

Graphic: "Yo Soy Chicano not Hispanic! Get it Right." in Elizabeth Martinez, ed. 500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures. Published by Southwest Organizing Project. (211 Tenth St. S.W. Albuquerque, NM 87102 505-247-8832. p. 233

# Language

The Unz Initiative would end bilingual education in public schools. Children will be required to learn English in one-year, sink-or-swim English "immersion" classes. Teachers, parents and language experts agree: it won't work.

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# Human Right

So what are millionaire software entrepreneur Ron Unz (who wrote the initiative) and the right-wing "English only" movement (that supports it) really up to? Unz attacks the Latino, Asian and African cultures that make up the majority of California's population. Unz strikes at the core of cultural identity, teaching shame and self-hatred to children of color and non-English speaking backgrounds.

Adding injury to insult, the Unz Initiative guarantees that millions of children will "fail" to learn English in the single year allowed ... and they will be marked for life as educationally inferior, fit only for the lowest-paying jobs, entitled to expect little and demand nothing from the society that exploits them.

Like anti-immigrant Proposition 187 and anti-affirmative action Proposition 209, the Unz Initiative is just another brick in California's wall of racism, cultural genocide, and economic injustice.

**Sunday, March 22, 1998 • 6pm**

**Pilar Mejía**

Principal of Cesar Chavez Elementary School

**Nancy Hernandez**

Voices of Struggle

**Pheobe Hirsh**

Bilingual Teacher from Santa Barbara

**New College of California**

766 Valencia Street, (between 18th & 19th Streets) SF

"Language is a Human Right." Event to protest Prop. 227. March 22, 1998.  
Sponsored by Fireworx. S.F. (Organization no longer exists.)

*for fighting against Prop 227*

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# OF WORDS

Colonialism,  
Language  
and  
English Only

by Jimmy Emerman

"Open up. This is the language police. We're investigating a report of Spanish speakers in this apartment."

A futuristic sci-fi nightmare? Perhaps, but in 1988, two years after English was declared the official language of the state of California, Latina and Filipina nurses at the University of California San Francisco Hospital were reprimanded for speaking Spanish and Tagalog on the job. The courts eventually overturned the English-only workplace rules, but that a "liberal" employer such as a major university would consider such rules in itself had chilling implications.

A nationwide movement whose proclaimed goal is making English the "official language" of the U.S. is spreading. In virtually every state where this idea has been brought to a popular vote, voters have overwhelmingly approved the measure.

The English Only Movement bases its appeal on a seemingly innocuous and obvious idea—that, as the glue that holds the U.S. together, the importance of English should be codified in law and protected. But scratch ever so slightly and blind patriotism and racism ooze to the surface. From concert-goers in Boston yelling for Linda Ronstadt to "sing in English" to Los Angeles school teachers demanding an end to bilingual education, the English Only movement is a breeding ground for racism.

Although most people, including many who support English Only, don't realize it, the movement is integrally tied to a U.S. state strategy evolved during the Reagan years. Its goals were to contain and overturn the process of revolution in Central America and undermine any potential support for national liberation struggles within the U.S.—particularly among Mexican people along the 1,000 mile border. At the same time,

Jimmy Emerman, "War of Words: Colonialism, Language and English Only." in Breakthrough. Winter, 1991. p. 22-27.

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English Only represents the continuation of a 500-year history of European colonization of non-white people in this hemisphere and its attendant chauvinism and arrogance, captured in this quote from Theodore Roosevelt:

We have room for but one language in this country and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house.

Colonialism, an attack on the sovereignty of a people, violates every aspect of the colonial subject's personality. Its chains include an ideology of superiority and inferiority, domination and submission, encoded in law, media, education, and other forms of culture. If all goes as planned, this sense of inferiority becomes embedded in the psyche of the colonized person.

