

The Portland Speech

President Clinton acknowledges demographic change but evades the real consequences

by Roy Beck

Addressing Portland State University's graduates this spring, President Clinton offered a candid and essentially accurate view of the math of immigration that previous Commanders-in-Chief had concealed from the American people.

But he displayed an embarrassing lack of understanding of the history, economics, political science and sociology of immigration.

As for the math: no previous president had contested Lyndon Johnson's assurances at the time of the immigration policy changes in 1965 that immigration is not designed to — and indeed won't — significantly change the ethnic and cultural composition of the United States.

Clinton has officially ended that charade.

Although Clinton had previously talked about the impending shift of America's European-descended citizens into minority status, this was the first time he cited the cause as being U.S. immigration policy. That also appeared to be the first time any U.S. president has acknowledged that federal immigration policy will — if left unchanged — transfer the United States into the hands of a population predominantly of descendants of people who, in 1965, were citizens of foreign countries.

That, however, was about as clear as the President got in his speech that was supposed to define what he called one of the three great challenges to this country: "how can we strengthen the bonds of national community as we grow more racially and ethnically diverse?"

In trying to answer that question, the President stumbled badly in several academic departments.

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Department of Political Science

While talking loftily about democracy, Clinton never once noted that the United States has a political system that theoretically gives the American people a choice in whether they are supplanted by a foreign population.

He acknowledged that immigration is causing demographic revolution. But he never admitted that the immigration is caused by the U.S. government, or that Washington could change the policy and stop the revolution. Listening to Clinton, one would assume that the "new, large wave of immigration" is an inevitable historic force we can only react to.

In Clinton's Portland view, Americans have only two choices: (a) behave nastily toward immigrants, take away benefits and exclude them "from our civic life," or (b) celebrate the current immigration wave and help the newcomers assimilate to our country.

Where does Clinton fit those of us who want immigration reduced by 70 to 80 percent — toward a more traditional level — and who also are eager for immigrants already here to participate fully in the American culture and economy? Since he didn't mention that political possibility, we don't know. But it is difficult not to feel incorporated into the group

Items in this Section

President Clinton made a major policy speech on immigration as a commencement address at Portland (OR) State University on June 13, 1998.

After this analysis by *The Social Contract's* Washington Editor Roy Beck, we reprint the main points of the President's speech.

This is followed by three contrasting viewpoints by Gregory Wilcox of ZPG-Boston, Jack Martin of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, and Harold Gilliam, noted environment preservationist of the San Francisco Bay area.

that Clinton said feels "unsettled" by the rapid demographic revolution. Those people who are "afraid the America they know and love is becoming a foreign land" are "wrong," he said. And then he seemed to link every "unsettled" American with anti-immigrant actions and sentiments which he pronounced as "un-American."

On the other hand, the President condemned those who "condone" illegal immigration: "Even a nation of immigrants must have rules and conditions and limits..." Are we to infer that Clinton understands that to set limits is to acknowledge that too many immigrants truly can turn a country into a land that is so different as to be "foreign?"

Clinton was even more politically confused about what is being proposed by most Americans who disagree with the present quadrupled levels of legal immigration. He warned all of us descendants of immigrants not to "lock the door behind us." Who is talking about locking a door? While a small minority of immigration reformers call for zero immigration, all the national reform organizations call for continued immigration that is similar to levels that existed in America's history before 1965.

And those Americans whose ancestors came not as immigrants but as slaves would show supreme ingratitude for recent improvements in civil rights if they complained about what immigration is doing to the schools, neighborhoods and job markets where American blacks are disproportionately found, according to Clinton.

Department of Economics

President Clinton suggests that mass importation of foreign workers may be the salvation of our Social Security system: "Immigrants are paying into Social Security at record rates." Yes, that is true; we've never had this many immigrants to pay before. But Clinton went on: "Most of them are young, and they will help to balance the budget when we baby boomers retire and put strains on it."

How interesting! Under the current immigration mix, the average foreign worker earns considerably less income and pays considerably fewer taxes

than does the average native worker. The Center for Immigration Studies examined 1992 tax payments and Social Security pay-outs of old age, survivor and disability benefits. It discovered that while native-born Americans paid \$19 billion more into the Social Security fund than they took out, immigrants took out more than they paid in.

