

Testimony of  
The Honorable Charles A. Gonzalez (TX-20)  
before the

**Subcommittee on the Constitution  
of the**

**United States House of Representatives  
Committee on the Judiciary**  
at its

Hearing on: H. R. 997, the "English Language Unity Act of 2011"

August 02, 2012

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Nadler, Hermano Conyers, and Members of the Subcommittee, I'm grateful for this opportunity to testify before you today.

I have never understood the motivations of those who believe either our country or our language needs to be "protected" by a law like H. R. 997. Let us leave aside, for now, the questionable use of the word "English" in the bill's title instead of what H.L. Mencken called, "The American Language". Maybe it's because I had such good teachers as a child that I learned the power and majesty of English and so I have no fear that the language of Shakespeare and Twain needs a federal law to protect it. Maybe it's because I have known Americans for whom English was not their first language and seen firsthand their burning desire to learn to speak the language in which our Constitution and our laws are written.

The French have a government agency to protect their language because our language so dominates the world, from commerce to culture, that they feel threatened. I've never had such worries about *our* commerce or culture.

This bill would certainly change our American culture, however. For most of our history, this country has welcomed immigrants. They have made us stronger, economically and otherwise, and their very desire to come to this country is a recognition of our national strength.

Now, there have been vocal minorities who did not share a faith in the strength of our American culture. Even Benjamin Franklin, as reported in an essay by Dennis Baron, "...considered the Pennsylvania Germans to be a 'swarthy' racial group distinct from the English majority in the colony. In 1751 he complained, 'Why should the Palatine Boors be suffered to swarm into our Settlements, and by herding together establish their Language and Manners to the exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language and Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion.'"<sup>1</sup>

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, they called themselves "The American Party" and bragged that they were defending us from the imminent destruction that would be wrought by criminal immigrants, Catholics from Ireland and Germany. Most Americans called them "Know Nothings" and their ignorant bigotry is justly condemned today. In the later-19<sup>th</sup> century, we heard of our imminent demise at the hands of the "Yellow Horde" of Chinese immigrants, and it's not yet two months since the House expressed our regret for that lengthy fit of unjustifiable bigotry.

These cries of our imminent demise by assorted alarmists were wrong then and they're wrong now. Do we really want to return to the mindset of a century ago, when a man could testify to Congress about immigrant laborers and say, "These workers don't suffer—they don't even speak English."?

We are a country, and a strong country, when and because we act as one, when "We the People... establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, [and]

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Baron, "Official American. English Only." © 2005 MacNeill Lehrer Productions.  
<http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/officialamerican/englishonly/>

promote the general Welfare....” We the People speak with accents from Texas and New York. Anyone who has listened to the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Financial Services Committee when they converse might wonder if they were, indeed, speaking the same language. We speak English and Inuit. We are one because we *will* it so. The United States is about what we *do*, not how we describe it.

That is why, back in 1787, the Constitution was translated and printed in German: so that the non-English speaking minority in Franklin’s Pennsylvania, which would become the second state to ratify our Constitution, could fully participate in the ratification debate. What that means, Mr. Chairman, is that our founding document, under and from which we derive all of our authority as Congress, is the result of the opinions and votes of men who didn’t even speak the language.

While the tradition of printing some public documents in German continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it died out because, then as now, everyone living here, especially American citizens, finds life easier if they learn to speak English. We don’t need to go out of our way to punish non-English speakers. The opportunity to enjoy all of the attributes of our country is more than enough of an incentive. There is no need for H. R. 997, as is evidenced by the 97% of Americans who speak English.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mauro E. Mujica, “Why An Immigrant Runs An Organization Called U.S.ENGLISH.”  
<http://www.usenglish.org/view/5>