LEXINGTON

Ron Unz, swimming instructor

THIS week the Clinton administration, summoning up its righteous zeal, declared war upon a heinous threat to American civilisation. The Education Department denounced it. The Justice Department threatened to file suit against it. The president himself, his officials said, was ready to campaign against it. No effort would be spared, the message went, to frustrate California's Proposition 227, the ballot measure that would get rid of the state's bilingual education programmes.

It is hard to see Ron Unz, the ballot measure's mastermind, as particularly heinous. His sweater is baggy, turned up at the cuffs; he looks like a boy in his older brother's cast-offs. His watch strap is plastic, like the chair covers in his favourite Palo Alto restaurant, where lunch for two comes to $11. It is not that he is broke: he has made millions from his software business. But he is an unpretentious sort. When he launched his ballot initiative, he decided not to incur the expense of hiring a political consultant or a public-relations firm. Instead, he spent $80 on blast-fax software, and got an extra 64 megabytes of computer memory. He rises at dawn, reads the California papers on the Web, and blasts off favourable articles to hundreds of sympathetic journalists.

On the face of it, the goal of Mr Unz's ballot initiative is just as modest. It would abolish California's practice of teaching immigrant children mainly in their native tongues for several years, until they are deemed ready to join normal classes in English. Instead, it would immerse these children in English lessons for one year, then move them into regular classes. An exception is offered for older children, who may need longer to learn English. Parents who feel their children should be sheltered from the regular system for more than a year may apply for an extension.

The Clinton administration claimed this week that Mr Unz's initiative would "stifle the ability of our non-English-speaking children to learn." But the truth may be closer to the opposite. Immersed in English, children can absorb the language within months. Taught only sporadically, for 30 minutes a day, they can sit through years of classes without mastering the language of their adoptive country. Many of California's Latino students, who make up by far the biggest share of children in bilingual classes, leave school unable to read or write English.

Mr Unz protests that denying Latino students the basic tools needed to prosper in America is the worst kind of paternalism. And a good many Latinos agree with him. The co-chairman of his campaign, Gloria Matta Tuchman, is a Mexican-American teacher. Its honorary chairman, and one of its most effective spokesmen, is California's best-known Latino teacher, Jaime Escalante, whose struggle to teach calculus to *barrio* kids in East Los Angeles has been celebrated in a film. Left-wing activists who work with immigrants have supported Mr Unz, even though his Silicon-Valley libertarianism would usually make them queasy.

Mr Unz had the idea for his campaign in 1996, when immigrant garment-workers in Los Angeles organised a school boycott to protest against bilingual education. Two years on, polls confirm that a majority of Latinos still share this frustration. Last year one poll suggested that 81% of Latino parents might prefer immersion English classes; more recently, support has dropped, but only to a still respectable 55-65%.

Non-Latinos support the Unz initiative, too. Richard Riordan, the popular mayor of Los Angeles, has endorsed it; Pete Wilson, California's Republican governor, calls bilingual education "one of the great misfired good intentions of our time". Bilingual education not only holds Latino children back. It is expensive (bilingual teachers get a bonus of up to $5,000 a year) and it is cumbersome (bilingual teachers are scarce, and so hiring standards are often compromised). A recent *Los Angeles Times* poll found that, among all likely voters in California, 63% favoured Proposition 227 and only 23% opposed it.

The mystery is why, just one month before the vote on June 2nd, the Clintonites have come out against a measure that is both wise and popular. It does not take Sherlock Holmes to unravel this one. For all its general support, Mr Unz's initiative is disliked by the professional leaders of Latino politics; and these matter to Mr Clinton and his party. The chairman of the Latino caucus in Congress is Xavier Becerra, who hails from California; he accuses Mr Unz of "immigrant-bashing". The chairman of California's Democratic Party is Art Torres; he describes Mr Unz's initiative as "another attack on the Latino community", akin to the proposition two years ago that curbed racial preferences, and to another one in 1994 that cut welfare benefits for immigrants.

This assault on Mr Unz is scurrilous. Like most Silicon millionaires, he is keen on immigrants. He campaigned against the 1994 initiative that cut their benefits; and, that year, he was so incensed by Mr Wilson's anti-immigration views that he challenged him quixotically in the gubernatorial primary. Mr Unz has gone out of his way to present his education proposition as a pro-immigrant idea, even including a clause that would increase spending on English tuition for adults by $50m a year. No matter: California's Latino politicians seem to fear that an end to bilingual education would erode immigrant cultural pride—and that this might erode their power base.

There is a certain irony in the Clinton administration's decision to side with Latino politicians against common sense and ordinary Latinos. In recent years, it is Republicans who have most conspicuously made the mistake of bowing to shrill interest groups—the gun lobby, the religious right—and thereby forfeiting the support of mainstream voters. Mr Clinton, for his part, has prospered by cold-shouldering the multiculturalist left and sticking to the centre. Perhaps the Clintonites are just mouthing off about opposing Mr Unz. But, if they are serious, they will be repeating the Republicans' self-damaging error.