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On Becoming American: Reasserting Citizenship in the Immigration Debate

William E. Simon, Jr.

On December 26, 1941, just 19 days after Pearl Harbor, Winston Churchill addressed the U.S. Congress and famously raised the following question about the enemy, “What kind of people do they think we are?”

Every crisis is a judgment call on an existing state of affairs; and the deeper the crisis, the deeper the question that is raised.

Churchill’s question evidenced a deep crisis. But one that pales beside the question raised by the deepest crisis of all: “Who do we think we are?” Or, in the words of Professor Samuel Huntington’s insightful recent book, “Who are we?”

This fundamental question requires a courageous honesty that goes to the very core of a nation in crisis. Only by saying who we are, and showing who we are, can we turn potential danger into an opportunity for growth and advancement.

This is precisely our challenge with immigration in America today. The issue goes to the very heart of American identity and unity, and we are all indebted to Professor Huntington for his wise perspective. And I am indebted to my friends at The Heritage Foundation, and in particular to Ed Feulner and Matt Spalding, for inviting me to speak today.

I am delighted to address this topic because the twin issues of immigration and assimilation are also very Californian. The Golden State leads America, and indeed the world, in immigration—legal and illegal.

Talking Points

- The United States rightly can claim to be the modern world’s supreme model of how to live with the deepest differences. *E pluribus unum* is not just our national motto; it is our supreme American achievement.
- That achievement, however, is called into question, not by the fact that so many people are coming but by the fact that we are not assimilating them.
- We must avoid the extremes of a “fortress America” that seeks to exclude further diversity and condemns it uncritically, as well as a “frontierless America” that seeks to welcome all immigration uncritically.
- There are two vital priorities for practical policies. One is a clear, firm commitment to stating and enforcing our policies. We cannot tolerate casual attitudes to controlling and securing our own borders. The other is to create a clear, efficient and attainable path toward citizenship, with a strong component that clearly inculcates American principles into all who seek to become citizens.

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(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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In the period from 1991 to 2000, some 5.6 million people became new U.S. citizens. But in just the three years since September 11, 2001, the U.S. has naturalized more than 1.5 million people and made 3 million more lawful permanent residents. In addition to the millions of legal immigrants and residents arriving each year, an estimated 10 million undocumented people have already made their way to California alone, and an addition million more arrive each year.

My home state is also the battleground for many of the political and social challenges arising with immigration. It is not too much to say that California's success in dealing with this thorny issue will be a beacon—illuminating and instructive for the world, and a vital part in the forward march of what George Washington called “the Great Experiment” and President Bush the “freedom project” that is America.

I have been in debates that are seriously miscast, both in California and in the national media, by conservatives as well as liberals.

In liberal circles, the issue is discussed as one more phase in the movement for expanding liberty and diversity, with no attention to issues of national identity and unity. And for my friends in conservative circles, the issue is hotly debated as a contest between “law-and-order conservatives,” concerned only with national security and control of our borders, and “pro-growth business conservatives,” concerned only with the chronic labor shortage—again, with no attention to issues of national identity and unity.

With little or no discussion of what it means to be an American, this narrow framing of the debate completely ignores the most important issue of all: the national implications of immigration without assimilation.

It is to Professor Huntington's credit that he fearlessly raises questions ignored by many, and I want to support his general position by adding my own perspective as a political leader in California.

I am confident that no politician will appeal to our citizens without sounding the missing positive note that has always resounded freely in American history. We must invite people to “become American.”

The American New Man

When the British Empire was at its height, Rudyard Kipling wrote that “to be born an Englishman means winning the first prize in God's lottery.” Today that privilege belongs to Americans, and our blessings are more than the luck of the womb. We are the legacy of the free people who have gone before us, on whose shoulders we now stand.

A central part of our American heritage is the way we welcome diverse people from all over the earth to join us as fellow-citizens in this great experiment. For countless millions, coming to America has meant freedom from oppression; for countless others, freedom to pursue a myriad of social and economic opportunities undreamed of elsewhere.