Language is a key weapon in this war. The language of the colonizer represents the "pinnacle of civilization." That of the "native," "barbarism." Franz Fanon, whose reflections on colonialism seeded national liberation theory around the world, observed:

Every colonized people — in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality — finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle.<sup>1</sup>

This dynamic of cultural imperialism and cultural resistance is a constant theme in the history of African, indigenous, and Spanish-speaking peoples colonized by the U.S.

### BLACK ENGLISH AND SLAVERY

The African slave trade represented the first need to control language. In order to minimize the risk of rebellion on board the slave ships, slaving captains had a conscious strategy of placing speakers of different African languages together, preventing communication. Captain William Smith, in *A New Voyage to Guinea in 1744*, described how by "having some of every Sort on board, there will be no more Likelihood of their succeeding in a Plot, than of finishing the Tower of Babel."<sup>2</sup> Once Africans arrived in the Americas, slave makers had the job of preparing them for life as chattel. Among other techniques, they would forbid the speaking of African languages and separate babies from their parents, so that new generations would forget their African roots.

In the clutches of slavery, separated from others of their tribe, Africans developed a new language, Black English, utilizing a combination of English and Africanisms and retaining many grammatical structures

of African language. Black English, or Ebonics, is the language spoken by many Black people in the U.S. today. In the South Carolina Sea Islands, physical isolation allowed for the purest preservation of the original plantation creole. This language, Gullah, is still spoken by about a quarter of a million Blacks, who retain tremendous pride in their language. In the words of Janey Hunter, a 70 year old Gullah speaker, "I keep my Gullah language too, 'cos I love it, and that's me. I can speak other language, but I love my Gullah language. If you disown that, you're disowning your parents."<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to the intent of the slaveocracy, the development of this new Black English played a critical role in the creation of a new national identity among Africans in the U.S. According to Sterling Stuckey, in a brilliant study, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundation of Black America*:

There was, inevitably, some unevenness of movement toward cultural oneness because of the language factor alone; some years in the New World were required before those from different ethnic backgrounds achieved cultural oneness by being able to use the same language. Ironically, it was a degree of harmony that could not be reached through African languages.<sup>4</sup>

Although most of the white power structure which governs Black people's lives—school teachers, social service workers, and employers—deny the validity of Black English and seek to suppress its use, linguistic research has refuted the notion that Black English is a "lazier" or "sloppier" version of white English. In fact, Black English is a fully-developed language, complete with a grammar and vocabulary as sophisticated as any other. Even among those Blacks who use white English to function in a racist society where conformity to white norms is a prerequisite for success, Black English is what most Black people speak when they're with other Black people.

### WITH A FORKED TONGUE: WHITE-WASHING NATIVE LANGUAGES

Unlike Africans, whose stolen labor was considered essential for the new colonies, Native Americans were basically in the way. In the 1830s, President Andrew Jackson initiated the forcible removal of Indian tribes from the eastern U.S. The forced march to Oklahoma, The Trail of Tears, resulted in the deaths of one-third of the Indians. Confined to reservations, a conscious educational policy was developed, designed to destroy Native culture.

In the case of the Cherokee nation, this involved dismantling one of the most effective bilingual education systems in history. The Cherokees had been guaranteed their language rights by treaty in 1828. After their forced exodus to the West, they established a system of 21 Cherokee language schools which attained a literacy rate of 90 percent. According to a federal study, these schools made such widespread use of bilingual

materials that by the 1850s Cherokees had a higher *English* literacy level than whites in Arkansas or Texas.

This was not to last. By 1879, the U.S. government began dismantling bilingual schools and mandating instruction in English only. In 1886, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported:

I [have] expressed very decidedly the idea that Indians should be taught the English language only. There is not an Indian pupil whose tuition and maintenance is paid for by the United States Government who is

permitted to study *any* other language than our own vernacular — the language of the greatest, most powerful, and enterprising nationalities under the sun. The English language as taught in America is good enough for all her people of all races...

