

The Americanization Ideal

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Congress is considering legislation to curb illegal immigration and set priorities for legal admissions. Several Presidential candidates have made immigration a keystone of their campaigns. Newspapers carry immigration-related articles almost daily, in contrast to just a few years ago when hardly any appeared.

This attention is not misplaced. Reform is needed in policies that permit the continued entry of hundreds of thousands of illegal aliens and blur distinctions between what is legal and beneficial and what is illegal and harmful. The Commission on Immigration Reform issued a report last year on illegal immigration and will release its second report, on legal migrants, tomorrow. These two reports outline a rational set of principles that will restore credibility to our policies while setting priorities for the future.

Legitimate concern about weaknesses in our immigration policy should not, however, obfuscate what remains the essential point: the United States has been and should continue to be a nation of immigrants. A well-regulated system of legal immigration is in our national interest.

There have always been those who despised the newcomers. The history of American immigration policy is full of racism and ethnic prejudice. The Know-Nothings. The Chinese Exclusion Acts. Even before the Revolution, as eminent a person as Benjamin Franklin feared that Germans coming to Pennsylvania would not become English.

Of course, German immigrants to Pennsylvania did not become English, nor did they make Pennsylvanians into Germans. Instead, they became Americans. So did the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans who came, despite prejudice. So do the Mexicans, Cubans and Haitians who come today.

The United States has united immigrants and their descendants around a commitment to democratic ***ideals*** and constitutional principles. People from an extraordinary range of ethnic and religious backgrounds have embraced these ***ideals***.

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There is a word for this process: **Americanization**. That word earned a bad reputation when it was stolen by racists and xenophobes in the 1920's. But it is our word, and we are taking it back. **Americanization** means becoming a part of the polity -- becoming one of us. But that does not mean conformity. We are more than a melting pot; we are a kaleidoscope, where every turn of history refracts new light on the old promise.

Immigration imposes mutual obligations. Those who choose to come here must embrace the common core of American civic culture. We must assist them in learning our common language: American English. We must renew civic education in the teaching of American history for all Americans. We must vigorously enforce the laws against hate crimes and discrimination. We must remind ourselves, as we illustrate for newcomers, what makes us America.

Naturalization is a vital step in this process. Interest in naturalization has never been greater; applications for citizenship exceed in number and proportion any previous period in our history. But would-be citizens must wait too long to be processed, as much as two years in some cities. The Immigration and Naturalization Service must make timely naturalization a strategic goal while maintaining rigorous standards.

Reforming our immigration policy is the best way to revitalize our commitment to immigration and to immigrants. It is literally a matter of who we are as a nation, and who we become as a people.

Graphic

Drawing

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