

The Declaration of Independents



Early Bilingual Reading

by Al Past

The other day I received a question from a graduate student in Spain who is studying ways to encourage children to grow up speaking two languages. That's a noble goal. It's well known that bilingual children generally do better in school than monolingual children, and that the extra brain activity that is required imparts a certain nimbleness and resourcefulness to one's imagination that lasts for a lifetime.

I'm not sure how the student found me—she wasn't one of mine—but I'm not surprised at what she wrote once she did. My wife and I have always been big proponents of bilingualism, even though we both grew up speaking only one language. We each learned a second (and third) language as adults, but it was difficult. Young children learn language effortlessly, and they learn it like native speakers, which is what they grow up to be. I thought language education so important that I made Ana Darcy, the heroine in my Distant Cousin novels, a big proponent too. She made sure to expose her toddlers to many languages (as well as mathematics and other kinds of mental stimulation).

Anyone who has raised a child (and paid attention) is invariably astonished at what formidable language learners little kids happen to be. At an age where they cannot drink juice from a cup without spilling it, they can master all the basic sounds of their native language (or languages), then acquire hundreds—and soon thousands—of words. They begin combining these into sentences, one or two at a time, and by age two or three are uttering full, original sen-

tences—without anyone teaching them to do that. In fact, you can't stop them! It's really quite amazing. Linguists have postulated that young children are born with a "Language Acquisition Device," which is a fancy term for a particularly sensitive period for learning language. Sensitive periods are well known in animals. Cats, for instance, must be exposed to all kinds of visual stimuli

learn many things. Language is one of these, and the time is in infancy. How little children figure language out is fascinating, but way beyond the scope of this essay. Here is one small example of how it happens. Children are always saying things like "The dog bit me," or "I hurt-ed myself." They don't hear other people saying that, so where does it come from? This is evidence that

they are figuring out English grammar for themselves. It means that they have understood how English (in this case) forms the past tense; and they use the rule that they figured out even on irregular verbs because that's the only rule they know. It's really a brilliant deduction. Children do this in all languages. While learning Spanish our first daughter once said "Yo sabo la respuesta," for "I know the answer," but the verb "saber" is irregular and the correct form would be "Yo sé la respuesta." She had not known that exception. If "saber" were a regular verb, then "Yo sabo" ("I know") would be correct. So her "mistake," while technically incorrect, showed that she had figured out how to form a regular first-person singular verb form—by herself. Little kids are like scientists, experimenting, trying again and again, and improving until they get it right.

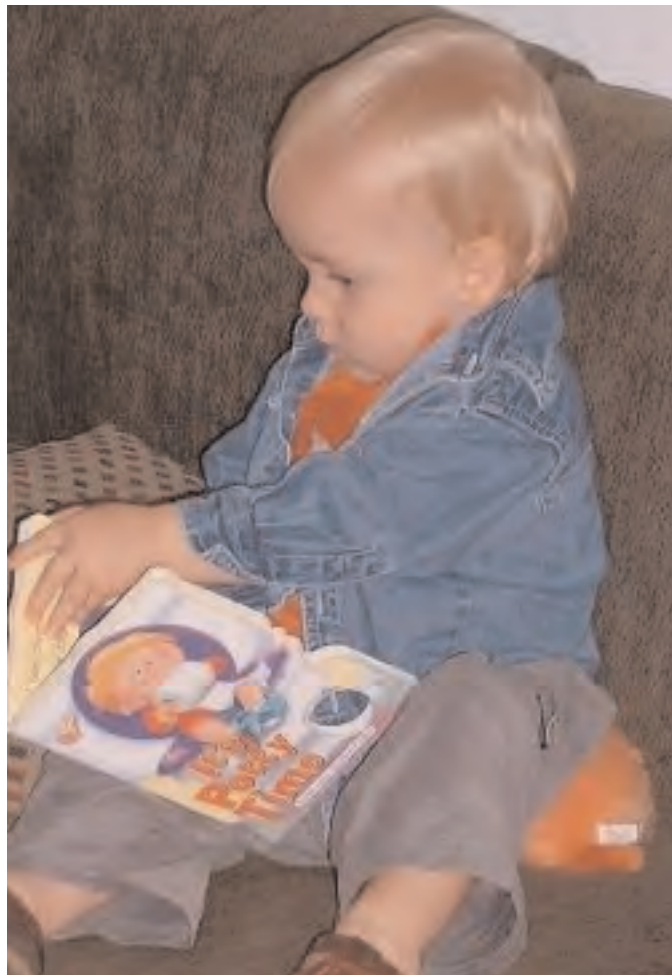


Photo by Al Past.

as kittens; if not, once they get beyond that sensitive period they never learn to hunt and follow prey like normal cats. The sad cases of children who were deprived of human interaction and activities at early ages show that much of what these children missed can never be replaced. Clearly, there is a time to

In the case of our own daughters, being raised in Texas, Spanish was the obvious choice for a second language. But how to teach them properly, if we were not native speakers? I took college classes in Spanish language, literature, linguistics and history. Those topics hardly lend themselves to the type of language that is

used at home. Little kids are not much interested in discussing Spanish transformational grammar or literary criticism.