Clinton will have to come up with a novel economic theory to explain how a population that is a net drain on Social Security will, take care of Baby Boomers in their old age. Also, Clinton fails to understand that the system's problem is not too few workers paying in today but too few paying after around

2010. All the foreign workers brought into the country prior to that will add to the retirement bulge. In fact, one of the reasons the system is facing such a threat is because half of all immigrants currently in the United States will have reached retirement age by 2020.

The President also somehow concluded that although the average American native does not pay as much in taxes as per capita government expenditures (that's why we have such budget deficits), "immigrants pay \$1,800 more in taxes every year than they cost our system in benefits." The National Academy of Science last year concluded almost the opposite — that immigrants in California, for example, underpay taxes by such a large amount that the average California native must pay more than \$1,000 extra in taxes to cover the costs that immigrants don't cover.

Department of Urban Sociology

According to the President, immigrants are "revitalizing our cities." Has he checked out Miami or Los Angeles recently? How about New York City's crumbling school system?

Actually, Clinton mentioned the "crumbling inner city schools" where "too many Americans, and far too many immigrant children" attend in crowded conditions. But without immigration, the country's school children would be attending classes in uncrowded conditions with only a few more schools than were standing in the late 1970s. Since then, the vast majority of the increase in public school

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enrollment has been from the children of immigrants.

The quickest way to stop exacerbating the overcrowding would be to stop adding children through the nation's immigration program. Clinton suggested increasing federal funding. Suggestions are easy. But after six years in office, he has yet to actually propose the tens of billions of additional dollars that various studies have said it would take to fully accommodate the swelling immigrant school populations.

Clinton conceded that rapid demographic transition and multi-cultural populations have not worked very well in other countries: "Around the world we see what can happen when people who live on the same land put race and ethnicity before country and humanity ... immigration of this sweep and scope could threaten the bonds of our union."

But the President believes it is worth the risk in order to conduct a gigantic sociological experiment to see if the United States can succeed where no other country has. The reason, according to the President, is so this country can become a model for all the other multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual countries of the world that are "increasingly gripped with tense, often bloody conflicts rooted in racial, ethnic and religious divisions."

Department of History

The President can be so cavalier in his treatment of immigration's likely effects in the future because he has such a distorted view of immigration's effects in the past.

"America has constantly drawn strength and spirit from wave after wave of immigrants," he said. A fairly dispassionate reading of most economic and cultural histories of massive waves of immigration would find great economic disparity, wage depression, overcrowded public facilities and versions of the ethnic and religious tensions that Clinton ascribed to other countries. While there have always been benefits as well, Clinton's sanitizing of the past prevents him from paying attention to those very same signs of societal deterioration in today's America. While lauding the many fine benefits of the current long economic boom, Clinton failed to note that we have over the last three decades of mass immigration become one of the most economically disparate peoples in the advanced world and in our own history.

Clinton romanticized immigrants to the

denigration of America's traditional Afro-descent and Euro-descent citizens. Clinton indicated that this country has needed the new immigrants to energize our culture and renew our most basic values. Such an assessment perhaps comes from his view of history. He believes that immigrants have always been superior to the Americans living in the country at any given time. The immigrants, according to Clinton, were the more adventurous, the more innovative and the more industrious. One must suppose that the children and grandchildren of immigrants become as shiftless, sterile and tired as the earlier Americans, thus requiring constant replenishment from the more vibrant citizens of other countries.

In Clinton's view of history, opposition to mass immigration has always been a result of Americans who are bigoted, as he reiterated the usual narrow description of resistance to mass arrivals from Ireland and China. The renewal of mass immigration these past thirty years is a sign that "the better angels of our nature prevailed over ignorance and insecurity, over prejudice and fear," he said.

If the President would look at immigration today through more accurate historical lenses, he might be able to understand the American people far better. He would see that the huge influx of Irish newcomers before the Civil War drove free black Americans out of major skilled and semi-skilled occupations. Among the greatest forces decrying the Irish arrivals were abolitionist white Protestants. Among the most fierce opponents of mass Chinese immigration a few decades later were Irish and other immigrants trying to protect the wages and working conditions they had earned after several years. Opposition to mass immigration has always included sincere concerns about economic fairness, working conditions, urban order, social tranquility and educational quality.

But there also have always been some Americans who opposed immigration purely on the basis that they did not like the nationality that was arriving. That apparently is all the President can see — in the past and today. Perhaps that is why he believed it important in Portland to raise as a cause for cheering the current trend that will during the next century make a minority out of the Americans whose ancestors founded and built this country.

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