

"Writing the truth  
as I see it;  
trying not to  
offend  
those who will  
disagree."

# The truth as I see it™

Idaho Common Sense™



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## Out of many, one

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"The one absolute certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, or preventing all possibility of its continuing to be a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities. We have but one flag. We must also learn one language and that language is English" stated President Theodore Roosevelt. Was he right? Should the United States have English as its official language? Would it be discriminatory? Would (legal) immigrants suffer if English were required as a prerequisite for citizenship? Would immigrants' children be handicapped in school if they were expected to learn in English?

Our national motto is E pluribus unum meaning "out of many, one". What does that really mean? The majority of Americans' ancestors are immigrants to this country. We refer to our country as the "melting pot" meaning we meld us all into one people – Americans. Isn't that what "out of many, one" means?

What are the realities of having English as our official language versus having a multilingual government? What are the costs of running multilingual governments? Canada has two official languages consuming 0.16% of their nation's budget to do government business in two languages. That same percentage cost in our country would be nearly \$4 billion. The European Union has 25 nations with 20 official languages yielding over 380 translation combinations. They have an ongoing insurmountable backlog of material awaiting translation; over 60,000 pages with 8% of their employees working as translators. The city of San Francisco spends \$350,000 for each language that a document is translated into. Californians pay \$4,965 per capita in state and local taxes meaning that 70 people's taxes for the entire year are required to pay for just one translation! The cost of expecting

governments to perform multilingually is staggering and grows exponentially.

But what of the claims of racism and discrimination if we require Americans to speak English because the government only does business in English? What is the greater disadvantage for the immigrant; being required to learn English or being allowed to continue in his/her native language? Data from a 1999 study showed that immigrants who spoke English had twice the annual income of immigrants who did not speak English. The Thomas Rivera Policy Institute found that, "far and away, the most commonly cited obstacle to gaining college knowledge is the language barrier". This indicates that expecting an understanding of English is actually a benefit to the immigrant rather than a liability. This data also hints that expectations or demands to learn English may actually diminish discrimination rather than enhance it because they become Americans rather than foreigners living in America.

There are many opinions on this issue but few based on actual research. Some of the best research has come from Ruben G. Rumbaut, professor of sociology and co-director of the Center for Research on Immigration at the University of California-Irvine. He determined that it takes three generations for new immigrant lines to convert to speaking only English. He found that over 90% of first generation immigrants often did not learn English. The second generation was bilingual but preferred English over 80% of the time. And the third generation preferred English over 97% of the time.

Could it actually create more discrimination if we make it easy for immigrants to continue to function in a foreign language? The majority of immigrants already understand what many of their "protectors" do not. This is an English speaking country. The

overwhelming majority of immigrants wish to become Americans – not German Americans, not Italian Americans, not Mexican Americans – just Americans. They understand the economic benefits of speaking English. They understand both the educational and future economic benefits for their children who speak English. They understand what their defenders do not, avoiding English and expecting bilingual laws promotes discrimination. It promotes not being a part of the very country they came to join. Virtually all legal immigrants came to this country understanding part of the deal was to learn the country's language – English. One of Dr. Rumbaut's most interesting findings is that immigrants twelve years of age or younger will almost always speak fluent English rather their native language by adulthood. This means maintaining bilingual education for these youth markedly interferes with their ability to learn English. We are creating a lifelong handicap by not demanding they learn English.

Was President Theodore Roosevelt correct in his assessment? Was William McKinley similarly correct when he stated, "The mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation?" We can be either a melting pot or a tower of Babel. Is there any way to be kinder to a new (legal) immigrant than to expect them to learn English, to allow them to become a citizen, and to ask them to join us as a fellow American? Wouldn't it be un-American to do anything less? "Out of many, one!"

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