

President Clinton's Speech on Diversity

A major policy statement made at Portland, OR

[Editor's note: *On June 13, 1998 President Clinton gave the commencement address at Portland (OR) State University in which he laid out his administration's policy regarding immigration. Moving beyond the introductory comments, we present the main body of the speech. Following references to his previous addresses at the Naval Academy on security matters, and at MIT on the information age, the president began the discussion of race and ethnicity in America.*]

Today I want to talk to you about what may be the most important subject of all — how we can strengthen the bonds of our national community as we grow more racially and ethnically diverse.

It was just a year ago tomorrow that I launched a national initiative on race, asking Americans to address the persistent problems and the limitless possibilities of our diversity. This effort is especially important right now because, as we grow more diverse, our ability to deal with the challenges will determine whether we can really bind ourselves together as one America. And even more importantly in the near-term, and over the next few years, perhaps, as well, our ability to exercise world leadership for peace, for freedom, for prosperity in a world that is both smaller and more closely connected, and yet increasingly gripped with tense, often bloody conflicts rooted in racial, ethnic and religious divisions — our ability to lead that kind of world to a better place rests in no small measure on our ability to be a better place here in the United States that can be a model for the world.

The driving force behind our increasing diversity is a new, large wave of immigration. It is changing the face of America. And while most of the changes are good, they do present challenges which demand more both from new immigrants and from our citizens. Citizens share a responsibility to welcome new immigrants, to ensure that they strengthen our nation, to give them their chance at

the brass ring.

In turn, new immigrants have a responsibility to learn, to work, to contribute to America. If both citizens and immigrants do their part, we will grow ever stronger in the new global information economy.

More than any other nation on Earth, America has constantly drawn strength and spirit from wave after wave of immigrants. In each generation they have proved to be the most restless, the most adventurous, the most innovative, the most industrious of people. Bearing different memories, honoring different heritages, they have strengthened our economy, enriched our culture, renewed our promise of freedom and opportunity for all.

Of course, the path has not always run smooth. Some Americans have met each group of newcomers with suspicion and violence and discrimination. So great was the hatred of Irish immigrants 150 years ago that they were greeted with signs that read, "No Dogs Or Irish." So profound was the fear of Chinese in the 1880s that they were barred from entering the country. So deep was the distrust of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe at the beginning of this century that they were forced to take literacy tests specifically designed to keep them out of America.

Eventually the guarantees of our Constitution and the better angels of our nature prevailed over ignorance and insecurity, over prejudice and fear.

But now we are being tested again — by a new wave of immigration larger than any in a century, far more diverse than any in our history. Each year, nearly a million people come legally to America. Today, nearly one in ten people in America was born in another country; one in five schoolchildren is from immigrant families. Today, largely because of immigration, there is no majority race in Hawaii or Houston or New York City. Within five years there will be no majority race in our largest state,

California. In a little more than 50 years there will be no majority race in the United States. No other nation in history has gone through demographic change of this magnitude in so short a time.

What do the changes mean? They can either strengthen and unite us, or they can weaken and divide us. We must decide.

Let me state my view unequivocally. I believe new immigrants are good for America. They are revitalizing our cities. They are building our new economy. They are strengthening our ties to the global economy, just as earlier waves of immigrants settled on the new frontier and powered the Industrial Revolution. They are energizing our culture and broadening our vision of the world. They are renewing our most basic values and reminding us all of what it truly means to be an American

It means working hard, like a teenager from

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Vietnam who does his homework as he watches the cash register at his family’s grocery store. It means making a better life for your children, like a father from Russia who works two jobs and still finds time to take his daughter to the public library to practice her reading. It means dreaming big dreams, passing them on to your children.

You have a lot of stories like that here at Portland State. Just this morning I met one of your graduates — or two, to be specific. Mago Gilson, an immigrant from Mexico who came here without a high school education. Twelve years later she is receiving her Master Degree in Education, on her way to realizing her dream of becoming a teacher.

She is joined in this class by her son Eddi, who had dreams of his own and worked full time for seven years to put himself through school. Today he receives a Bachelor’s Degree in business administration. And soon — there’s more. Soon her son Oscar, whom I also met, will receive his own

Master’s Degree in education. I’d like to ask the Gilsens and their family members who are here to rise and be recognized. There she is. Give them a hand.

In the Gilson family and countless like them, we see the spirit that built America — the drive to succeed, the commitment to family, to education, to work, the hope for a better life. In their stories we see a reflection of our parents’ and grandparents’ journey — a powerful reminder that our America is not so much a place as a promise; not a guarantee but a chance; not a particular race, but an embrace of our common humanity.

Now, some Americans don’t see it that way. When they hear new accents or see new faces, they feel unsettled. They worry that new immigrants come not to work hard, but to live off our largesse. They’re afraid the America they know and love is becoming a foreign land. This reaction may be understandable, but it’s wrong. It’s especially wrong when anxiety and fear give rise to policies and ballot propositions to exclude immigrants from our civic life. I believe it’s wrong to deny law-abiding immigrants benefits available to everyone else; wrong to ignore them as people not worthy of being counted on the census. It’s not only wrong, it’s un-American.

Let me be clear: I also think it’s wrong to condone illegal immigration that flouts our laws, strains our tolerance, taxes our resources. Even a nation of immigrants must have rules and conditions and limits, and when they are disregarded, public support for immigration erodes in ways that are destructive to those who are newly arrived and those who are still waiting patiently to come.

We must remember, however, that the vast majority of immigrants are here legally. In every measurable way, they give more to our society than they take. Consider this: on average, immigrants pay \$1,800 more in taxes every year than they cost our system in benefits. Immigrants are paying into Social Security at record rates. Most of them are young, and they will help to balance the budget when we baby boomers retire and put strains on it.

