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EDITORIAL

Naming Names

BY ROGER E. HERNANDEZ

I was thinking the other day that almost nobody asks me to spell my last name anymore. Spanish-speakers or not, just about everyone knows it's H-e-r-n-a-n-d-e-z. The few who wonder whether it ends in Spanish "z" or Portuguese "s" are actually demonstrating they are culturally savvy enough to know the difference exists.

"Hernandez, it's as common as Smith," the front-desk attendant jokingly said the other day at the gym in my not-particularly-Hispanic-heavy hometown. She had announced over the loudspeaker that there was a phone call for a Mr. Hernandez -- and three sweaty guys ran up the stairs thinking it was for them.

Well, maybe not quite as common. Smith is No. 1. Hernandez, No. 15.

Still, pretty high up there.

The figures come from a new Census Bureau report, which also says Garcia and Rodriguez are Nos. 8 and 9 among the most common surnames in the United States. As The New York Times put it, this marks "probably the first time that any non-Anglo name was among the 10 most common in the nation."

Is that a big deal? Yes, but not as much as it might seem at first glance.

Clearly, the list shows there are demographic changes going on. Those two Spanish last names were ranked No. 18 and No. 22 in the 1990 census; back then, there was only one other in the top 25. The new report, based on the census of 2000, has six Spanish surnames in the top 25.

Some Asian names, too, leaped up the charts. Vietnamese Nguyen is No. 57, up from No. 229 in 1990. The most common South Asian name was Patel, which ranked No. 172, up from No. 591. Lee, which can be English, Chinese or Korean, is No. 22.

Most of the rest are Anglo, as the Times said, shorthand for surnames that originated in Great Britain. You hit Smith, Johnson, Williams, Brown, Jones, Miller and Davis before you get to Garcia. Eighty-one of the top 100 are British.

To go only by this surnames list, you'd think four-fifths of Americans are of British descent and most of the rest Hispanic, with a handful of Asians and non-British, non-Spanish Europeans.

Which is not how American history has worked.

For one thing, there are people whose

family names were obliterated. Some of those British-sounding names are borne today by the descendants of Africans who were owned by people who really did trace their ancestry to Britain.

For another: all those immigrants from yesteryear are missing -- the first non-Anglo, non-Spanish European surname is the Germanic Schmidt at No. 173. Why is that?

It's a similar story for those other sources of immigration in past generations, Eastern Europe and Italy. Among Polish or Italian surnames, there simply is no equivalent of Smith or Garcia, no handful of dominant names like there are in English- and Spanish-speaking countries.

The result is that the rise of all those Hispanic surnames ranking so high on the list makes it seem as if for the first time in American history some sort of Anglo hegemony is being challenged.

Actually, it's history repeating itself -- more immigrants, just like in past years, except now they are more visible on a list of American surnames. ■

— Roger Hernandez is a syndicated columnist and writer-in-residence at New Jersey Institute of Technology.

Science Trumps Politics

BY RICH LOWRY

The "sideshow" has become the main event. For years, we've been told that only stem-cell research that destroys human embryos is worth pursuing. Everything else is a diversion, driven by fanatical religious opposition to the progress of science.

When President Bush sought legislation from Congress to advance research that didn't involve destroying embryos, he was rebuffed by the Democratic Congress. Eventually, he issued an executive order in June 2007 to promote stem-cell research "without violating human dignity or demeaning human life."

Now, a breakthrough could deliver all the therapeutic potential of stem-cell research with none of the ethical concerns. We learned just last month that stem cells can be created by "reprogramming" human skin cells. The moral problem thus disappears.

Dr. James Thomson of the University of Wisconsin, a pioneer in embryo-destructive stem-cell research, was one of the scientists who discovered the new method. "If human embryonic stem-cell research does not make you at least a little bit uncomfortable,"

he told The New York Times, "you have not thought about it enough." Apparently, very few Democrats thought about it at all.

They trotted out Ron Reagan, son of the late president who suffered from Alzheimer's disease, to make the case for embryo-destructive stem-cell research at their 2004 national convention. As for the moral objections, well, "the theology of the few should not be allowed to forestall the health and well-being of the many."

Democrats loved this narrative: theology versus science, with its echo of the Inquisition repressing Galileo. Ethical concerns about destroying embryos were dismissed as worries about "a clump of cells" without, as Ron Reagan dismissively put it, "fingers and toes."

The pro-life writer Ramesh Ponnuru countered, "Of course the embryo looks like a human being: It looks like a human being in the embryonic stage of development."

Per Dr. Thomson, it doesn't take a keen moral sense to realize, at the very least, that this is a boundary to cross only with extreme trepidation. But when in 2001 President Bush limited federal funding of embryo-destructive research to already existing

stem-cell lines, he was showered with obloquy. He had "banned" such research. No, he had only denied it federal funding. He opposed "stem-cell research." No, he supported stem-cell research that didn't involve destroying any more embryos.

With the breakthrough that Bush had been hoping for, his position looks farsighted. The ethical boundary he defended helped push scientists to pursue the new discovery.

Bush's opponents, on the other hand, specialized in simplistic advocacy contemptuous of moral qualms about how stem-cell research was conducted. Their muted reaction to the latest development suggests that for some of them, what was so exciting about stem-cell research wasn't the far-off potential therapeutic applications, but the chance to portray pro-lifers as standing in the way of life-enhancing scientific discoveries.

"The tide of history is with us," Ron Reagan said at the conclusion of his 2004 speech. Sorry, Mr. Reagan. On this issue, the science now says otherwise. ■

— Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.

MOMENTS IN TIME

- On Dec. 6, 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, officially ending the institution of slavery, is ratified, the single greatest change wrought by the Civil War.

- On Dec. 7, 1965, Chevrolet produced its 3 million-th car for the year. It was the first time Chevrolet had produced an annual total surpassing 3 million vehicles.

- On Dec. 8, 1980, John Lennon, a founding member of the Beatles and one of rock's most influential musicians, is murdered by a deranged fan in front of Lennon's New York City apartment building. The Beatles scored several U.K. hits in 1963, launching the "Beatlemania" tidal wave that hit the United States in 1964.

- On Dec. 9, 1958, in Indianapolis, retired Boston candy manufacturer Robert H.W. Welch Jr. establishes the John Birch Society, a right-wing organization dedicated to fighting what it perceived to be the extensive infiltration of communism into American society.

- On Dec. 10, 1901, the first Nobel Prizes are awarded in Stockholm, Sweden, in the fields of physics, chemistry, medicine, literature and peace. The ceremony came on the fifth anniversary of the death of Alfred Nobel, the Swedish inventor of dynamite and other high explosives.

- On Dec. 11, 1939, actress Marlene Dietrich records her hit song "Falling in Love Again." Dietrich also became a U.S. citizen in 1939 and allegedly refused several offers to return to Germany to star in Nazi films. She was awarded the Medal of Freedom and named Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor.

- On Dec. 12, 1980, American oil tycoon Armand Hammer pays \$5,126,000 at auction for a notebook containing writings by the artist Leonardo da Vinci. The manuscript, written around 1508, contained 72 loose pages featuring some 300 notes and detailed drawings. ■