

What about the National Anthem

By Louis P. Solomon

The current furor surrounding Spanish-language adaptation of the American National anthem called “Nuestro Himno” is an interesting issue that has recently arisen. When I first heard about what was going on, I laughed. Surely, I misunderstood. But, as it turns out, I did not.



Let me try to tell the reader about my views about immigrants. I am for them. They are the life blood of the growth of the United States. They bring vitality to the American fabric that is important to our continued growth as a people. The different points of view and ranking of priorities cause us to consider how this country operates. We should do this frequently, if not continually. These different points of view, brought to us by new immigrant arrivals, are good for the country. This country, since well before the *Declaration of Independence* of 1776, was a magnet for all sorts of people with different backgrounds, opinions, cultures, and ways in which they led their lives. In the course of time the country became established as an English speaking nation. I would like to point out that several languages were possible for the United States to adopt, one of which was German. But, circumstances and historical events made English the language of the country.

How was the use of English as the primary language of communication perceived by the newcomers coming to our shores? In a very simplified tale, generally the new arrivals wanted to become part of our fabric. They wanted to mix and meld into the melting pot. The newcomers maintained their languages and customs by frequently settling with people who came from their original country, but this was for ease of communications, living, and other issues. And, with time, they spread throughout the continental United States. What was interesting was that many went to night school and made serious efforts to learn English. In the language of today, they were learning English as a second language. It was absolutely clear to all the people who immigrated to our shores, particularly in the early 20th century, that if they wanted to be “real” Americans, they would have to learn English, and they did.

When they had children they sent them to local schools and forced them to learn English, and use it well. There are many tales of the early 20th century how families who had to deal with the local authorities on some issue had their children come with them to translate and mitigate the problems of language. As the children grew up, married, and had children of their own, the grandchildren went through an equally intensive learning process but something interesting happened. The grandchildren learned the original language and talked with their grandparents about their original country of origin. The second generation of immigrants was interested in their heritage and learned much from their grandparents.

In the wars of the 20th century our so-called immigrant population volunteered and fought with their fellow American citizens to preserve our freedoms, customs, and way of life. Many Americans of German descent fought in the Pacific Theater. [It was felt that sending them to Europe was not a good idea because they might be too angry to calmly deal with any Germans they would encounter.] Interned Japanese Americans volunteered to serve in the Japanese-American 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442d Regimental Combat Team during World War II. They were the most decorated unit in the United States Army; at least 680 of them were killed in action fighting the Germans in Italy.

The complex fabric of life in the United States varies from region to region. It is impossible to find a region that has not been affected in major ways by “immigrants” who are now part and parcel of the American spectrum. Poll after poll has shown that there are no such things as the Hispanic vote, or Jewish vote, or Chinese vote. As soon as the results of any such poll are seriously examined it turns out that the opinions about any subject vary across the entire political spectrum. While one can define the main stream of an ethnic vote, the variations are substantial. The views on any given subject are as diverse as the descendants of immigrants of 300 years ago. So, what does this all have to do with the concept of a Spanish version of

the National Anthem?

The national anthem is a song that was written by Francis Scott Key, celebrating the continued existence of Fort McHenry after its bombardment by the British Fleet in Baltimore Harbor during the war of 1812. Key wrote down the words that eventually became “The Star Spangled Banner.” As far as we know, Key never intended it to be anything but a poem. Eventually it became a song, using a tune from a drinking song written by John Stafford Smith for the Anacreonic Society, probably around 1771.

What is quite interesting is that nothing much happened to make “The Star Spangled Banner” into the National Anthem until Woodrow Wilson decided to encourage its playing by the military services in 1916. One thing led to another, and finally on 3 March 1931 Congress passed the law that made it the National Anthem.

The words of the National Anthem are OK. They are rather anti-British, particularly in the third verse. The song is quite difficult to sing, since the range of the music covers several octaves. I personally have never liked the music of song, and have always had trouble singing it. (I have no singing ability whatsoever). There are several songs that could have been much better for us to adopt as a National Anthem. “America, the Beautiful,” comes to mind as does “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean.” But, at the present time the National Anthem is “The Star Spangled Banner.” That can be changed by an Act of Congress, something very unlikely to happen.

The key point is that the National Anthem is a single focus for all Americans. It is something that all Americans, or would-be Americans, can sing together, with pride. It is an integrating act. The concept of having the National Anthem in a different language for a minority of the population is flying in the face of the entire idea. If you think it is an integrating force to have the National Anthem sung in Spanish, then what about other languages? How about Hebrew? What about Gaelic? German? Urdu?

To focus on other nations, let us consider La Marseillaise, which is in French. How do you think the French would consider having La Marseillaise translated and then sung in Arabic? Remember that southern France now has a large minority of Arabic speaking people from North Africa. Consider the British Anthem, “God Save the Queen.” How about translating that into German and having that sung in British schools?

I have no objection to changing the National Anthem, but I think that the idea of having different language versions of “The Star Spangled Banner” is a bad idea.