

# Needed: A Patriotic Assimilation Policy

by **John Fonte**

In America, today as in the past, immigration and assimilation are bound together like Siamese twins. It makes no sense to talk about immigration without talking about assimilation, nor does it make sense to develop an immigration policy without an assimilation policy. The United States is the most successful immigration country in the history of the world for one basic reason – the triumph of patriotic assimilation – the assimilation of immigrants as loyal members of the American body politic.

For more than 200 hundred years immigrants to America and their children have successfully assimilated into what has been called the “American way of life.” This civic or patriotic assimilation of immigrants into the American constitutional regime did not just happen “naturally.” Patriotic assimilation was the end result of a sometimes explicit (and other times implicit) long-range vision

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that was formulated by America’s leaders. Since the days of George Washington, continuing through the era of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, and supported in the past decade by such public figures as Barbara Jordan – this strategic vision has helped to define immigration-assimilation policy by articulating two interconnected ideas: (1) welcoming immigrants, and (2) assimilating those immigrants into the mainstream of American civic life.

Thus, George Washington wrote John Adams that he envisioned immigrants becoming “assimilated to our customs, measures, laws,” and because of this, he predicted, native-born citizens and immigrants would “soon become one people.” In the same vein, more than a century later Theodore Roosevelt stated that, “the immigrant who comes here in good faith [and] becomes an American and assimilates himself to us... shall be treated on an exact equality with everyone else, for it is an outrage to discriminate against any such man because of creed or birthplace or origin. But that is predicated upon the man’s becoming an American and nothing but an American....”

In a similar manner, Roosevelt’s chief political rival President Woodrow Wilson, told immigrants at a citizenship

ceremony, “I certainly would not be one even to suggest that a man cease to love the home of his birth and the nation of his origin—these things are very sacred and ought not to be put out of our hearts—but it is one thing to love the place where you were born and it is another to dedicate yourself to the place to which you go. You cannot dedicate yourself to America unless you become...with every purpose of your will thorough Americans....”

Closer to our own time (in 1995), the late Texas Democratic Congresswoman Barbara Jordan wrote in a *New York Times* article entitled “The Americanization Ideal” that, “Immigration imposes mutual obligations. Those who choose to come here must embrace the common core of American civic culture,” but the native-born must “assist them” in learning about America, and, at the same time, must oppose prejudice and “vigorously enforce” laws against discrimination.

In different ways George Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Barbara Jordan all advocated what I have called “patriotic assimilation.” Clearly, there are different types of assimilation. Economic assimilation implies that immigrants are doing well financially and joining the middle

class. Linguistic assimilation means newcomers are learning to speak English. Cultural assimilation could mean that immigrants are becoming absorbed (for good or ill) into the mainstream popular culture of 21<sup>st</sup> century American life. While economic, linguistic, and cultural forms of assimilation are clearly significant, nothing is more important to the health of American democracy than the patriotic assimilation of the millions of immigrants who have come to our shores.

What is “patriotic assimilation”? First of all, patriotic assimilation does not mean giving up all ethnic traditions, customs, cuisine, and birth languages. It has nothing to do with the food one eats, the religion one practices, the affection that one feels for the land of one’s birth, and the second languages that one speaks. Multiethnicity and ethnic subcultures have enriched America and have always been part of our past. Historically, the immigration saga has involved “give and take” between immigrants and the native-born. That is to say, immigrants have helped shape America even as this nation has Americanized them.

Patriotic assimilation occurs when a newcomer essentially adopts American civic values and the American heritage as his or her own. It occurs, for example, when newcomers and their children begin to think of American history as “our” history not “their” history. To give a hypothetical example, imagine an eight-grade Korean-American

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female student studying the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

Does she think of those events in terms of “they” or “we”? Does she envision the creation of the Constitution in Philadelphia as something that “they” (white males of European descent) were involved in 200 years before her ancestors came to America, or does she imagine the Constitutional Convention as something that “we” Americans did as part of “our” history? Does she think in terms of “we” or “they”? “We” implies patriotic assimilation. If she thinks in terms of “we” she has done what millions of immigrants and immigrant children have done in the past. She has adopted America’s story as her story, and she has adopted America’s Founders – Madison, Hamilton, Franklin, Washington – as her ancestors. (This does not mean that she, like other Americans, will not continue to argue about our history and our heritage, nor ignore the times that America has

acted ignobly).

In this regard, it must be emphasized that in the post September 11 world, patriotic assimilation is something thicker than simply adherence to vaguely defined “universal democratic values.” It is adherence to American constitutional principles and loyalty to the American nation-state. In the first citizenship ceremony held in Washington, DC, after the September 11 attacks, two new citizens, one Muslim-American and one Latino-American exemplified patriotic assimilation.