The Commissioner suggested removing Indian children *en masse*, forcibly if necessary, to boarding schools away from their families, because:

The greatest difficulty is experienced in freeing the children attending day school from the language and habits of their untutored and often savage parents. When they return to their homes at night and on Saturdays and Sundays, and are among their own surroundings, they relapse more or less into their former moral and mental stupor.<sup>5</sup>

Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a Northern Cheyenne, described the experience. "Both my grandparents were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in boarding schools. One of the first English words Indian students learned was *soap*, because their mouths were constantly being washed out for using their native language." Of course, literacy in English and Native languages declined precipitously. By 1969, only 40 percent of Cherokee adults were functionally literate in any language.

#### PUERTO RICO: A MODEL COLONIALISM

After the U.S. seized Puerto Rico in 1898, a U.S. Commissioner of Education, Victor S. Clark was appointed to oversee the transformation of the Puerto Rican schools into model colonialist institutions:

A majority of the people...do not speak pure Spanish. Their language is a patois almost unintelligible to the natives of Barcelona and Madrid. It possesses no literature and little value as an intellectual medium... English is the chief source, practically the only source,

of democratic ideals for Puerto Rico. There may be little that they learn to remember, but the English school reader itself provides a body of ideas and concepts which are not to be had in any other way.<sup>6</sup>

In 1909, the U.S. moved to abolish the teaching of Spanish in Puerto Rican public schools. Schoolmasters were ordered to give instruction exclusively in English. These measures provoked an angry response; children from six to ten years of age refused to attend their classes unless they were taught in Spanish. Some children who refused to learn English were turned out into the streets.

Puerto Ricans responded by setting up a Spanish language school for those who had been expelled.

In 1916 the Commissioner compromised, allowing

Spanish instruction in grades 1-4, Spanish and English in fifth grade, with English only in higher levels. Although this policy remained in effect until the late 1940s, to this day Puerto Ricans speak Spanish as their native language. The reasons for the ultimate failure to impose English in Puerto Rico are captured in the sentiments of Cayetano Coll y Cuchi, a member of the Puerto Rican House of Delegates at the time of the 1909 student strike: "We knew perfectly well that the soul of a people is incarnated in its language. We would have preferred being without a country, to losing our native tongue."<sup>7</sup>

#### SILENCING THE BORDER

The seizure of half of Mexico between 1836 and 1848 — the current states of Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California, Colorado, Nevada and Utah — had a devastating impact on Mexican people living in these territories. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ceding these territories to the U.S., guaranteed the original inhabitants land and water rights, as well as use of their own language and customs. But prevailing European chauvinism and outright settler greed made a mockery of the letter and spirit of the Treaty.

The first school administrations in the areas taken from Mexico were controlled by Anglos who knew little or no Spanish. Teachers, trained in the educational system of the early 1900s, would, in the description of Carey McWilliams, "invest their position, on this issue, with an emotional halo of moral and patriotic self-righteousness... it seemed both heretical and disloyal,

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despite the guarantees of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, to tolerate any form of bilingualism."<sup>8</sup>

This situation persisted well into the 1970s. A 1972 U.S. Civil Rights Commission study showed that 40 percent of Mexican children in educationally and mentally retarded classes in the Southwest were there *because they did not speak English*. Schools which discouraged the use of any Spanish in elementary classes ranged from 13.5 percent in California to 66.4 percent in Texas. In the Rio Grande Valley, "Spanish detention" — punishment for speaking Spanish in class — remained in effect until the late 1960s. Until 1973, it was against the law to use any language other than English for instruction in Texas schools.<sup>9</sup>

