

Immigrant Numbers Threaten National Cohesion

by Richard D. Lamm

The opposite of a truth is a lie; the opposite of a great truth is another great truth.

– Niels Bohr

Immigration is an issue on which there is always strong opinion, but let me adopt the words of an 18th century wise man who said: “It is better to debate a problem without settling it, than to settle a problem without debating it.” We haven’t had a deep enough, thoughtful enough, debate about immigration. When a subject involves our demographic future, and perhaps our social peace, it deserves a deeper discussion than merely saying, “We are a nation of immigrants.”

Of course immigration has been good for America, and of course we are all immigrants, but that is not the end of the debate. If I could leave any plaque in the governor’s office after my twelve years there it would be something like “beware of solutions that were appropriate to the past, but are disastrous to the future.” Or perhaps Neils Bohr’s statement “the opposite of a true statement is a false statement, the opposite of a great truth is another great truth.”

Public policy is never static, it is always evolving, and, ironically, often yesterday’s solution to an issue becomes today’s problem.

There is a political correctness and liberal orthodoxy throughout America that constipates debate on subjects that should be debated. Issues of great importance to America’s future are not being talked about because of the fear of being called a racist. My first law job out of Berkeley was as a civil rights

attorney. Our family marched in Selma. I have proved, to some extent, that I care. But regardless, the debate needs to be engaged.

There are three main issues in immigration: How many immigrants should we take? Who should they be? And how do we enforce the rules decided upon? But I would like to defer these questions and first address a growing concern of mine (and others) that immigration is risking the balkanization of America, – that the melting pot is not melting, – and that we are growing within America a large second underclass when we haven’t even solved the problems of our existing underclass.

Is the melting pot still melting? All of American history says we should answer “yes.” Throughout our great history, there has always been someone saying that the Irish, the Jews, the Italians, whoever – are not going to assimilate. They have always been wrong. Always. The melting pot has taken on all comers, and won. So a heavy burden of proof should be on me in raising this question. Let me make my case.

First, never before have we taken so disproportionate a number of immigrants from one geographic area. Forty percent of our legal immigration and virtually all of our illegal immigration is from south of our border and Spanish-speaking. Metaphorically, one of the most important questions facing America and the Southwest is this question: are Mexicans Italians? Italians were the last immigrant group to come to America under antagonism and suspicion. Prejudice was palpable, discrimination widespread, intergroup relations difficult. Italians 100 years ago, like the Mexican immigrants today, had poor graduation rates, high rates of dropouts, higher crime rates, fewer college graduates per capita, and fewer professionals. It seemed for a time that Italians would be a permanent

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underclass of blue-collar workers.

But the Italians, while they took longer to succeed in the traditional ways, took on the educational and success patterns of the majority community and now they equal or exceed the performance of the majority community. They are among the proudest Americans, with family income and professional status higher than the national average. They took longer, but succeeded brilliantly. Are Mexicans Italians?

Samuel P. Huntington, who gave us the perceptive *The Clash of Civilizations*, has a new book, *Who Are We?* – an important book that should be much debated by those who care about American's future. Huntington states:

the persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves – from Los Angeles to Miami – and rejecting the values that built the American Dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril.

Is this xenophobic? Huntington is not saying that people south of our borders can't become good Americans. It's the numbers, it's proximity, making it so easy to avoid the commitment that citizenship requires.

Hispanic Americans have fought and died for America in impressive numbers and have won more medals of honor proportionally for bravery than any group in America.

But there are three big differences that distinguish current immigration patterns, which in my opinion make non-assimilation (an Hispanic Quebec) an equally likely scenario. Those three all began with the letter "d".

Distance: previous generations of immigrants had to come a long way and didn't have much option to go home. They had to totally throw themselves into becoming Americans; today many of our immigrants can go back to their homes for a weekend. The pull to assimilate is considerably less. With dual citizenship they vote both for president of Mexico and of the

United States.

Diversity: the only way former immigrants could talk to their neighbors and live their lives, was to learn English and assimilate. But no longer. Never in history has America accepted so disproportionate a percentage of one nationality and language group. Today over 70 percent of our immigrants are Spanish-speaking and America is backing into becoming a bilingual/bicultural country. It's the "press two" problem. We never had the equivalent of "press two for Italian." I fear we are backing into becoming a bilingual/bicultural country without adequate debate. I know of no bilingual/bicultural country in the world that lives at peace with itself.

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Discontinuity: the history of American immigration shows there were times of large immigration followed by periods of low immigration (war, Depression), which gives the new immigrants a chance to assimilate and join our community. Today we take approximately one million legal immigrants while perhaps as many as one million illegal immigrants settle here, with massive numbers of illegals being added year after year. There is never the pause that assimilates. Will the melting pot becoming a pressure cooker? How do we avoid becoming an Hispanic Quebec with all the agony that goes with having two language groups, two cultures, competing within one country?