New immigrants also benefit the nation in ways not so easily measured, but very important. We should be honored that America, whether it’s called the City on a Hill, or the Old Gold Mountain, or El Norte, is still seen around the world as the land of

new beginnings. We should all be proud that people living in isolated villages in far corners of the world actually recognize the Statue of Liberty. We should rejoice that children the world over study our Declaration of Independence and embrace its creed.

My fellow Americans, we descendants of those who passed through the portals of Ellis Island must not lock the door behind us. Americans whose parents were denied the rights of citizenship simply because of the color of their skin must not deny those rights to others because of the country of their birth or the nature of their faith.

We should treat new immigrants as we would have wanted our own grandparents to be treated. We should share our country with them, not shun them or shut them out. But, mark my words, unless we handle this well, immigration of this sweep and scope could threaten the bonds of our union.

Around the world we see what can happen when people who live on the same land put race and ethnicity before country and humanity. If America is to remain the world's most diverse democracy, if immigration is to strengthen America as it has throughout our history, then we must say to one another: whether your ancestors came here in slave ships or on the Mayflower, whether they landed on Ellis Island or at Los Angeles International Airport, or have been here for thousands of years, if you believe in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, if you accept the responsibilities as well as the rights embedded in them, then you are an American.

Only that belief can keep us one America in the 21st century. So I say, as President, to all our immigrants, you are welcome here. But you must honor our laws, embrace our culture, learn our language, know our history; and when the time comes, you should become citizens. And I say to all Americans, we have responsibilities as well to welcome our newest immigrants, to vigorously enforce laws against discrimination. And I'm very proud that our nation's top civil rights enforcer is Bill Lam Lee, the son of Chinese immigrants who grew up in Harlem.

We must protect immigrants' rights and ensure their access to education, health care, and housing and help them to become successful, productive citizens. When immigrants take responsibility to become citizens and have met all the requirements to do so, they should be promptly evaluated and accepted.

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The present delays in the citizenship process are unacceptable and indefensible. And together, immigrants and citizens alike, let me say we must recommit ourselves to the general duties of citizenship. Not just immigrants but every American should know what's in our Constitution and understand our shared history.

Not just immigrants but every American should participate in our democracy by voting, by volunteering, and by running for office. Not just immigrants, but every American, on our campuses and in our communities, should serve — community service means good citizenship. And not just immigrants but every American should reject identity politics that seeks to separate us, not bring us together.

Ethnic pride is a very good thing. America is one of the places which most reveres the distinctive ethnic, racial, religious heritage of our various peoples. The days when immigrants felt compelled to Anglicize their last name or deny their heritage are, thankfully, gone. But pride in one's ethnic and racial heritage must never become an excuse to withdraw from the larger American community. That does not honor diversity; it breeds divisiveness. And that could weaken America.

Not just immigrants, but every American should recognize that our public schools must be more than places where our children learn to read, they must also learn to become good citizens. They must all be able to make America's heroes, from Washington to Lincoln to Eleanor Roosevelt and Rosa Parks and Cesar Chavez, their own.

Today, too many Americans, and far too many immigrant children, attend crowded, often crumbling, inner city schools. Too many drop out of school altogether. And with more children from immigrant families entering our country and our schools than at any time since the turn of the

century, we must renew our efforts to rebuild our schools and make them the best in the world. They must have better facilities; they must have smaller classes; they must have properly trained teachers; they must have access to technology; they must be the best in the world.

All of us, immigrants and citizens alike, must ensure that our new group of children learn our language, and we should find a way to do this together instead of launching another round of divisive political fights.

In the schools within just a few miles of the White House, across the Potomac River, we have the most diverse school district in America, where there are children from 180 different racial and ethnic groups, speaking as native tongues about 100 languages.

Now, its all very well for someone to say, everyone of them should learn English immediately. But we don't at this time necessarily have people who are trained to teach them English in all those languages. So I say to you, it is important for children to retain their native language. But unless they also learn English, they will never reach their full potential in the United States.

Of course, English is learned at different rates, and, of course, children have individual needs. But that cannot be an excuse for making sure that when children come into our school system, we do whatever it takes with whatever resources are at hand to make sure they learn as quickly as they can the language that will be the dominant language of this country's commerce and citizenship in the future.

We owe it to these children to do that. And we should not either delay behind excuses or look for ways to turn what is essentially a human issue of basic decency and citizenship and opportunity into a divisive political debate. We have a stake together in getting together and moving forward on this.

Let me say, I applaud the students here at Portland State who are tutoring immigrant children to speak and read English. You are setting the kind of example I want our country to follow.

One hundred and forty years ago, in the First Lady's hometown of

Chicago, immigrants outnumbered native Americans. Addressing a crowd there in 1858, Abraham Lincoln asked what connection those immigrants could possibly feel to people like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, who founded our nation. Here was his answer: if they, the immigrants, look back through this history to trace their connection to those days by blood, they will find they have none. But our founders proclaimed that we are all created equal in the eyes of God. And that, Lincoln said, is the electric cord in that declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving people everywhere.

Well, that electric cord, the conviction that we are all created equal in the eyes of God, still links every graduate here with every new immigrant coming to our shores and every American who ever came before us. If you carry it with conscience and courage into the new century, it will light our way to America's greatest days — your days.

So, members of the Class of 1998, go out and build the future of your dreams. Do it together, for your children, for your grandchildren, for your country.

Good luck, and God bless you.

TSC

In Deconstructing America: Immigration, Nationality and Statehood, Joseph Fallon gives a detailed account, with statistical and legal data, of ongoing decline of U.S. ethnic and cultural homogeneity. The author reviews the numerous congressional acts and legal decisions currently undermining U.S. sovereignty in favor of international treaties and controlling organizations.

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