

# Clinton Should Not Link Race and Immigration

by Gregory Wilcox

In his commencement address at Portland State University, President Clinton urged Americans not to shun immigrants. Knowingly or not, Clinton is making the classic mistake of tangling the issues of immigration and race. He is playing into the hands of Republicans, who support unlimited immigration to feed the U.S. job market. This, in turn, benefits businesses that thrive on cheap labor. It simultaneously shuns the needs for our growing segment of unskilled citizens who are already established here.

Clinton appears to care deeply about the issue of race. He began a "national conversation" on race one year ago, which resulted in the *One America* initiative. He understands how divisiveness caused by racial prejudice has

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crippled this country, and prevented it from being the great nation he wants to lead. If his initiative leads to a healing of the rifts of prejudice, it will be the greatest accomplishment of his presidency, and his enduring legacy.

Unfortunately, however, Clinton has confused race with immigration. The "politically correct" rationale is as follows: limiting the number of immigrants would send the message that they are not wanted. And since immigrants are mostly people of color, that could be interpreted as a prejudiced policy. It would send a message to the ethnic communities that relatives and friends from their homelands are not welcome here. A sizeable and growing number of Americans are minorities; soon whites too will become minorities. Demographers predict that sometime after 2010 there will be more Americans of Hispanic descent than Anglo-Saxon. So Clinton, ever the politician, is careful not to send the wrong message. Hence his plea to "share our country with immigrants, not shun them or shut them out." He knows who his constituents are.

But the fact of the matter is that race and immigration are separate issues. The race issue, as it is perceived today, is mostly about lingering biases which prevent minorities from

achieving true equality with whites. This remains true despite the Civil Rights Act, Affirmative Action, and many other laws which make overt discrimination a crime. Many in this country still do not appreciate or value the contributions of ethnic Americans. They need to understand that racial diversity is a good thing. *All* Americans, past and present, working together, made this country what it is today.

Immigration, on the other hand, is more about government policy regarding the number and kind of foreigners who are admitted to this country. This policy, in turn, affects most other government functions: everything from welfare to education to labor to drug interdiction to foreign aid. In deciding whom to admit, the government must plan not only for the skills and strengths they will bring, but also for the services they will require and the effect on their native land.

It is true that there is overlap between these issues. Many Americans are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Many of them have a personal interest in immigration policy, and would like to be reunited with loved ones from home. However, Americans in general favor much lower limits on immigration. Perhaps not surprisingly, this is also true of

minorities. They see the negative consequences of runaway population growth as well as anyone.

Immigration, like racial diversity is a good thing. It is a source of strength, creativity, vitality and innovation. This country was founded by immigrants, and they have made it the great nation it is today.

But it's possible to have too much of a good thing. For centuries, America was a vast and boundless frontier, brimming with seemingly inexhaustible natural resources. That was while this country was young and still had room to grow. But no more. We are beginning to find our limits.

What used to be a source of strength has unintentionally become a force of destruction.

This country has long since reached its carrying capacity, and yet immigrants are arriving in record numbers. Our ability to accommodate them — regardless of nationality — is severely compromised.

All Americans, by nature of their citizenship, enjoy certain rights and freedoms: liberty, justice, education, and housing being some of the major ones. For each new citizen, the government must add more services to provide these entitlements. It does so by carving ever deeper into our natural resources. It builds new police stations, courts, jails, schools, colleges, and public housing. And then it builds the necessary supporting infrastructure: new roads, highways, bridges, and parking lots. As it does so, the pie is

divided into ever-smaller pieces.

In striving to provide entitlements to all citizens — even new ones — we forget that this is our natural resources are also an entitlement. Unlike the others, it is not guaranteed in the Constitution. (Perhaps it should be: "As an American you have the right to breathe clean air, to drink pure water, to eat food which is uncontaminated by pesticides or other toxins.") Unfortunately our natural resources are finite. By continuing to divide them into ever-smaller pieces, we compromise and eventually deplete them entirely. Ecosystems become fragments, genetic diversity is lost, air and water quality fall. As a result, we all suffer.

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