In becoming an American citizen, Libyan-born Yasir El-Maghrbi declared, “I’ll fight against people who want to destroy the system **we** have in the United States.” And Argentine-born Elisa Rojas stated that changing citizenship is “a very serious decision...I’m ready to help the country – **my** country.” The key words spoken by Yasir El-Maghrbi and Elisa Rojas were “**my**” and “**we**.” They clearly understood that in transferring allegiance from their birth nations to the United States they had assumed a new common identity with the American people. This identification is the essence of patriotic assimilation and the main reason for the success of our immigration tradition.

In contrast to Yasir El-Maghrbi, another naturalized American citizen, Mukhtar al-Bakri, from Lackawanna, New York clearly has different loyalties. Al-Bakri (who was charged with aiding a foreign terrorist organization) was described in the Associated Press

as a young immigrant who “graduated from Lackawanna High School,” where he “played soccer and hockey.” Interestingly, Yemeni-born al-Bakri, and five other members of the Lackawanna al-Qaeda terrorist cell (who were born in the U.S. of Yemeni immigrants) were all characterized by acquaintances as typical young people who played sports, had fun, and attended public schools – and were, apparently economically, linguistically, and culturally assimilated into American society. Surely, this should remind us that economic, linguistic, and cultural assimilation are meaningless without patriotic assimilation – without loyalty to the United States.

Today we are in an era of continuing large scale immigration; international terrorism; competing global loyalties; increasing dual citizenship; and transnational allegiances based on ethnicity, race, and religion. At the same time, it is also an era of heightened concern with homeland security and national loyalty. This is a moment for us to reaffirm the meaning of American citizenship for all Americans, old and new. In these circumstances what would the public response be if the Bush Administration launched a serious and sustained patriotic assimilation initiative? One suspects, that if such an initiative was well conceived, it would strike a strong positive chord in the American people and have overwhelming popular and bi-partisan political support.

A successful patriotic

assimilation project would have two phases: (1) setting the terms of the debate and shaping the national conversation on immigrant assimilation in American life, and (2) offering

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concrete programs to assist the project. Strategically, the Bush Administration could do, in broad terms, what the Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson Administration’s did in the early Twentieth Century.

*First*, Presidents Roosevelt and Wilson used the White House “bully pulpit” to promote an “Americanization” project that would bring newcomers into the mainstream of American life. For example, on July 4-5, 1915, President Wilson, cabinet members, and prominent public figures like Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis, gave speeches at citizenship ceremonies in 150 cities around the nation, as part of “National Americanization Day.” *Second*, during the Roosevelt and Wilson Administrations the Bureau of

Naturalization and the Bureau of Education implemented programs to promote the patriotic assimilation of immigrants. For example, during Theodore Roosevelt’s Presidency, Francis Kellor, director the National Americanization Committee, served as a key advisor to the President and helped institutionalize Roosevelt’s patriotic assimilation policies at the Bureau of Education.

Surely, an explicit message from this Administration advocating patriotic assimilation would influence the national conversation. In addition, there are two concrete programmatic arenas in which patriotic assimilation could be advanced.

(1) THE OFFICE OF CITIZENSHIP. In November 2002 Congress voted to abolish the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and divided its functions into two bureaus: the Bureau of Border Security and the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services. Upon the recommendation of the chairman of the House immigration subcommittee, George Gekas (R-PA), an “Office of Citizenship” was created within the new Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services that according to the legislation, “shall be responsible for promoting instruction and training on citizenship responsibilities for aliens interested in becoming naturalized citizens of the United States, including the development of educational materials.”

Like the Bureau of Naturalization in the days of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the new Office

of Citizenship should become an agency that actively promotes the patriotic assimilation of immigrants. Today, applicants for citizenship are required to have “an understanding of, and attachment to, the principles of the Constitution of the United States.” They are supposed to be tested in the English language and in American history and government. Most importantly, before becoming citizens the newcomers take an Oath of Allegiance renouncing all prior political allegiances; swearing, “true faith and allegiance” to the US Constitution; and promising “to defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic.” The mandate of the Office of Citizenship should be to assist our new fellow citizens in understanding the serious moral commitment that they are making in taking the Oath, and “bearing true faith and allegiance” to American liberal democracy.

Because we are a multiethnic, multiracial, multireligious country, our nationhood is not based on ethnicity, race, or religion, but, instead, on a shared loyalty to our constitutional republic and its liberal democratic principles. If immigration to America is going to continue to be the great success story that it has been in the past, it is essential that newcomers have an understanding of and attachment to our democratic republic, our heritage, and our civic principles.

