Assimilation Anyone?

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Body

I was disturbed by William Branigin's article "Immigrants Question Idea of ***Assimilation***" [front page, May 25]. While the melting pot is an appealing idea, it was no more an accurate description of the last great wave of immigrants than it is of the current wave. Of the masses of people leaving Europe earlier in this century, many came to the United States, while others went to Argentina, Chile and Brazil. Those who came here did not do so because they wanted to "become American" vs. "becoming Chilean." People leave their countries because of a combination of turmoil and lack of opportunity. The reasons always have been more economic than cultural; and cultural ***assimilation*** is a long and difficult process.

The danger of painting the earlier wave of immigrants as melting effortlessly into American society and the new immigrants as resisting ***assimilation*** is obvious: It breeds a hostile attitude toward the new immigrants on the part of the descendants of European immigrants who have little connection to the ambiguities and difficulties their ancestors faced in ***assimilating*** into a new society. Such hostility leads to prejudice and discrimination. Is that the American legacy we want to pass on?

-- Julia Lynn Coronado

The attitude of some Hispanic immigrants described in the May 25 immigration story, notably that of Maria Jacinto, seems to be that they have little obligation to adapt to their new society, let alone ***assimilate***. Rather, they can reestablish their own cultural environment here and shift to their new surroundings the burden of adjustment traditionally assumed by immigrants to America.

As the article notes, many believe this is a dangerous notion, that a country of immigrants in particular needs to cultivate a strong national identity and a dominant culture in order to ensure its long-term survival. We see the problems tearing at other societies -- Belgium and Canada come to mind -- where powerful ethnicities pursue their own narrow interests. Having avoided such problems up until now, does the United States wish to shoot itself in the foot and put its basic cohesiveness at risk?

As an immigrant and a refugee myself, I cannot imagine why Americans would commit such folly. I was fortunate to have a choice of countries willing to accept me as an adult refugee. But I chose the United States, which I thought would provide me with the greatest range of opportunities. I fully accept that living and working in America imposes fundamental obligations on me to adjust to my adopted country. That does not mean I have abandoned my own culture or language -- quite the contrary -- but I pursue them on my own time and with my own resources. I have no expectation whatever that any governmental entity should provide these things for me.

I often long for my native country, its sights and sounds and smells. Making my way in America has not always been easy. But this country has given me opportunities no other could match, and I owe it a lot. I came here freely, and if I cannot accept what I find here, I know I am not forced to remain. If Maria Jacinto is troubled by so many white faces with blond hair and "Anglo" ways, perhaps she would be happier back in Mexico.

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-- Q. D. Nguyen

I challenge reporter William Branigin's conclusion that today's immigrants are much different from those in the past, and much less willing to ***assimilate*** into U.S. culture. In fact, the flow of immigrants to this country in the 1980s and '90s is remarkably similar to earlier immigrant waves.

In 1910, the Census found that about 15 percent of the U.S. population was foreign-born, compared with slightly less than 10 percent today. It was also concentrated geographically, as are today's immigrants. For example, in 1890, fully 855,000 of the 1.1 million population of Chicago were immigrants or children of immigrants, most of whom did not speak English and lived in their own culturally isolated communities.

Proceedings of the Texas legislature were published in German for a time in the 19th century; many towns in the Midwest and Plains states conducted their official business in German (or Bohemian, Swedish or Slovakian), and letters from immigrants in that era often told of their indifference and even disdain for the United States and its culture. All these non-***assimilating*** immigrants were, of course, our great-grandparents.

Throughout American history, it has taken awhile -- often two or three generations -- for immigrants to become fully integrated (if not exactly "melted") into U.S. society. But immigrants traditionally have been an investment whose value to the country has been enormous.

-- Roy Petty

The writer is executive director of the American Immigration Law Foundation.

William Branigin's take on the melting pot was somewhat off the mark. He presumes that the United States used to be one, but it certainly hasn't been in my lifetime or my parents' lifetimes, or my grandparents' lifetimes, not in the Pennsylvania cities to which three of my grandparents emigrated after stopping at Ellis Island to have their names mutilated or changed by INS officials.

My immigrant grandparents didn't know each other before they left Lebanon, though they wound up together, living in distinctly Lebanese communities, attending Maronite churches, shopping in Arabic groceries, speaking Arabic among their friends and family, cooking Arabic food and celebrating and mourning events in a fashion quite unlike what my non-Lebanese friends experienced.

The small city of 20,000 in which I grew up wasn't overrun by Lebanese immigrants. It had room for several Italian-immigrant-run bakeries and restaurants, a Greek-immigrant-run grocery and any number of other small -- and large -- businesses catering to various ethnicities and certainly to the community at large, "ethnic" or not. It was not a melting pot; although the peoples lived peaceably together, they retained their ethnic identities.

In my generation, some of us still think of ourselves as ethnically Lebanese. Others prefer that friends and neighbors not know we have immigrant Lebanese grandparents. I don't know how many generations it takes to "melt," but I'm encouraged by the resistance some of us put up to the heat.

"Salad bowl" is too simple and "mosaic" is too static to describe what plays out across the country family by family and individual by individual. "Melting pot" has to be the worst, however, for it suggests that when we enter the United States we shed our ethnic identity and heritage and become as dull and unappetizing as sliced white bread. That doesn't describe my family or the community I grew up in, and I'll bet it doesn't describe many other places that have been invigorated and enriched by immigrants.

-- Deborah A. Oliver

William Branigin makes a mistake that appears to be common. He writes, "E Pluribus Unum (From Many, One) remains the national motto, but there no longer seems to be a consensus about what that should mean."

Contrary to what Branigin says, as well as to what many people believe, E Pluribus Unum is not, and never has been, our national motto. While that motto's usage has been traced back as far as the year 1776, and by tradition

may have been considered to be the motto of the United States, our country did not officially have a national motto until 1956, when by law Congress designated the phrase "In God We Trust" as such.

-- Peter A. Byrd

Graphic

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