Nor were there any young Spanish-speaking children in our neighborhood for them to play with and learn from by copying. Austin did have schools with bilingual education programs, but children do their best language learning before they're school age, from birth to age four, more or less. It was a problem.

Fortunately, a solution was at hand, a simple solution that worked wonderfully. The professor who supervised my dissertation, Dr. Theodore Andersson, was a world-famous expert on early education. He suggested that our daughters be exposed to native-quality Spanish through reading, and that we should begin when they were around two years old. The Spanish found in children's books, is native quality Spanish. If kids could use that as a source of input, they would learn to speak correct native Spanish.

The idea of infants reading may seem shocking, but it shouldn't. What organ of the body understands language? The ears? No. The mouth? No. It's the brain. And the brain gets its input from the nervous system. Basically, language is language whether it reaches the brain through the ears or the eyes. It's all the same language, just in different forms.

Once a child realizes that language can be written as well as spoken, most of the hard work is done. Any parent remembers times when their child read "Stop" on a sign, or "Pizza Hut," or "WalMart," or "Sears," or "Kentucky Fried Chicken." They might say, well, Johnnie saw the red, hexagonal shape of the stop sign, or the blue and gray sign over the store, and that gave it away. That's fine, it's a start!

We started by using word cards with our daughters. One card had a purple dot on it from some spilled grape juice. Our one daughter could read that word from across the room, even upside down. But when we made an

identical card with no grape juice stain, she couldn't read it at first. That's no problem!

You see, that's how we did it: starting with word cards, first with single words in three inch letters to train her eyes to see the right shapes. Think of "car" versus "ear." LOOK at the words. See the difference? It's tiny. Do you see it? Show those cards to a child several times; read them correctly for them if they don't get it, and soon they will. They won't be able to tell you how they know, and it doesn't matter. They know, and no one told them. They figured it out.

We were careful to choose only words she liked (friends, food, toys), and not give her more than she could learn, no more than one or two new ones a day. We'd always tell her what the word was at first. We'd play flash card games. She rapidly and eagerly learned to read 40 or 50 words in both Spanish and English. We knew from her mistakes that she was looking at the overall shapes, misreading "ball" as "baby," for instance. She had trouble with "hand" and "head," which are identical except for one letter. She had to figure out that she would have to look for that. Much easier was "hair." It had "the dot" on top of one of the letters.

What do we do when we read, anyway? We look at a word and instantly know the meaning; we don't sound it out. Only beginners sound out words, unless it's a new, funny one, like "syzygy."

Consider this example, from our bilingual reading sessions: we'd show her the card with the word "table," and she'd instantly say "mesa," or show her the card "pato" and she'd say "duck." If that isn't getting the intrinsic meaning out of a written word, I don't know what would be.

We introduced function words (the, an, of, etc.) and began laying the cards out in short sentences, to teach reading left to right. She loved to rearrange them and read the non-sense sentences. She loved to dictate new books, which she'd illustrate. By

age four she was reading at third grade level; and by first grade reading in both languages at that level or higher (and reading by herself for fun, I might add).

I don't mean to explain how help a child learn to read, but anyone interested might consult *How To Teach Your Baby to Read*, by Glen Doman. (You don't need all the extra piffle the publishers are happy to sell you along with it—you can easily make your own word cards.) We used that book ourselves, only we added the second language.

Just remember: if your child isn't interested in seeing his or her own name on a card, then he/she is probably a little young yet. Just wait. Mostly likely by age 2, they'll be delighted and off to the races. They'll often tell you what words they want on cards!

Doman also has a book called *Teach Your Baby Math*, which came out too late for us, but which works the same way for children the same age. After all, math is easier than language—no exceptions!

Both of our daughters went into high school already bilingual, both easily learned a third language in college (French and Italian), one learned a fourth in graduate school, and both can read like lightning. But they're sweet, normal young ladies, not brainiacs.