So Huntington is saying Mexicans can be the new Italians if they come in assimilable numbers, and if the rest of us insist on assimilation. Whatever numbers we

take, immigrants must be assimilated into our melting pot and incorporated into our economy. The chief product of American immigration has been citizens – patriotic citizens.

This raises some new and uncomfortable questions. Should not we at least debate whether it is wise to build up a large Muslim population? How' s the Muslim population working out in Great Britain, or the Netherlands, or France? Why would we want to voluntarily do this to America? Shouldn' t these questions be debated on a deeper level than simply citing the Statue of Liberty.

We inherited a great country from our fathers and mothers – but I question how good trustees we have been. A nation' s wealth and status is like starlight – what you see is not what *is*, but what *was*. Just as the light we see from a distant star started its journey thousands of years ago, so is the nation' s current success due principally to past actions. Great nations have great momentum; past investments in education and productivity continue to give benefits even after those good traits deteriorate. To a large degree, one generation benefits from the seeds planted by their fathers and mothers. We, in turn, plant seeds that will be reaped by our children. Some of these "seeds" are measurable; some are immeasurable.

I am very concerned about what history will say of our generation. We inherited the world' s largest creditor nation; we are leaving it the world' s largest debtor nation. We inherited a nation that exported more than it imported, and we are leaving a nation that imports more than it exports. We inherited a nation that produced more than it consumed, and we leave a nation that is consuming more than it produces. My father and mother fought a war and a Depression and left my generation with a small federal debt. We are leaving an albatross of debt of unbelievable magnitude to our children. We are even putting every dime of the war in Iraq on our children' s credit cards. Has our generation kept faith with America? We have done well for ourselves – have we done well by America?

The real story of a nation' s strength is in those things we do *not* measure. These intangible assets also grow or decline. Herein lies the fate of empires.

Great nations cannot be judged by the success of their stock exchanges or their GNP – great nations

have great intangibles. Great nations must have great citizens, and the kind of future we will have depends on what kind of people we are and what kind of kids we produce. And because most of our future growth will be from immigration or the children of immigrants, the future depends on what kind of immigrant we decide to accept.

One very wise man observed that "what makes a nation great is not primarily its great men, but the stature of its innumerable mediocre ones." (James Fallows) The strength of nations is how ordinary citizens, ordinarily behave.

That brings me to the skills of our current

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immigrant stream. Why not take into account the skills of potential immigrants, as all other immigrant-receiving countries do? Are we really that confident in the ability of America to turn all immigrants into productive citizens? Or is it hubris? America gets the world' s "first-round draft pick" of immigrants. Why not pick the skills that will keep America great?

If we take 1000 people from Russia, 1000 from Asia, and 1000 from south of our border and run them through three generations in America, will not there be a difference? Of course there will be!

Too many of our Spanish-speaking immigrants live in ethnic ghettos. Too many are unskilled laborers, too many are uneducated, too many live in poverty, too many are illegal, too many haven' t finished 9th grade, too many drop out of school. Too many don' t have health insurance, and too many go on welfare. The question has to be asked: "Are we laying the foundations for a new balkanizing Hispanic

underclass?"

The Center for Immigration Studies has found that "our immigration flow is overwhelmingly unskilled, and it is hard to find an economic argument for unskilled immigration, because it tends to reduce wages for (U.S.) workers." The study goes on:

because the American economy offers very limited opportunities for workers with little education, continued unskilled immigration can't help but to significantly increase the size of the poor and uninsured populations, as well as the number of people on welfare.

Most worrisome, the study goes on to find:

the lower educational attainment of our Spanish-speaking immigrants appears to persist across the generations. The high school dropout rates of native-born Mexican-Americans (both second and third generation) are two and a half times that of other natives.

Then there is the question of *language*. I am convinced that one of those intangibles that keep America great is a common language, and that we have avoided the tension of two competing languages and cultures. It is a blessing for an individual to be bilingual – it is a curse for a society to be bilingual. Think Quebec. Think Emmanuel Kant who said, "language is the great divider." One scholar, Seymour Martin Lipset, put it this way:

the histories of bilingual and bicultural societies that do not assimilate are histories of turmoil, tension, and tragedy.

Some of you are saying, "wait a minute, what about Switzerland?" but Switzerland has been divided into three geographic regions; one speaks German, one French, and one Italian. They do not have competing languages within the same geographic area.

We have plenty of room in America for Cinco de Mayo, and Spanish culture has already immensely enriched our culture. Our culture doesn't have to be (and shouldn't be) the culture of 1776 or 1950 – but it must have a unified core. The United States runs the

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very great risk of creating a "Hispanic Quebec" if we do not develop the right "social glue." Assimilation doesn't just happen. The late Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, who headed a commission on immigration reform, warned that we have to

"Americanize" immigrants or lose our social peace. We must become one people, indivisible. She pointed out that we have high school graduations all across America where the Mexican flag is flown, rather than the U.S. flag.

We took Irish, Indians and Italians, Cambodians and Chinese, Europeans and Ethiopians and made them into Americans. But, a nation must be more than a diverse people living in the same place and sharing only a standard of living. Today, with unprecedented numbers of immigrants arriving year after year, America faces a new and serious assimilation challenge. We must become one nation with one flag.