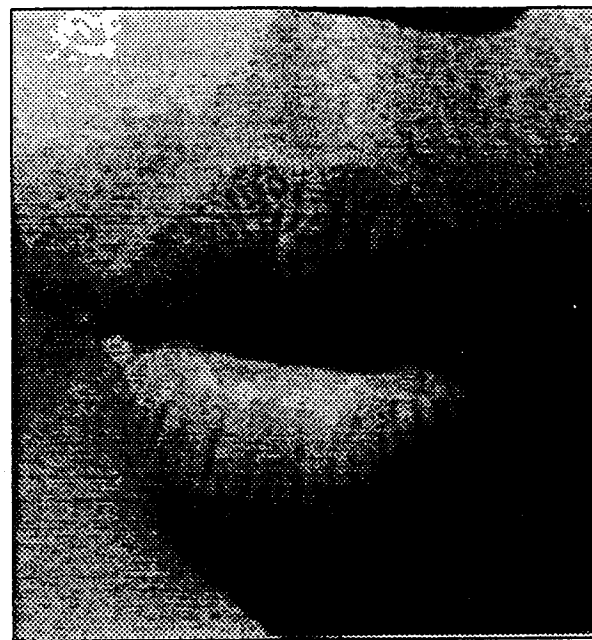
Suppression of Spanish meshed with a systematic neglect of Mexican history and culture. At the time of the Civil Rights Commission report, only 0.7 percent of Mexican secondary school children were enrolled in Chicano history courses, and 0.9 percent in Mexican history courses in the entire Southwest.<sup>10</sup>

These issues became a focus of Chicano organizing in the late 60s and 70s. Bilingual and bicultural education became a mass demand and eventually led to federal legislation requiring education in student's native languages, as a transition to English proficiency. Many activists went beyond this however, arguing that *maintenance* of native language and culture was a critical condition for their liberation. The politics of "la Raza" led to a revival of interest in Mexican history and culture and the development of a strong sense of

maica, and the first steps towards the invasion of Panama.

These interventions are well known. More surprising is the preoccupation of the Reagan administration with the prospect of revolution engulfing Mexico, with ominous implications for the U.S. This view dominated the thinking of key members of the Reagan administration, such as Constantine Menges, special assistant to the National Security Council. In his 1988 memoir, *Inside the National Security Council: The Making and Unmaking of Reagan's Foreign Policy*, Menges presents his perspective on Mexico:

... the Mexico of the late 1980s is a very fragile land. Since 1983 this sun-drenched but poverty-ridden nation has been in the throes of a visible economic and hidden political crisis that threatens its political system... If communist groups succeed in taking over most of



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solidarity with the rest of Latin America, "nuestras Americas."

By the time Ronald Reagan stepped into the Oval Office in 1980, armed with his strategy for intervention in Latin America, the U.S. right wing saw solidarity between Chicano/Mexicano activists in the Southwest and national liberation struggles south of the border as a national security threat, fueled by the bilingual movement.

## CHAOS ON OUR DOORSTEP?

Reagan and his cronies orchestrated an eight-year full-scale assault on progressive and revolutionary movements in Central America and the Caribbean: an enormous military build-up in Honduras, billions of dollars in military aid and U.S. advisors to El Salvador's death squad government, a resumption of aid to Guatemala, a murderous CIA/contra war and economic blockade against Nicaragua, the invasion of Grenada, the destabilization of the Manley government in Ja-

maica, this will likely produce a major communist effort to take power in Mexico.... This would mean that after two centuries of secure borders, for the first time the people of the United

States would be face to face on land with one hundred million people under communist control and allied with Cuba and the Soviet bloc.

By invoking a vision of chaos on the border, a flood of Mexican refugees, or armed infiltration by Communist guerrillas, a case was being made to militarize the border and clamp down on illegal immigration.

Right-wing preoccupation with Mexico did not stop at the border. In 1985, the Council on Inter-American Security — a right-wing think-tank made up of counter-insurgency experts, retired military officers, contras, U.S. Senators and Congressmen, many with links to the State and Defense Departments — published *On Creating A Hispanic America: A Nation Within A Nation?* The report was authored by R.E. "Rusty" Butler,

a businessman, columnist and consultant for the National Council on Educational Research, an English Only lobbying group.