The flood of immigration is perhaps the most compelling endorsement of the allure of the American Dream. As Jack Paar once said, “Immigration is the sincerest form of flattery.”

The current challenges of immigration and assimilation are therefore not new to us. We have always been more diverse than most countries. The United States rightly can claim to be the modern world's supreme model of how to live with the deepest differences. We are a “nation of nations.” *E pluribus unum* is not just our national motto; it is our supreme American achievement.

But our generous attitude toward immigrants has two important consequences. One, we cannot take in the entire world, and two, those who do come must become American.

Today, however, our supreme achievement—*e pluribus unum*—is called into question, not by the fact that so many people are coming but by the fact that we are not assimilating them.

As we begin this new century, America does not stand out so uniquely from the rest of the world as it once did. From the culture-war controversies of the last 30 years to the more radical expressions of multiculturalism, there are disturbing signs that here in America difference and separateness are becoming more pronounced than unity and harmony.

At a time when living with our deepest differences is one of the world's pressing challenges, any Ameri-

can confusion over this issue goes to the heart of America's nationhood and freedom—thus the importance of the question “Who are we?”

In answering Professor Huntington's question, I would submit that immigration is not the defining problem, but rather the lack of an adequate framework and focus for citizenship.

From the days of the Pilgrims, these twin pillars—immigration and assimilation—have been central to why America was called “the first new nation.” The history of America is the story of a steadily expanding pluralism. What is at issue now is how immigration and assimilation are to be understood and handled in light of the plain facts and circumstances of this generation.

The fundamental question we face today is whether immigration will contradict or reinforce American identity and unity. Will we allow a flawed approach to assimilation and diversity to lead to what has been called by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “the disuniting of America”—a tragic situation where American identity and unity is systematically undermined?

Yes, there are important differences between the source and scale of the different waves of immigration, but the fundamental issue is still: How do people from different nations, who speak different languages, believe in different faiths, and practice different social customs settle in the same geographical region and live under the same political authority without turbulence and strife? Our answer has been to “Americanize” them—in other words, to integrate them and create a new national identity by respecting certain differences, melting others, and thus transforming many disparate peoples into one nation.

This process was evident from the beginning of our history. For example, the French farmer Hector St. John de Crevecoeur emigrated from Normandy in France in 1759 and settled in the Hudson Valley, New York, and married an American woman. The astounding diversity of the other settlers startled him: “a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and

Swedes.” One family he knew had an English grandfather, a Dutch grandmother, an Anglo-Dutch son with a French wife, whose four sons all married women of different nationalities. “From this promiscuous breed,” he wrote, “that race now called Americans has arisen.”

“What then is the American, this new man?” Crevecoeur famously asked. And his answer points to one of the keys in the success of America's nation-building. “He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. The American is the new man who acts upon new principles.... Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.” According to Samuel Huntington, immigrants “become Americans only if they ... participate in American life, learn America's language, history and customs, absorb America's Anglo-Protestant culture, and identify primarily with America rather than with their country of birth.”¹

The Disuniting of America

Does this conviction still hold true today, over 250 years later?

Is the historic idea of America's unifying identity as clear and strong as it used to be? Hardly. In the last generation a new and opposing idea has emerged, and a growing chorus of voices now decries the earlier transforming process.

Many people point to 1965 and the new immigration laws overturning the quotas that since 1924 had favored people from a European background. Certainly these laws caused an important shift, not just in the numbers coming in but the sources. The main thrust of immigration is now from Latin America and Asia, not Europe.

But the real explanation for the problem lies elsewhere. The new views of diversity do not come from the latest immigrants. As we know well, most Latinos and Asians are the most enthusiastic supporters of integration and the best examples of its benefits. Instead, the new ideas come from the oldest and

1. Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 339.

most established areas of our society and they grow directly out of the cultural revolution of the 1960s led by the wealthy, young elite of that day.