Final recommendation: if all this play time with kids and word cards sounds too difficult, then don't worry about it. Just read to your kids. Read to them every night if possible. Point to the words as you read and let them watch. Do this for years and you'll be amazed at what they learn. ■

Al Past is a former English professor and a trilingualist. He is the author of the Distant Cousin trilogy, in which a young woman speaking an extinct Indo-European language lands on Earth.

For more information see www.distantcousin.net.





A monastery in Zhongdian, Yunnan province of China, designated by China as the actual location of Shangri-La. Photo by Colegato.

The Minority Report: China vs. America

by Lloyd Lofthouse

Atrocities abound in the history books concerning treatment of Native American Indians during the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Spanish destroyed the Aztec and Inca civilizations with disease and warfare. The Catholic mission system in California enslaved Indians. After the Civil War, the American military pushed west and slaughtered men, women and children as they drove native North American Indians from the land they had lived on for ten thousand years. Also, let's not forget that at one time native children were removed from American Indian families and forced to attend Christian boarding schools. If these children were heard speaking in their native language, they risked beatings. *The Education of Little Tree*, both a novel and a movie, depicts this savage treatment.

As a matter of fact, the treatment of American Indians hasn't changed much. The United States govern-

ment might no longer wage brutal war against Native American Indians to get their land, but in recent times billions of dollars slated to support native American Indian tribes on reservations have gone missing, and no one seems to know (or care) where all that money went, except the Indians. It would appear that the era of lies and broken treaties has not ended.

Few people may know that America also grabbed Hawaii away from the native Hawaiian people against their will. There's a native Hawaiian non-violent separatist movement asking for freedom from America.

How does Communist China treat its minorities compared to the way minorities have been treated in the Americas? Most of us have heard about Tibet and the demands by Tibetans in exile, that Tibet be free from China to rule itself. We hear claims of recent brutal human rights violations taking place, although without much solid evidence to support the claims. Meanwhile, in the United States, news recently

revealed that tens of thousand of illegal aliens (some seeking political asylum) were locked up in detention centers without proper medical care, and are dying because of it.

Yes, human rights violations did happen in Tibet, and there is evidence to support such claims. However, during Mao's twenty-seven years as the modern emperor of China, almost everyone in China suffered. Most who lived in China during the Cultural Revolution, including my wife, suffered horribly. Tens of millions died all over China, including people in Tibet. Since Mao considered Tibet to be part of China (and this belief is supported by recorded, nonbiased evidence from primary sources prior the rise of Communism), those who suffered in Tibet were treated the same as the rest of China—yes, horribly. Hardly anyone was spared. Monasteries in Tibet were destroyed, Buddhist Monks were killed. But the same was going on everywhere in China.

Soon after Mao died, many of the larger Buddhist Monasteries in Tibet

were rebuilt and Buddhist monks wearing saffron colored robes were once again able to inhabit their rooms. We all know that China's Communist government is capable of reacting harshly when there is criticism of their management of China, but China does not have a Bill of Rights like America does. Chinese law does not permit criticism of the government. We may not like it, but China is not Europe or America. Of course, American and European democracies can say, "Look at how we treat people in our countries as an example of how to treat your own people." If this tactic is used, it would be wise not to mention how American natives, minorities and illegal aliens have been—and are being—treated in America.

China has a one-child policy due to the fact that more than 1.3 billion people live in that country. What isn't well known is that the one-child policy does not apply to the hundred million people that belong to the more than fifty minority groups in China. That means Tibetans may not be able to worship and maintain the feudal, nomadic lifestyle they had before Mao's brutal reoccupation of Tibet in 1951, but they can have as many children as they want.

When China was ruled by emperors, the theory was that an Emperor wanted others to see him as a benevolent ruler embracing every kind of beauty under heaven. To do this, the Emperor encouraged minorities to stay where they had always lived. No one forced them off their land with false promises, as happened in the Americas at the hands of European invaders. In China, if a minority king proposed a marriage alliance with the Emperor, the Emperor adopted a Chinese beauty as his daughter and sent her to that king. This is portrayed in *The Dream of Red Mansions*, a Chinese novel written in the 1800s. But if a minority king became powerful and caused unrest, the Emperor proposed that this king marry his real daughter, as

if to say, "You will be a member of my family, so stop what you are doing. Since we are soon to be related through marriage, there is no need to fight." This happened with Tibet more than a thousand years ago, during the Tang Dynasty. After that, China and Tibet have had close (albeit sometimes violent) ties.

Under the rule of the Emperor, minorities were not forced to pay taxes like the Han Chinese. This is because it was believed that minorities were less fortunate and did not have the same advantages.