With sharply racist overtones, Butler warned of the impending population explosion which will make Mexicans a majority in the Southwest in the early part of the next century. He pointed to a pattern of increasing immigration from Mexico to the U.S., as well as the higher fertility rate of Mexicans compared to whites.

Butler focused on Mexican nationalism as a serious threat to the physical integrity of the U.S. He traced the idea of Aztlán, a Chicano homeland, from the 1960s to the position of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional

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Mexicano, which advocates socialist reunification with Mexico. According to *A Nation Within A Nation?*, short-sighted language policies which cater to Mexican nationalist sentiment by teaching Spanish—and, worst of all, promote Mexican pride and encourage maintenance of national culture—create the conditions in which this “subversion” can flourish. His solution—classic counter-insurgency theory—is to dry up the ocean (the Mexican people), so the fish (Mexican nationalist guerrillas) have nowhere to swim. In this case the ocean is Spanish and dehydrating agent is the English Language Amendment.

With *A Nation Within A Nation?*, U.S. counter-insurgency thinking came full circle: from Central America, up through Mexico, and into the Southwest. And with this linkage, came the origins of a new mass political movement, English Only, integrally tied to the strategies of intervention in Central America and militarization of the border.

#### THE ENGLISH ONLY MOVEMENT

In 1983, Larry Pratt, a former Virginia State Legislator and a director of the Council for Inter-American

Security founded English First. Pratt is a direct-mail entrepreneur whose other political action committees include U.S. Border Control and Gun Owners of America. English First lists members of 20 state legislatures on its advisory council and claims a membership in excess of 200,000.

The other major organization, U.S. English, claims a membership of more than 350,000, with over 100,000 in California alone. The organization has an annual budget of \$7 million. Its stated purpose is “to defend the public interest in the growing debate on bilingualism and biculturalism.”

U.S. English was founded by Dr. John Tanton, a Michigan ophthalmologist, and S.I. Hiyakawa, a former U.S. Senator from California. (As President of San Francisco State University, Hiyakawa was known for his racist attacks on Black studies and his suppression of student activism in the 60s.) Founded in 1983, U.S. English was an off-shoot of another Tanton brainchild, FAIR, the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a Washington, D.C. lobbying group advocating strict immigration regulation. Tanton is also immersed in a web of anti-immigration and zero population growth organizations, all supported by ultra-right wing

foundations, known for their support of racist causes.

With the tenure of William Bennett as Secretary of Education, the English Only forces secured the commanding heights

of educational policy-making. Bennett launched an attack on bilingualism in September of 1985, when he criticized bilingual education programs as ineffective in making a rapid transition from non-English to English. Two months later, he made another speech equating the ability to speak and read English with loyalty and citizenship. According to the Department of Education, public response was overwhelmingly positive.

English Only advocates advanced to key positions within the Department of Education. In 1987, Bennett hired Rusty Butler, author of *A Nation Within A Nation?*, as a special assistant on post-secondary education. Gary Imhoff, a U.S. English consultant, was hired to review and evaluate materials used in teacher-training for bilingual education programs. His job was to determine whether maintaining non-English languages and cultures was being promoted over the goal of English proficiency. In a book co-authored with former Colorado governor Richard Lamm entitled *Immigration Time Bomb*, Imhoff had argued that assimilation of immigrants had to take precedence over the preservation of cultural identity, even at the expense of lowered educational expectations: “If we can’t afford school dropouts, who are a natural by-product of displacement and culture shock, then we can’t afford immigration.”

To date, English Only legislation has been passed in

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18 states, most recently Colorado and Florida. Additional states are targeted by U.S. English for campaigns, particularly New York and Texas which have been identified as key states along with California and Florida. The ultimate goal of the movement is to get legislation passed in 34 states, enough to secure an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Thus, step by step, the English Only movement is building a mass base to suppress non-English speaking people.