There are two main themes in this new view of diversity: a weakened confidence in there being any such thing as Americanism, and a sudden awareness of groups that had been supposedly locked out or left behind by the American dream.

The major result of this crisis of confidence was a new stress on culture and on the differences between cultures. The traditional picture of the “melting pot” is out; “mosaic” is in. “Assimilation” is now viewed as bad; “integration” is good. The emphasis on “Americanizing” helped to create the blind spot that led to America’s greatest evils, so “Americanism” itself is suspect—it is said to be essentially coercive, always relentless and sometimes ruthless.

Besides, advocates of diversity say that the chosen metaphor of the melting pot was always an exaggeration and never an accurate description. All cultures are equal—equally true and equally valuable—and therefore unmeltable. Thus the United States is a multicultural society rather than “Western” or “American.” Indeed, they argue there is no such thing as Americanism with which to do the melting.

At best they say, the notion is an abstraction. At worst it is an excuse for coercing the cultures of the world into the mold of the Anglos or the Europeans.

Instead of Americanness, these critics say, what we need to stress are diversity, relativism, and tolerance. According to the liberal psychobabble, *all* the cultures of the earth are equal, and must be treated as such. What is respected must be protected, and what is protected must be celebrated and promoted. Anything else is discrimination and judgmentalism. Thus all cultures are equal—especially formerly victimized cultures, which are at least temporarily more equal than others.

If ever there was a case of throwing out the baby with the bath water, this must be it. It is one thing to identify occasional excesses of Americanizing and another thing to reject its even more frequent successes and overall dramatic picture. Ironically, the very appreciation of cultural diversity is a fruit of the values now rejected in the name of cultural

diversity, just as almost all of America’s most distinctive values have roots in the tradition now pushed to one side.

But, far more importantly, the process of Americanizing is crucial for American nationhood. One of the lessons of the 20th century was the explosive power of nationalism—far more potent and enduring than the power of communism and other failed forms of government. *E pluribus unum* is therefore an extraordinary achievement, and one that we neglect at great peril, for it lies at the heart of our nationhood.

But what were the dynamics at work in the process of American nation-building at its best?

From the 17th to the late 20th century these dynamics are clearly visible, and the chorus of voices describing them has a remarkable harmony.

First, becoming American meant that new arrivals saw themselves as individuals rather than as members of groups. As George Washington said, “The bosom of America is open...to the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions”—but they should not come as groups and so retain the “language, habits, and principles (good or bad) which they bring with them.” Rather they should settle as individuals ready for “intermixture with our people” and so become “assimilated to our customs, measures, and laws: in a word, soon become our people.”

Woodrow Wilson made the same point strongly: “You cannot become thorough Americans if you think of yourselves in groups. America does not consist of groups. A man who thinks of himself as belonging to a particular national group has not yet become an American.”

The stark contrast with our recent politics of identity and quotas is more than a little disturbing.

Second, becoming American meant that new arrivals saw themselves looking forward rather than looking backward. As John Quincy Adams said to a visiting German aristocrat about new immigrants, “They must cast off the European skin, never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than backward to their ancestors.”

This forward-looking stance is most striking in the great leaders of earlier generations. Frederick

Douglass said, “No one idea has given rise to more oppression and persecution toward the colored people of this country than that which makes Africa, not America, their home.” W.E.B. Du Bois said similarly, “Neither my father nor my father’s father ever saw Africa, or knew its meaning or cared overmuch for it...there is nothing so indigenous, so completely ‘made in America’ as we are.” As late as the early Sixties Martin Luther King said, “The Negro is an American. We know nothing of Africa.”

Third, becoming American was seen as a matter of beliefs rather than birth and blood, a matter of the heart and mind rather than race and ancestry. This past Independence Day, President Bush declared that “There is no American race, only an American creed.” Earlier, in 1943, Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race and ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to this country and to our creed of liberty and democracy.”

