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Speaking Spanish and Assimilating

by Jacob G. Hornberger

I'm always intrigued by people who complain that Latino immigrants who don't learn English aren't "assimilating" within American society.

Consider my hometown of Laredo, Texas, where I was practicing law in the 1970s. The jury pool for judicial trials consisted of citizens whose names had been taken from the voter rolls. Before jury selection, the judge would ask the jury pool (through a Spanish interpreter) whether there was anyone who could not speak or write English. Inevitably about 20 percent of the group would raise their hands. They would be excused from jury service.

Now, keep in mind that all these people were American citizens. Most, if not all, of them had been born and raised in the United States. They did not speak or write English. They communicated in Spanish.

So what? The judge didn't berate them. He politely thanked them for coming and excused them to return to their daily lives. In fact, hardly anyone gave it a second thought. It was just no big deal. It was part of the culture of our (American) society. It was these Americans' own business whether to learn English or not.

On a recent visit to Laredo, I conducted an informal survey in a restaurant where I was eating lunch. I walked around the various tables to see how many conversations were in English and how many in Spanish. About 90 percent were in Spanish. Everyone seemed to be enjoying himself, and I doubt whether very many of them were asking themselves whether they had been properly assimilated into American life.

A few years ago, I walked into the Laredo Wal-Mart, where a store employee was greeting the customers as they walked into the store. He would quickly, almost instinctively, size up each customer and then say, "Buenos dias, señora," or "Good morning, ma'am." No one got offended if she were greeted in the wrong language.

In Laredo, many, if not most, of the street signs contain Spanish names, which shouldn't surprise anyone who is familiar with the history of the American Southwest. Laredo was once part of the northern half of Mexico, the part that the United States forcibly absorbed in 1848. In

fact, when that event took place Laredoans didn't even want to be part of the United States but were forced to do so anyway. If Laredoans had had their way, they would still be an independent nation — the Republic of the Rio Grande — that is, if the Mexican dictator Santa Anna had not brutally suppressed their secession.

Have Laredoans been assimilated into the United States after more than a century and a half of having been forcibly absorbed into this country? Certainly a large portion of the population doesn't speak English. And many Laredoans who are bilingual prefer to communicate in Spanish with friends and neighbors. Laredoans closely monitor political, cultural, and sport events in Mexico, sometimes even more so than similar events in the United States. I wouldn't be surprised if Univision is more popular in the community than the English-language channels. I know at least one Laredoan, who is an American citizen by birth, who does not speak English and who watches Univision exclusively. (I confess that I myself periodically watch one of the many soap operas on Univision, primarily to maintain my Spanish; they are actually much better than American soap operas because they end after a few months.)

What does the “assimilation” crowd say about Laredo and Laredoans? Do they consider Laredo and Laredoans assimilated after 150 years of absorption despite the fact that a large portion of the population still speaks Spanish? If not, what does the assimilation crowd propose to do about them? Send Laredo's Spanish-speakers to some sort of federal reeducation camp? Convert them into felons for speaking Spanish in the United States? Force them to give up their American citizenship and move to Mexico?

In fact, I've often wondered what those who bring up the assimilation argument say about the Mexicans who were automatically made American citizens when the United States forcibly absorbed the northern half of Mexico, a country that had been under Mexican, Spanish, and Indian rule for centuries. Were those people considered automatically assimilated even though they all spoke Spanish and had been Mexicans the day before the absorption? I wonder if U.S. officials worried about that before they absorbed Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, all of which had experienced centuries of Mexican, Spanish, and Indian culture, laws, and tradition.

Have Laredoans been assimilated 150 years after the U.S. absorption of their city? Well, while many Laredoans still speak Spanish Laredo has long had the biggest celebration in the nation honoring George Washington's birthday — bigger even than those in Washington, D.C.! As part of that celebration, Laredoans have a big parade which is attended by people who speak both Spanish and English. No one much seems to care which language is being used by people enjoying the parade, and everyone seems to have a good time regardless of which language is being spoken. Now, it's true that Laredo also has a jalapeño festival as part of its George Washington Birthday celebration, but still — wouldn't a [month-long event honoring the father of our country](#) constitute fairly strong circumstantial evidence that Laredo and Laredoans have been “assimilated” despite the fact that so many Laredoans still speak Spanish in daily conversation?

The language a person speaks says nothing about the speaker's character, honesty, or integrity. Language is simply a means by which people communicate with each other. In fact, if you were to ask those people who object to people's speaking Spanish in the United States why they nevertheless refer to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and El Paso, rather than to The Angels, St. Francis, and The Pass, they would undoubtedly give the same answer that Spanish-speaking Americans would give, "Because it's easier for me to communicate and be understood using the Spanish names rather than their English equivalents."

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