

Immigration Reform Stumbles as Inarticulate President Bumbles
(*Bush's "splain yourself, Lucy" problem*)

The Washington Times

Inarticulate on immigration

TODAY'S COLUMNIST

By Terry Michael

May 18, 2006

There are many reasons President Bush's approval ratings have sunk to Carter and Nixonian depths, but not least is his "splain yourself, Lucy" problem with English as his first language.

Mass-mediated politics demands that a leader be able to articulate, in simple and evocative terms, both policy and vision. Think FDR's radio chats with the country, Kennedy's televised press conferences and Reagan's masterful State of the Union performances.

Mr. Bush is paying a political price for this deficit of leadership on one of the few things he's gotten almost right lately, immigration reform. He can't seem to explain himself any better than could the hapless, but well-intentioned, TV wife to her 1950s Latino immigrant husband. Instead of broadening public support with a clear, principled, history-informed case for liberal immigration policy, Mr. Bush's poll-driven address Monday night muddled the debate even more by introducing the specter of a militarized border.

It is not just the disaffected center to whom the president seems tongue-tied. He can't convince much of his conservative base that assimilative immigration is old-fashioned Americanism, good for the country.

Though this president seems book-averse, he might bolster his ability to communicate on this crucial problem if he were to read Michael Barone's brilliant "The New Americans: How the Melting Pot Can Work Again." Published five years ago this month by the conservative Regnery press, the book should be required reading for populist/nativist-inclined Republicans. But it could also enlighten Democratic left-liberals, who make weak proponents of immigration with their fetish of "multiculturalism" — a benign-sounding word, by which most really mean a new form of segregation.

Left-lib multi-cultis almost gleefully posit a "majority minority" nation, in which white males get their comeuppance from tribes of "people of color" (didn't we give up the stereotype "colored people" four decades ago?), while know-nothings on the right whip up anti-immigrant bias by suggesting threats to everything from jobs to racial purity, ignoring the fact that many of their own ancestors were targets of the same charges.

Mr. Barone dismisses both nativist and multiculturalist nonsense with a political and cultural history-packed contrast of the new immigrants and their 19th century counterparts.

With illuminating detail that could come only from this one-man encyclopedia of American political geography and demography, the author of “The Almanac of American Politics” compares Asians, Hispanics and blacks of today with, respectively, Jewish, Italian and Irish newcomers of a century or more ago. (He casts African Americans as virtual immigrants, as they began to migrate into the larger Caucasian American culture in the mid-20th Century.) Many immigrants of the 19th century, he notes, were thought of as another race, incapable of assimilation into the civic culture that has made America so strong. Those who contend that today’s “minorities” are greater victims because they are so identifiable by skin color are simply clueless about how the Irish, for example, were easily singled out by earlier nativists.

But, Mr. Barone explains, the late-20th and early-21st-century immigrants won’t be “minorities” for more than a few generations, any more than their earlier counterparts were stuck in time as outsiders. He offers this summary of his arguments, which is also a powerful case against today’s liberal race-consciousness, virtually promoted on American college campuses and by mainstream news organizations that insist on seeing far too much through the prism of race: “America in the future will be multiracial and multiethnic, but it will not or should not be multicultural in the sense of containing ethnic communities marked off from and adversarial to the larger society, any more than today’s America consists of unassimilated and adversarial communities of Irish, Italians or Jews.”

Congressional Democrats aren’t going to help this president make that kind of intelligent case for immigration, because too many of them want a 2006 and 2008 campaign issue more than they desire sensible reform. A few, like Edward Kennedy in the Senate, are interested in a serious effort to find accommodation with those who favor tough enforcement of statutes against illegal entry, while taking a practical approach to legalizing the 12 million or so who have entered without documentation in the past few decades.

But on this hugely important challenge, the nation pays a policy price for a president recently reduced to differing with his wife on whether the national anthem can be sung appropriately in Spanish. Without effective presidential leadership, if we do reach a compromise, it may well be a bad one.

If only we had a leader with a Trumanesque knowledge of immigration history and a Reaganesque talent for selling assimilation. ‘Splain yourself, Dubya.

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