In addition to this belief in freedom and democracy, the American republic itself—and hence its citizenry—is grounded in a collective recognition of a Higher Being. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that, “In the United States... religion... is mingled with all the habits of the nation and all the feelings of patriotism, whence it derives a peculiar force.”

Fourth, becoming American was seen as transformative rather than preservative. In a letter to a French friend, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “Imagine, my dear friend, if you can, a society formed of all the nations of the world...people having different languages, beliefs, opinions: in a word, a society without roots, without memories, without prejudices, without routines, without common ideas, without a national character, yet a hundred times happier than our own.”

No wonder the magical power of the melting pot grew ever more mythical. In America, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, this “asylum of all nations, the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles & Cossacks, and all the European tribes—of the Africans, & of the Polynesian, will construct a new race.” The climax of praise was probably Israel Zangwill’s celebrated hymn to the melting pot in 1908. “America

is God’s Crucible, the Great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! Here you stand ... in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages...and your fifty blood hatreds.... A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.” As historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., later wrote more soberly, “The point of America was not to preserve old cultures, but to forge a new American culture.”

Our Tribute and our Warning

This account of becoming American stands as a tribute but also a warning.

The tribute, as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once said, “No other nation has so successfully combined people of different races and nations within a single culture.”

But, the warning needs also to be underscored.

After his visit to this country in 1922, the great Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton pointed out what is plain to anyone with a sense of history: “The melting pot must not melt.”

Earlier Theodore Roosevelt had said equally bluntly, “The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, of preventing all possibility of its continuing to be a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities, an intricate knot of German-Americans, Irish-Americans, English-Americans, French-Americans, Scandinavian-Americans, or Italian-Americans, each preserving its separate nationality.” Talk about a toppling tower of Babel!

Some people argue that, even if there are no common American values today, it is enough to maintain our unity through technology and the economy, through the links of the media and the marketplace. But this simply will not do. Anyone who understands the American republic knows that our unity as Americans must be a unity of citizens, not simply of consumers or geographical coincidence. Our goal must be to have people become *American*, not just Americans.

There is no escaping the conclusion: There are two equal and opposite errors in the debate:

unguarded liberal support for immigration and diversity and narrow conservative advocacy for tighter controls alone. Both ignore the central importance for citizenship education and the broader issues of national identity and unity.

The errors of the first approach are plain: It will balkanize the nation, and leave us divided and weak. Multicultural dogma will triumph over American identity and purpose. Separatism will overpower integration. The color of our skin and the pedigree of our past will matter more than the content of our character and the quality of our commitment to freedom.

Without a clear American *unum*, to balance the *pluribus*, we will inevitably come to the point at which immigration will put its stamp on this country even more than the American Revolution.

But the error of the second approach needs to be understood, too. A narrow approach, focusing only on national security and relying on strict law enforcement alone, both of which represent sound public policy, is also inadequate, for it ignores the genius that makes us who we are as Americans.

In sum, while we glory in the many cultures in our land, the radical rainbow vision of a multicultural America is a prescription for American decline, and a purely legal security-minded response will not suffice. An America that is all *pluribus* and no *unum* cannot hope to remain strong and free, let alone be the champion of the free world.

Lincoln had it right: United we stand, and divided we fall.

Policies Worthy of our Past and Future

What does all this mean for our present policies? Let me set out a possible paradigm in a series of pairs:

First, when we negotiate the opportunities and challenges of immigration, assimilation, and diversity, *there must be two guiding principles*.

One is that, for Americans, immigration and assimilation are ultimately and always a matter of nationhood. In today's emotional debate the sole focus is too often on faked documents, welfare costs, non-citizen jail populations, law and order,

urban deterioration, the creation of an internal alien culture, bilingualism, and so on.