**"DELIBERATELY INFLECTING  
CONDITIONS OF LIFE ..."**

In a country where 96 percent of the population speaks English, the idea that the dominance of English might be threatened or overwhelmed by Spanish is absurd. The visions conjured up by English Only advocates, almost uniformly, of cultural fragmentation and civil war, mask a harsher reality: Mexican people living inside U.S. borders are in imminent danger of losing Spanish along with their national cultural heritage. Seven out of ten children of Spanish-speaking immigrant parents become English speakers, and their children — the third generation — grow up with English as their native language. Among Mexican people whose roots in the Southwest go back to the U.S. occupation and seizure of northern Mexico, the decimation of Mexican cultural heritage and loss of Spanish language proficiency is intensified.

Now we have the development of a mass movement, born and bred of white supremacy and U.S. chauvinism, whose goal is the eradication of any vestige of this language and culture from the public educational system in particular and U.S. society generally. When the larger context of attacks on Mexican people is taken into consideration — the continual violation of land and water rights, the militarization of the border, and other attempts to isolate Mexican people on this side of the border from any contact with the southern part of the Mexican nation — the implications are clear. We are facing a concerted campaign to destroy Mexican national identity.

According to the United Nations, genocide is defined as "deliberately inflicting conditions of life, designed to destroy, in whole or in part, a people, nation, religious or ethnic group." When the intent is to destroy a people's language and heritage, the term cultural genocide is most appropriate. For all its claims to be protecting the English language, the English Only movement must be exposed for what it really is: a strategy of cultural genocide against Mexican people.

Yet, despite a deliberate strategy to deny colonized people in the U.S. the use of their languages, Spanish, Black English and Native American languages persist. In most cases, this is simply the refusal of a people to sacrifice their national identity and accept their disappearance as culturally distinct people. But the struggle to reclaim a national language, like other aspects of the struggle for national culture, can become part of a

**conscious political strategy to resist cultural genocide:**

To fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material cornerstone which makes the building of a culture possible... A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. A national culture should take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom. <sup>11</sup>

Stopping English Only is more than just replacing restrictionism with democratic pluralism. It is an integral part of a struggle by Mexican people to maintain their national identity — Mexicanidad — in the face of a political, economic and cultural onslaught aimed at destroying them. It has to be linked with efforts to hold onto Mexican-owned land in the Southwest, with a campaign to stop repression by the Migra (immigration police) and against the militarization of the border.

The Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Mexicano and the Colorado Coalition Against English Only are building a National Coalition Against English Only that projects this perspective. The Coalition is organizing a national education campaign to expose English Only and develop grassroots resistance to any attempt to use English Only laws against non-English speakers. For more information about the Coalition and its activities, contact them at: 98 Wadsworth Blvd., Ste. 127-170, Lakewood, CO 80226, (303) 922-7243. □

**Footnotes**

1. *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.18.
2. *The Story of English*, Robert McCrum, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil, Penguin Books, New York, 1986, p. 200.
3. *The Story of English*, p. 209.
4. Oxford University Press, New York, 1987, p. 23.
5. *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1886, p. xxiii.
6. From *The Puerto Rican Papers of Victor S. Clark*, cited in *The Puerto Ricans: A Documentary History*, Edited by Kal Wagenheim with Olga Jimenez de Wagenheim, Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1973, p. 141 and *Puerto Rico: Flames of Resistance*, by Peoples Press, p.36.
7. Cited in *Puerto Rico: A Documentary History*, p. 181.
8. Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1968, pp. 298-299.
9. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "The Excluded Student: Educational Practices Affecting Mexican Americans in the Southwest," *Mexican American Education Study, Report iii*, Washington, DC, Government Printing Office, 1972, pp. 13-16, 19.
10. U.S. Civil Rights Commission, p. 34.
11. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 233.