To this end, the Office of Citizenship should strengthen the current educational materials used by applicants for American citizenship. Since the Oath of

Allegiance is the culmination of the naturalization process, an examination of the Oath and what it means “to bear true faith and allegiance” to the United States Constitution should be part of those educational materials, and should be included on any citizenship test. Further, the Office could (1) examine ways to make citizenship training and the swearing-in ceremony more meaningful; (2) cooperate with other government agencies that work with immigrants such as the U.S. Department of Education’s English Literacy-Civics program; and (3) reexamine the citizenship test to see how it can be improved.

(2) ENGLISH LITERACY-CIVICS (EL-Civics). English Literacy Civics (formerly English as a Second Language-Civics or ESL-Civics) is a 70 million dollar federal program that provides grants to teach English with a civics education emphasis to non-native speakers. The program is administered by the U.S. Department of Education through the states. The money goes to adult education schools, community colleges, and non-governmental organizations to integrate civic instruction into English language learning.

Logically, EL-Civics is a program that should promote the civic and patriotic assimilation of immigrants. As noted, in becoming American citizens, immigrants pledge, “True faith and allegiance” to American liberal democracy. This requires some knowledge of our history and our values. If the seventy million dollars expended annually on EL-Civics assisted our future

fellow citizens in understanding America’s heritage and civic values, the money would be well spent. This appears to have been the intent of Congress in creating the program in the first place.

Unfortunately, on balance, EL-Civics programs are falling short. In many federally funded EL-Civics classes “civics” is defined narrowly as pertaining almost exclusively to mundane day to day tasks such as how to take public transportation or make a doctor’s appointment. Obviously, these “life-coping skills” (as they are called in the jargon) could be part of EL-Civics classes, but the classes should focus primarily on American values, or what veteran civic educator Robert Pickus calls “Idea Civics.” The problem is that many state guidelines for EL-Civics are rigid and inflexible. These state guidelines have been influenced heavily by language professionals who, define “civics” in a very narrow way and resist the idea of teaching American values through English language training. Moreover, current Department of Education’s regulations do not seriously address the importance of emphasizing citizenship instruction.

It is time to put American civic principles at the head of the taxpayer-supported English Literacy Civics program. Federal guidelines to the states should be revised, insisting on the use of solid content materials that emphasize our American heritage, and our civic and patriotic values. In our post-9-11 world, “Idea Civics,” that will assist newcomers in understanding the

meaning of “bearing true faith and allegiance” to our democratic republic, must be emphasized.

In sum, it is time to launch a new national initiative aimed at promoting the civic and patriotic assimilation of immigrants into the mainstream of American life. Today as in the past, patriotic assimilation is a necessary

component of any successful immigration policy. This does not mean that we should blindly replicate all the past Americanization policies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, some of which would be inappropriate today. But it does mean that we have much to learn from our great historical

success in civic assimilation. In the final analysis it means that we should draw on a usable past, exercise common sense, and develop a patriotic assimilation policy that will be consist with our principles and effective in today’s world. ■

This table was compiled by John Fonte, Ph.D., Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute and Director of its Center for American Common Culture. It outlines our changed understandings of key elements in America’s history and national culture, from the Founders to today’s era of globalization. It is a graphic summation of his chapter entitled “Is the Purpose of Civic Education to Transmit or Transform the American Regime?” in *Civic Education and Culture*, Bradley Watson, ed. (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2005).

**Regime Transmission**

- American People
- Emphasis on national unity
- Individual citizen
- Individual rights
- Voluntary associations
- Civic/individual identity
- National identity
- Emphasis on political freedom
- Multiethnicity
- Melting pot
- Americanization/assimilation
- Realistic constraints
- Free society
- Majority rule/limited government
- Realism about human nature
- Natural rights
- Objective moral order
- American achievements
- Europeans discover America
- British constitutional heritage
- Mayflower colonists land
- Emphasis on West
- Political/Intellectual history
- Free enterprise
- Emphasize equality of opportunity
- Stories of soldiers at war
- American citizen
- Citizen (of US)
- National interests
- Patriotism
- America Is
- Preserve our Constitution
- Improve American democracy
- Transmit the American Regime

**Regime Transformation**

- American Peoples
- Emphasis on group diversity
- Culture/ethnic/gender group
- Group rights
- Ascribed groups
- Racial/gender identity
- Culture group identity
- Emphasis on ethnicity/gender
- Multiculturalism
- Mosaic/patchwork quilt
- Cultural pluralism
- Utopian agendas
- Diverse society
- Social justice for groups
- “Nature” is socially constructed
- “Rights” are socially constructed
- Morality is socially constructed
- Gaps between ideal and real
- Three worlds meet
- Convergence of three worlds
- Hunters cross the Bering Strait
- Emphasis on Non-West
- Social/Ethnic history
- Economic equality
- Emphasize equality of results
- Stories of the home front
- Global citizen
- Resident (of US)
- Transnational concerns
- Transnationalism
- America Will Be
- Fulfill our “social ideals”
- Create a genuine democracy
- Transform the American Regime