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*By Tim Schultz, U.S. ENGLISH.*

***A Spanish 51st State?  
Puerto Rico draws closer to statehood.***

Imagine that New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, citing his state's "unique linguistic and cultural heritage," signed into law a bill with the following provisions:

- 1) English and Spanish are the co-official languages of New Mexico, but government agencies, courts, and the legislature will operate in Spanish, with English translations available only upon request.
- 2) English will be taught in New Mexico's schools as a foreign language, with students receiving a mandatory 50 minutes of instruction per day in English.
- 3) New Mexico will seek an exemption from the provisions of federal law that require students with limited English proficiency to be given standardized tests in English within three years.

Governor Richardson is a colorful character, but not that colorful. As a presidential candidate in 2004, he passionately argued that Spanish should not be a co-official language with English, let alone be given "first language" status.

Remarkably, Nancy Pelosi will soon bring to the floor a bill that would allow Puerto Rico to become the 51st U.S. state without changing policies that are identical to those in our hypothetical New Mexico. It is rumored that the Puerto Rico Democracy Act (H.R. 2499) will be placed on the rarely used "suspension calendar," barring any floor amendments and suggesting that the measure is less about democracy than about Democratic electoral power.

Puerto Rico's political status is complex, and the Act counts 58 Republicans among its 181 co-sponsors, including thoughtful conservatives like Indiana's Mike Pence. Whatever the complexities, though, thoughtful people should agree that no state in the Union legally treats English as its "second" language, let alone as a foreign language, and a Puerto Rican state should not be an exception.

Led by Puerto Rico's formidable pro-statehood Del. Pedro Pierluisi, the Act's supporters make two attractive arguments that fall apart under closer inspection. First, they contend that the Act merely creates an island-wide referendum, and therefore vindicates self-determination rather than statehood per se. But since the current U.S.–Puerto Rico "commonwealth" relationship has no legal sunset date and will endure unless Congress acts to change it, passage of H.R. 2499 must at

least be acknowledged as making statehood infinitely more likely. The bill divides the island along hard party lines: It is supported by Pierluisi's New Progressive party and opposed by the pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic party.

The Act's supporters also soothingly assert that the Act-created referendum is locally funded and legally non-binding: It is meant merely to inform Congress of Puerto Ricans' will. If the measure really only creates a "poll by ballot box," however, one wonders why Puerto Rico's solidly pro-statehood legislature does not initiate an identical process rather than doing the heavy lifting of seeking the congressional seal of approval.

While the bill is technically non-binding, in the sense that no legislation binds future Congresses from changes, it is hardly morally non-binding. Puerto Ricans are born with U.S. citizenship, and Congress would scarcely react to a vote for statehood in a congressionally sanctioned election with a shrug. If Congress issues what amounts to an invitation to vote for statehood now, only to change the terms of the deal later, it would be a slap in the face of American citizens that would draw international outrage.

Congress can avoid this course by consulting history. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote, in his book *Pandaemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics*: "In two centuries, the United States Congress has admitted thirty-seven new states to the original Union of thirteen. But always a stated or unstated condition was that English be the official language. Louisiana, for example, might and did retain the Code Napoleon, but trials were to be in English. . . . E pluribus unum."

Like Puerto Rico, the territories that became Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma all entered the Union with large and historically rooted non-English-speaking populations. To ensure assimilation, the congressional enabling acts in all three cases required that "schools shall always be conducted in English." Congress should condition statehood on lifting Puerto Rico's exemption from the federal requirements that standardized tests be given to limited-English-proficient students within three years of entering school.

The foreignness of English in Puerto Rico is greater in magnitude than it was in any state at any time in our national experience. Census data show that just 20 percent of the island's residents speak English fluently. By comparison, California has the lowest proficiency rate among the 50 states, but its 80 percent proficiency rate dwarfs Puerto Rico's. The deeply rooted preference for Spanish makes Puerto Rico's 1993 elevation of English to "co-official" status practically irrelevant. Authentic "official English" policies increase English learning, but they will not work when English is merely an add-on to a pre-existing official language that is spoken in 95 percent of homes. Congress should condition statehood on making English the sole official language, which would still allow Spanish translations for a population in transition while insisting on acceptance of the lingua franca of the Union.

Both of these changes would require a sea change in Puerto Rico. But acceptance of a "Spanish first" state would be a sea change for the Union. Courtesy to our fellow citizens requires that they be honestly informed of all the costs and benefits if they are to join us in the Union.

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