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THE IRONY OF “SI SE PUEDE”

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By Michael C. Maibach

We have a Presidential race building in America – and it is all about “Change”. While we may differ as to how America should change, most agree our nation has some soul searching to do. And it’s about far more than for whom we will vote. It’s about America’s place in the world, and the nature of our republic – that “last, best hope of mankind” Lincoln spoke of during a time of “change” when our nation almost split in two. Think of the loss to the world had that happened in 1863.

In fact, the world is changing. Man’s technology has gotten hold of people, products, and politics, and connected them on a scale and at a speed never known in human history. This time of testing we are feeling is felt in most every nation. But given America is the *country of change* - the true revolutionary on the planet – the choices we make will affect people and places far beyond our borders. Let us therefore choose and act wisely.

This begins with choosing our words wisely, for words are the tools of democracy. Words allow reason to create resolution. The words of our leaders are powerful things. Barack Obama reminds us of this as he rides this *wave of change* on the power of his words. He says, “don’t tell me words don’t matter...”. Central to his message are words I heard in a speech he gave in California. “We don’t have red states and blue states -- we have the Untied States!” The crowd cheered, and many find resonance in that simple phrase. I do. Successful republics, after all, require civility and compromise. And then - ironically - he concluded that speech by saying “Yes we can! - Si se puede!” And the largely Hispanic crowd began to chant over and over, “Si se puede, si se puede, si se puede!” What was he thinking? In his quest for the support of ethnic voters has he forgotten the divisive power of Calhoun’s nullification speeches in the midst of the battle over slavery? Is this the path to election today, rhetorical winks to future societal divisions based on language?

The irony of that moment gave me pause. To be sure, Obama is not the only politician today who uses bilingual websites, Spanish radio ads, Spanish phone banks... and Spanish phrases like “si se puede” to entice the votes of our newest immigrants. But since he is the leader of a movement that is calling for American “unity”, it is both fair and imperative to ask him - and all our candidates at all levels - to re-think the use of a second language in a nation they seek to “unite”.

America is a nation of immigrants. We accept more legal immigrants than the rest of the world combined. Twice as many when one includes illegal immigrants. In a country comprised of people from every nation, we have only three things that unite us - our flag, our Constitution, and the language in which that Constitution is written - English. Americans can disagree about every policy considered by our government. But we must do so in a common language or face the primal forces of language separation that Canadians and Belgians can teach us much about to their regret.

Immigrants come to America because our society works so well. Not perfectly, but very well compared to most. Central to our success has been a tradition of political debates and campaigns carried out in words we all understand, in the language of the Declaration of Independence. By 2050, 30% of Americans will be Hispanic. The risk of "two Americas" is real. It would be a tragic irony if today's immigrants inherit an America where a future Presidential candidate would feel forced to proclaim to a divided nation "We don't have Spanish communities and English communities, we have American communities" - and millions not even understand those words. If on nothing else this election year, can we unite in telling our candidates that to reason with each other we must first understand each other? Yes, we can.

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| <u>US RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS</u> | <u>2005</u> | <u>2050</u> |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Caucasian | 67% | 47% |
| Hispanic | 14% | 29% |
| Black | 13% | 13% |
| Asian | 5% | 9% |

Source: Pew Research Center 2008