All these things are important, and no policies will be comprehensive unless they address these issues, but they pale beside the issue of nationhood. The United States will never be stronger and more united than in its answer to the *challenge of diversity*.

The other principle is that American history is the best guide to American decision making—offering us a range of principles and lessons that, sometimes as inspiration, sometimes as caution, are a unique and proven toolbox for wise and seasoned policy.

Second, when we negotiate the opportunities and challenges of diversity, *there are always two extremes to avoid*.

One extreme is the vision of a “fortress America” that seeks to exclude further diversity and condemns it uncritically, forgetting the richness of its contribution to our present strengths and the character of its importance to the American experiment. Let there be no misunderstanding: I am unreserved in my commitment to the place of immigration and diversity of America.

The other extreme is the vision of a “frontierless America” that seeks to welcome all immigration and embrace all diversity, and celebrates it uncritically, forgetting that without a companion emphasis on citizenship, immigration and diversity can weaken and undermine rather than enrich. Again, let there be no misunderstanding: I am unreserved in my commitment to the importance of American citizenship and American values for all who come to participate in our republic.

Third, when we negotiate the opportunities and challenges of immigration and diversity, *there are always two main spheres of application*.

One sphere is education in the broader sense, for the genius of the original ideal of the public schools was not just free, universal education, but an education in American values that transcends the diversity born of spiritual creed and social class. This issue must not be lost in the debate. Required citizenship education that is serious and substantive is an indispensable component of any successful immigration policy.

The other sphere is immigration, for each wave of newcomers enriches those already here to the extent that the path to citizenship is open, clear, and rewarding. This means, I believe, that we must not only focus on immigration but on citizenship education for immigrants in a narrower sense if our American values are to remain clear and strong.

Fourth, and here I speak more personally in light of what we face today, when we negotiate the opportunities and challenges of diversity, there are two vital priorities for practical policies at the present moment.

One priority is a clear, firm commitment to stating and enforcing our policies. We cannot tolerate casual attitudes to controlling and securing our own borders.

The other priority is to create a clear, efficient and attainable path toward citizenship, with a strong component that deals with citizenship that clearly inculcates American principles into all who seek to become citizens.

Conclusion

In the 19th century the poet and diplomat James Russell Lowell was once asked by a Frenchman how long he thought the American republic would remain dominant. His reply: Just as long as the ideas of the Framers remained dominant in America.

The sheer passage of time means that our generation is further from the Framers than any other. There is nothing we can do about that, and it is not the distance that concerned Lowell. But sadly, many in our generation—both liberals and conservatives—are also further from the Framers in terms of understanding and sympathy—and nowhere more so than over the discussion of immigration and diversity. That fact is more fateful.

The eyes of the world are on America today as never before. My state, the great state of California, has a special responsibility as America's most diverse as well as its largest population. At the start of the 21st century, we represent what New York did a hundred years ago and Boston before that: the point of entry for millions of new Americans. But we cannot solve the problem alone. And if this argument is correct, the issue is not a Californian, or Texan, or even a Southern problem, but a federal and American one.

Let us not hesitate. Let us not turn back from the shining path that lies behind us. Let us work together from whatever background or heritage we come from.

The challenges of character-forming, culture-blending, and nation-building are greater than ever but our resources are as strong as ever. The prize is the guardianship of freedom and the continuation of our previous legacy that is uniquely American. As citizens of "a nation of nations" we must ensure that our American diversity always complements rather than contradicts our liberty and our unity. We must work to see that our diversity always be a New World symphony, not an Old World cacophony. Our melting pot *must* create the richest and most varied republic the world has ever seen and never turn into a toppling tower of Babel. The complex realities of *e pluribus* must always be resolved by a clear American *unum*.

Together let us dedicate ourselves to that demanding but glorious end, and thus prove ourselves worthy heirs of those who went before and worthy guardians of those who follow.

—William E. Simon, Jr. is Co-Chairman of William E. Simon and Sons L.L.C.