There are many similarities between the way the emperors of old treated minority groups inside China and the way the Communist government treats minorities today. However, today it is understood that all minorities are part of China. That means Chinese law applies to this hundred million people, including Tibetans, in two important areas.

The first law is that an elementary education is mandatory for all children, no exceptions, and also that children under sixteen are not allowed to work. This is one of the areas that Tibetans have problems with. They don't want mandatory education for their children, because it goes against the way the Buddhist Lamas ruled a feudal Tibet prior to 1951. But the Chinese government refuses to bend in regards to education.

The second law is that all civil law must be obeyed. For example, you can't destroy the forest or sell your children, two things that were once part of Chinese culture when the emperors ruled. Some minorities may want to keep that outlawed custom; but again, the Chinese government refuses to bend in regards to slavery.

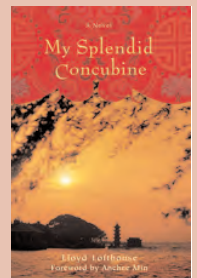
The Communist government of China also provides financial support to all minority groups. As a matter of fact, money goes toward developing the potential for tourism in minority areas. Minority people are also paid a stipend to continue living in their traditional lifestyle as long as it does

not violate Chinese civil laws. It might be interesting to note that Tibet gets the biggest slice of this minority financial support.

If a minority person decides to leave his minority autonomous region, he receives monthly food coupons to help maintain a decent lifestyle. If another minority person wants to attend college, she will be allowed entry over better qualified Han Chinese students and receive financial support to help her succeed.

Mainstream western media seldom reports facts like this about China. Most of the time, we only hear recent bad news and horrible accusations without much evidence to support them. A recent series of pieces in American magazines reveals the real China. If you want to further your education regarding China, I suggest you read the May/June 2008 issue of *Good* magazine; the May/June 2008 issue of *Poets and Writers* magazine's Beijing Book Report, and the May 2008 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*. A recent book by American photojournalist Tom Carter, *China: Portrait of a People*, captures the heart and soul China. It is always good to have the facts before jumping to conclusions. ■

Lloyd Lofthouse is a retired journalist and teacher. His book *My Splendid Concubine* is the fictionalized account of the life of Robert Hart, the Inspector General of China's Imperial Maritime Custom Service. Details can be found at www.mysplendidconcubine.com.



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EDITED BY MICHAEL S. KATZ

A Rich Man's War, But a Poor Man's Fight: The Role of Class in the American Civil War

by Barry Yelton

In 1861, the culmination of a series of political conflicts caused the nation to spiral into the bloodiest war it ever fought, more deadly than the two World Wars, and more tragically divisive than Vietnam or Iraq. In the early years of the nineteenth century, the booming, industrial North and the mostly agrarian South constantly came into conflict on a variety of issues, most importantly that of human slavery. That fundamental disagreement boiled over into armed conflict resulting in the first modern war.

Slavery is so alien to us today that it is difficult to comprehend the countenancing of human bondage. Something that civilized people now recognize as a barbaric and inhuman scheme seemed to the rich planters of the mid-nineteenth century a profitable economic institution. Anti-slavery voices in the South were almost non-existent at the time, shouted down by slavery's proponents. In the North, however, an abolitionist movement grew stronger by the day, led by freed slaves and Christian groups intent on ridding the country of the curse of slavery.

While wealthy slaveholders demanded the right to hold slaves, there were millions of Southerners who were never slaveholders, and had no stake in the institution. The vast majority of Southerners were in fact small farmers, sharecroppers, trades-

men, and the like. They lived from season to season, surviving on what they grew, purchased, or bartered, with little hope of significant economic betterment. Content to feed their families and have a roof over their heads, they—the ordinary people—had no reason to go to war with

Southerners were sold on the fact that the scheming politicians of the North wanted to take away their rights. Never mind that the primary right the abolitionists, North and South, wanted to take away was the right to own human beings, which was something that affected virtually



Painting titled *Capture of Ricketts' Battery*, depicting action that took place during the First Battle of Bull Run.

the North. In order to provide them with a compelling reason, the wealthy landowners, slaveholders, and politicians developed the concept of “states’ rights” to convince the common people that going to war was in their vital interest.

Much as masses of people have been misled and duped over the millennia, so were Southerners sold a bill of goods to inspire them to fight for their beloved Southland. Wars have to be sold, for the obvious reason that they are both horrendously painful and dreadfully expensive. To garner support for a war, you have to convince people they are fighting for some great purpose, such as doing God’s will, stopping Communism or Fascism, or ridding the world of a dictator’s weapons of mass destruction.

none of the people who would ultimately suffer the most. The vast majority of Southerners could not afford to own slaves even had they wanted them.