I thus suggest that "diversity" is only an asset if it is secondary to unity. The emphasis must be on the "unum," not the "pluribus." We can be composed of many ethnic groups and religions, but we must be one nationality. We should respect diversity, but we should celebrate unity.

What immigration policy would I suggest?

First, for reasons of national security and future social peace we should not tolerate illegal immigration. There may be as many as 15 or even 20 million illegal immigrants living in the shadows of America. We may now get yearly as many illegal immigrants as we accept legal immigrants. There is no moral, legal or public policy reason to wink at illegal immigration.

1. Illegal immigrants jump the line.

2. It's not cheap labor – it's subsidized labor. The average illegal immigrant is no longer a single male coming up from Mexico to take a low-paying job – and then going home. There are now whole families that settle permanently, who come with kids we have to educate – we have to pay health care for whole families plus all other municipal services. It is imposing massive costs on our taxpayers. Forty percent of the illegal immigrants work off-books.

3. Security concern in this time of terrorism: We have this vast gap in our security protection on our borders. The same process that allows illegals to come and blow leaves off our lawns, allows terrorists to come and blow up our buildings. It's like a homeowner going to bed with the front door locked, but not locking the back door, though he knows there are dangerous people in the neighborhood.

I believe we need a counterfeit-proof social security card or driver's license and that before any of us get on an airplane, open up a bank account, or get a job, we show this counterfeit-proof social security card. This would not be a national ID that you would be required to show – except when you wanted a job, bank account or seat on an airplane.

I would not give illegal immigrants amnesty until we are sure we have control over our borders. I think the John McCain/ Ted Kennedy legislation now before Congress is bad legislation. Amnesties are giant billboards to the world that we really don't enforce our immigration laws.

Second, I would do what Canada, Australia, and New Zealand do – pick their immigrants for the skills they bring, not for who they are related to. America takes over 90 percent of its legal immigrants, not for the skills they bring to America, but to whom they are related. Family reunification is essentially a policy of nepotism.

Third, I would reduce legal immigration. As part of that, I would suggest that we not take immigrants from terrorist-supporting countries where we can't do a background check. There are lots of good people in those countries, but 9/11 taught us that it is not a matter of the odds, but the stakes. In an age of weapons of mass destruction, even small odds should be avoided. I would also debate much more openly whether we should allow our immigration laws build up a significant Muslim population until we see how this population does in those countries (including Canada) which have a significant Muslim minority.

Fourth, and most controversial: I would cut legal immigration in half. America is taking four times as many legal immigrants as we averaged before 1965. The Census Bureau estimates 400 million Americans by 2050 and a billion by 2100. We are leaving our grandchildren a nation of one billion people! I suggest that there is no public welfare reason why we should

have an immigration policy that will leave our grandchildren among one billion Americans. When the Statue of Liberty was erected, there were approximately 70 million Americans – we were an empty continent in an uncrowded world. We are no longer an empty continent. We no longer live in an uncrowded world.

We have to ask ourselves: how big a country do we want to become? How many people can live satisfied lives within our borders? Do we want the population of California and Colorado to double and then double again? These issues will not go away and will only grow more complicated.

Four hundred million Americans would mean a doubling of the population of California. Do we want that? I have yet to meet an American that wants one billion neighbors. Or 400 million. Demographers calculate that immigration is now the determining factor in America's rapid population growth. Immigrants and their U.S.-born children accounted for more than two-thirds of population growth in the last decade, and will continue to account for approximately two-thirds of our future growth.

What possible public policy advantage would there be to an America of 400 million? Do we lack for people? Do we have too much open space, parkland and recreation? What will 400 million Americans mean to our environment? Do we need immigration for a larger military? Are our schools under populated? Do we not have enough diversity? Will our children live better lives if San Francisco, Fresno and Denver double in size? Do we want a Colorado of 12 million people? A California of 60 million? These questions seem to answer themselves.

Many of us have been to India or China. Is that what we want to leave to our grandchildren? Can we imagine an America of one billion people that you would want to leave to your grandchildren?

Bottom line, ask yourself: what problem in America will be made better by continuing to add massive numbers of immigrants? Is it really good public policy for America to take twice as many immigrants as all the rest of the world combined?

Let me end as I began: "It is better to debate a question without settling it, than to settle a question without debating it." There is a liberal orthodoxy that makes it hard to discuss some problems, but

demography is destiny. Our current immigration policy is leading us to an America of one billion people by the end of the century. Our current immigration policy, or non-policy is building a massive underclass of illegals. It is preventing assimilation. Our current immigration policy leaves us terribly exposed to a terrorist attack. As every house needs a door, every country needs a border, an enforceable border. I end with a poem from Howard Nimerov who said:

*Praise without end, for the go-ahead zeal,
Of whoever it was that invented the wheel;
But never a word for the poor soul's sake,
Who thought ahead and invented the brake.*