-only environment.

To date, none of the many federal “Defense of English” laws have passed, though sometimes one comes close. In 2006, the Senate amended the Immigration Law to make English the national language of the United States, though later the same day it passed another amendment making English America’s “common and unifying language.” No one was quite sure what the difference between a “national language” and a “common and unifying language” was, and fortunately they didn’t have to take a citizenship test
requiring them to explain that difference. But Congress adjourned, *sine die*, before the House could act on either provision.

One last story. In this Philadelphia sandwich shop, not just employees but customers as well are enjoined to speak English. Geno’s Subs, home of the “original” Philly cheese steak, posted a sign at its take-out window proclaiming, “This is America. When ordering, ‘speak English.’” Geno’s Steaks quickly became the darling of right-wing talk radio, and official-English advocate Rudy Giuliani even made a campaign stop at Geno’s during his presidential run in 2007, but Geno’s English-only policy also drew two formal complaints from Philadelphia’s Human Rights Commission.

*Joey Vento, owner of Geno’s Steaks, poses at the take-out window with his English-only sign*

The goal of official English at all levels, from federal to local, from the White House to the schoolhouse, is ultimately not to defend English. English is not in danger abroad, where it continues to function as the most successful global language to date (though as we learned from the unpleasantness at Babel, and from the history of Latin and French,
no world language lasts forever). Nor as the Census shows us, is English in danger at home, in the United States.

All this suggests that the defense of English, as presently manifested in laws, workplace policies, and school rules, is not so much a defense of a language that has never been stronger, but an attack on immigration, a desire to return to the idyllic, pre-Babel decades between 1924 and 1965, when America didn’t have to deal with the large-scale integration of immigrants and their languages, when the United States isolated itself from the inconvenient truth that there are other people in the world, and that these other people may be different.

Whether we’re talking about the English Language Unity Act, or Pahrump, Nevada’s official English ordinance, we’re not talking about an idealistic celebration of American unity, like the Fourth of July. These laws are actually aimed at Mexican immigrants, and those from other countries too.

Steve King introduced the English Language Unity Act in Congress on Abraham Lincoln’s birthday because, he said, Lincoln brought a nation torn by Civil War back together again, and King thinks that a nation threatened by immigration can be held together by an electrified fence and an official language.

Many states in the former Confederacy don’t celebrate Lincoln’s birthday. Yet once they were brought back into the Union they stayed, because it takes more than a holiday to unify a nation. And as the British found out in 1776, and Lincoln found out in 1861, it takes more than a common language, as well.

What holds the United States together isn’t the English language but our laws, customs, traditions, and spirit. We don’t need to add an official language to that mix,
because today’s immigrants are already learning English as fast as they can, and whether it’s at a lunch counter or in a schoolroom, at the town hall or the White House, making English official sends immigrants a message even stronger than an electrified fence or a multiple-choice test on the Constitution. It says that they’re just not welcome here. And that’s not a way to help anyone assimilate.

Some people don’t hide their anti-immigrant stand behind English-only legislation