

Languages Don't Bind People

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OVER AND OVER, those who want to make English the United States' one official language have claimed that this is necessary to prevent the balkanization of America. Now that thousands of young Americans are about to become acquainted with the real Balkans, we may all finally learn the true lesson from that region. Intercommunal savagery like that occurring in Bosnia is not due to linguistic or other cultural differences, but to the ambitions of demagogues who exploit fears of those differences. Playing on intolerance will be the quickest way to balkanize America.

The prelude to the war in Yugoslavia began in 1987 when a Belgrade politician, Slobodan Milosevic, in order to gain a majority in the largest ethnic group and thus seize control of the ruling party, whipped up Serbs' anxieties about their failing economy by blaming the troubles on other ethnic groups. He soon was joined by other opportunistic politicians, who dredged up ancient enmities against the Croats and a mythical "Muslim fundamentalist" threat to keep everybody distracted from the Serb leaders' disastrous economic policies. The Croats under Franjo Tudjman responded in kind, holding even their pacific Serb neighbors responsible for the sins of Milosevic and company. Lately all this nationalistic pressure has driven some of the Muslims in Sarajevo - a city famous for its tolerance - to similar chauvinistic attacks. Why did this work? There are many things that divide the warring groups in former Yugoslavia, besides ancient history and symbolism. One is religion, even though most of the so-called Bosnian Muslims, Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs were not especially observant before the war. But the most important difference is economic: Before the war, Croatia and the urbanized parts of Bosnia, especially around Sarajevo, enjoyed far higher standards of living than landlocked Serbia, partly because of their geographical advantages. Some Serbs took this as proof of unfair treatment and deeply resented the prosperity of their neighbors.

But curiously, one of the things that does not divide them is language. Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims all speak Serbo-Croatian, a single language, even though Serbs and Croats write it with different alphabets. Lately, the enmity among these groups has grown so intense that some Croats insist that they speak "Croatian" and some of the Muslims have taken to calling their language "Bosnian," but the fact is that these three peoples understand each other's radio broadcasts, shouts and insults perfectly well. This is probably one of the reasons the Balkan wars have been especially brutal. Their intimate knowledge of one another's language and thoughts makes it possible for the combatants to be cruel in especially effective ways: All that a torturer or a sniper needs to think is, "What would cause me the most pain?" One thing the recent history of the Balkans shows, as well as that of the American Civil War, is that a common language has little power to hold people together when there are interested parties determined to divide them. In Yugoslavia, they do this by exaggerating religious differences and ancient history. In the United States, we do it by fixating on race. Where that doesn't work, as with Hispanics, the latest supposed threat to our well-being, who can be of an race, we use language.

The real threat of balkanization here comes from intolerance, like that demonstrated by those who want to make life harder for minorities, even to the extent of making it more difficult to publish information about our laws in their languages. The American but, alas, not at this moment the Balkan, way is to accept and thrive on differences and to encourage everyone to participate, with no official preferences for any ethnic or racial group.

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