

Posted on Sun, May. 07, 2006

## Debate over anthem is lost in translation

Spanish version was first passed in 1919, and song is now available in countless other languages

By David Goldstein  
KNIGHT RIDDER

**WASHINGTON** - Psst.

Someone ought to tell the president, Congress and anyone else upset about the controversial Spanish translation of the national anthem that they're about 90 years too late.

The government already gave its blessing when the U.S. Bureau of Education prepared a Spanish version of the "Star-Spangled Banner" in 1919.

And that translation has been available on the Library of Congress' Web site for the past two years without so much as a sniff of disapproval.

Then there's the National Anthem Project, a group that supports music in schools and boasts first lady Laura Bush as honorary chairperson. Several members of Congress are also supporters. If you need a mariachi or steel drum version of the national anthem, they've got you covered.

For all the outrage, two out of three Americans don't even know all the words to the national anthem, according to a Harris Poll. A lot of them don't even know the song.

But if the English-only backers are really serious, they have their work cut out for them.

Besides Spanish, the library has vintage translations in Polish, French, Italian, Portuguese and Armenian, among others. A little Googling will turn up versions in Samoan and Yiddish as well.

And with 6,800 known languages in the world, who knows how many more are out there?

"What's sort of surprising for us here who've lived with the 'Star-Spangled Banner' is that everyone has their shorts in a bunch about it," said Loras Schissel, a musicologist at the library. "It's old news."

Until last week, that is, when some Latin pop stars released a Spanish version with somewhat different lyrics ("The time has come to break the chains.") called "Nuestro Himno" -- "Our Anthem."

It landed smack in the middle of a heated debate on immigration. The song's producer and singers hoped to fire up immigrants. To critics, they might just as well as torched a flag on the Capitol steps.

Musically speaking, the reaction was fortissimo. Once Spanish-language radio aired the song, talk radio, blogs and cable, along with members of Congress, were like a chorus of hounds barking at the moon.

In 1919, the government-sponsored Spanish translation evoked a collective yawn, if anyone was even paying

attention.

"National airs and anthems were popular music at time," Schissel said. "You bought them on 78 records and people sang them around the piano."

But the new Spanish version could become a political cri de coeur.

"Symbols like the flag and the national anthem take on some sacred meaning on both sides in a controversy over national identity," said Ron Eyeran, an expert on music and social movements at Yale University.

But critics are steamed because they insist that the song should be sung in English. Period.

"The national anthem is a symbol of unity of a diverse people united by our common values and Constitution," said Sen. Jim Talent, R-Mo. "That's why it should be sung in English.

Talent and Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., are among several co-sponsors of a bill from Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., requiring that the anthem never be recited or sung in a foreign tongue. Rep. Jim Ryun, R-Kan., has a similar bill in the House.

Even pro-immigration groups such as the National Council of La Raza, the largest Latino civil rights group in the country, said translating the anthem was a mistake.

"Anthems are sacred and we have to be respectful of that," said La Raza spokeswoman Lisa Navarrete.

Rep. Harold Ford Jr., D-Tenn., has said that the anthem "should not be lost in translation. ... The words, the phrases, the expressions -- they all count for something irreplaceable."

But Jaime Contreras, chairman of the National Capitol Immigration Coalition, said the song could not be translated literally, and the new wording helps people make a "connection about the movement." It was not meant to offend anyone, he said, but was a tribute to America.

"When the president wants to run for office, he runs ads in broken Spanish and people don't feel offended," Contreras said. "It's like getting mad because somebody is trying to honor you."

## **ONLINE**

Library of Congress:

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cocoon/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.100000007/default.html>

National Anthem Project:

[www.thenationalanthemproject.org/aboutthesong.html](http://www.thenationalanthemproject.org/aboutthesong.html)

---

© 2006 ContraCostaTimes.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.  
<http://www.contracostatimes.com>