The North did its share of selling as well. The Radical Republicans in the North insisted that subduing the “rebellion” was crucial to the existence of the country. What the North referred to as “rebellion” was in fact secession, a very different thing altogether. Indeed secession was something many scholars believe was perfectly within the right of any state or states at that time in our history. Our country was then (and still is) the United States, not the United State. At the time of the Civil War, when one spoke of one’s “country” it was usually in reference to one’s

home state, not the Federal Union. Other states had tried without success to secede at various times, including some in the North, so the concept was not without precedent. To help sell the war, however, the North insisted that the act of secession was in fact rebellion, and had to be put down by force of arms.

There was, then, conflict among both Northerners and Southerners about whether the country should travel the path to Civil War. Once the die was cast, however, both sides for the most part pitched into the process with great fervor. There were cheerful pro-war songs in the South with lyrics like, "Wait for the wagon, the dissolution wagon. Hop on the wagon and we'll all take a ride." While on the lips of Northerners were uber-righteous songs such as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." The nation went to the holocaust with cheerful hearts, martial music, and, for some, dreams of great personal glory. It was in essence a sort of tragic, collective errand of fools. What began with bright hope and regional patriotism would end with the death and debilitation of hundreds of thousands of young men, and the country would never be the same. As it has been said of the Civil War, "America was crucified on a cross of black."

As the war began, virtually shining with promise, wealthy landowners, bankers, and men of other privileged classes often raised their own regiments, thereby becoming instant colonels. Some simply joined existing regiments, and obtained rank based on their financial status or political connections. The graduates of the military academies were in strong demand to fill out the officer corps, both of the regular army in the North, and the newly formed regiments in the South. The men of farm and mill, however, could expect to serve their time in the army as private soldiers, mere "ground pounders" or "cannon fodder." Still, they came to volunteer, answering the call enthusiastically, if naively.

As a consequence, military organizations like the famed Army of Northern Virginia were led by the social elite, and peopled by men of common stature. The work was done, and the blood was shed primarily by what we would today call the "working class." The landed gentry—the slaveholders, successful politicians, businessmen, and others with a substantial stake in the war—could often serve in relative comfort, or could buy or bribe their way out of service entirely. Common soldiers, on the other hand, often served in conditions which one would not permit an animal to endure these days.

Those who chose not to serve were eventually forced to do so by conscription laws. One could either bleed on the battlefield or bleed before a firing squad; take your choice. Men with no stake in the war, other than their perceived "rights," bore the burden and sacrifice which rightfully belonged to the slaveholders and the wealthy.

To compound the injury, most of those men who marched off to join the struggle left families back home. Women were forced to accept complete responsibility of providing for their children and themselves. They also often had to provide for their soldier husbands fighting far away. The Confederate government, in particular, often failed miserably at equipping and feeding its troops. Folks back home sent clothing, canned food, and other goods to help sustain the much-deprived men in the field.

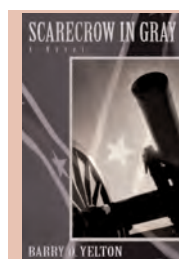
At the same time, women were often expected to do the hard labor to keep farms running, or perform other work to generate enough income necessary for survival. They often had to deal with lawless and predatory men, completely alone. Their lives were brutally hard for completely unsupportable reasons: wealthy people wanted slaves, and politicians North and South could not come to a rational and peaceable agreement.

The whole affair soon became one tragedy piled upon another.

The common soldiers may have been ignorant, but most were not stupid; and they soon saw through the façade of "states' rights," coining the phrase "a rich man's war, but a poor man's fight." This helps to account in part for the increasing flow of deserters as the war dragged on. Men were fighting for someone else's cause, paying the price in blood and treasure. All while their families suffered back home. It became an intolerable situation, and as a result, both armies experienced a staggering rate of desertions.

Though the Confederates deserted in great numbers, particularly after 1862, Union soldiers took to their heels at an even greater rate. Over 200,000 Union troops deserted during the course of the war. Men literally "voted with their feet." The men believed their families had suffered enough, and since there was little personal stigma, they often simply quit the army, and went home.

Stark indeed are the social and political divisions in the country today. Nonetheless, they pale in comparison to the divisions of the Civil War era. As poor Southerners suffered for the benefit of rich plantation owners, and as poor Northerners battled for abstract ideals, or simply for a paycheck, the societal fractures of the Civil War era were manifold. Political and moral failures led to America's holocaust. Let us indeed hope that such failures never again lead to the fatal divisions that so traumatized America during her tragic Civil War. ■



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