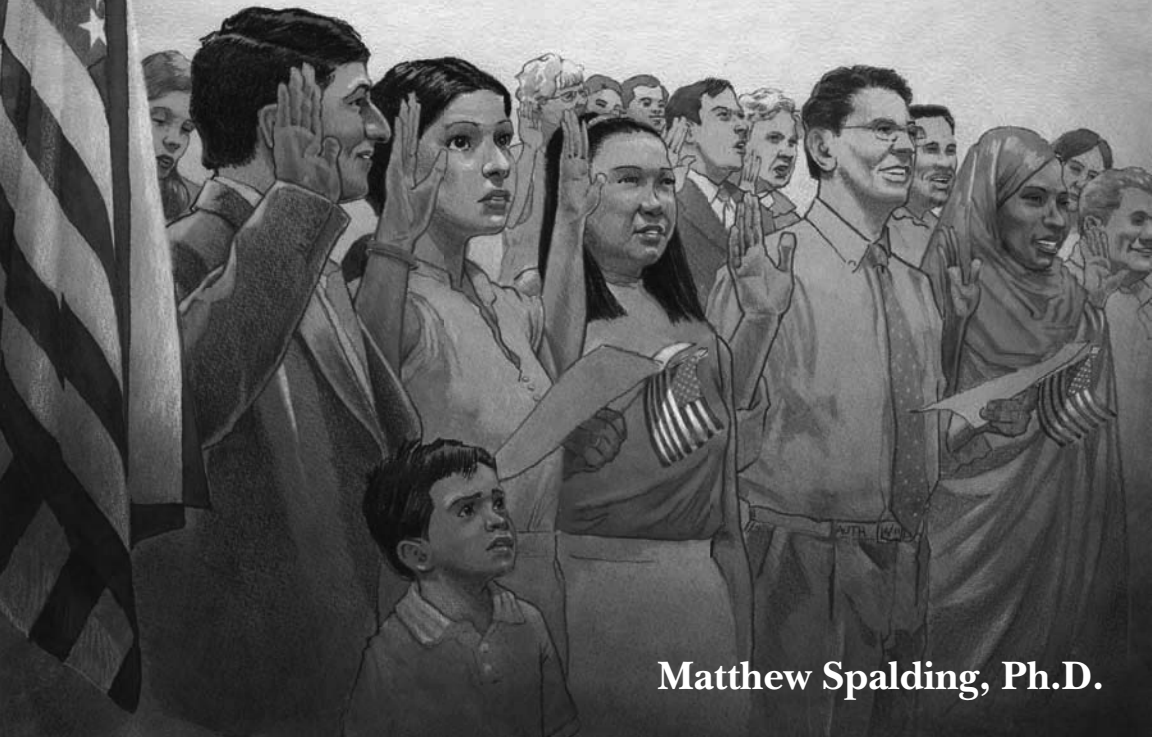


# UNDERSTANDING AMERICA



## Why Does America Welcome Immigrants?



Matthew Spalding, Ph.D.

The *Understanding America* series is founded on the belief that **America is an exceptional nation**. America is exceptional, not for what it has achieved or accomplished, but because, unlike any other nation, it is dedicated to the principles of human liberty, grounded on the truths expressed in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal and endowed with equal rights. As Abraham Lincoln once said, these permanent truths are “applicable to all men and all times.” The series explores these principles and explains how they must govern America’s policies, at home and abroad.

## About This Cover

In a naturalization ceremony, as depicted on the front cover, immigrants take the final step in the process of becoming citizens of the United States. All immigrants must take the Oath of Allegiance, pledging to support and defend the Constitution and to renounce allegiance to any foreign nation.

Cover illustration and logo ©2011 by Dennis Auth

# Why Does America Welcome Immigrants?

**B**y the very nature of the principles upon which it was founded, the United States—more than any other nation in history—beckons to its shores the downtrodden, the persecuted, and all those “yearning to breathe free.” It embraces those who come to this country honestly, armed with their work ethic, in search of the promises and opportunities of the American Dream. Why does America welcome immigrants?



*In the words of Emma Lazarus's poem, inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty, the United States welcomes immigrants who come to this country honestly, in search of the promises and opportunities of the American Dream, and "yearning to breathe free."*



The key to the uniquely successful story of American immigration is its deliberate and self-confident policy of patriotic assimilation: America welcomes newcomers while insisting that they learn and embrace its civic culture and political institutions, thereby forming one nation from many peoples—*e pluribus unum*. While there are differences of opinion about the number of immigrants the nation should accept and the process by which they should become citizens, there has always been widespread, bipartisan agreement that those who come here should become Americans.

The overwhelming result of this policy of assimilation, throughout American history, has been a strengthening of our social capital, the continuing expansion of our economy, and the constant renewal of our national purpose. America has been good for immigrants, and immigrants have been good for America.

Rather than assuming that civic allegiance rests on an ancient claim to divine right, or ethnic or religious identity, the American Founders began with equal rights and consent. As the Declaration of Independence states: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their

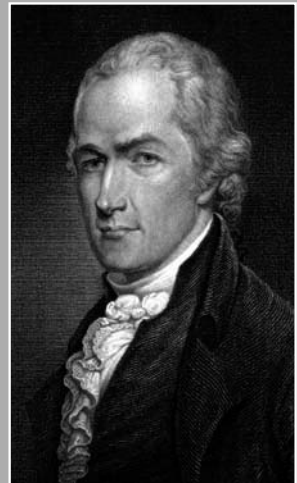
Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” All men—not just all Americans—are equal, because all possess fundamental rights that exist by nature.

Legitimate government is instituted to secure these fundamental rights, deriving its just powers from the consent of the governed. “The mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs,” as Jefferson put it, “nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.”<sup>1</sup> This new form of civic obligation creates not sovereigns and subjects, but equal citizens who rule in turn. The requirement of consent and the practice of self-government creates the conditions of citizenship.

“Naturalization” is the legal process by which immigrants become equal citizens *as if by nature*. The idea of naturalization flows from the political ideas of the Founding. Individuals have a right to emigrate from their homeland but they do not have the right to immigrate to this country without the consent of the American people as expressed through the laws of the United States.

When the American people welcome an immigrant, naturalization in America works differently than it does in other countries. A

“The safety of a republic depends essentially on ... a common national sentiment; a uniformity of principles and habits; the exemption of the citizens from foreign bias and prejudice; and ... love of country.”



—Alexander Hamilton  
*January 12, 1802*



*The United States is home to citizens whose ancestors hail from nations all around the world. Since the Founding, immigrants have brought with them elements of their native cultures, creating a society more diverse than any other. America's policy of patriotic assimilation, however, ensures that immigrants learn and embrace its civic culture, political institutions, and founding principles. Thus, America forms one nation from many people—e pluribus unum.*



foreigner can immigrate to France or Japan but never become truly French or Japanese. But a foreigner of any ethnic heritage or racial background can immigrate to the United States and become, *in every sense of the term*, an American. This transformation is possible in America because of the openness to diverse backgrounds and differences of opinion—including religious opinions—that stems from our commonly held political principles. It is these principles that make free government possible in the first place, and it is these principles the immigrant must accept.

When the United States was founded, this American theory of citizenship was new to the world. It still has revolutionary implications: All citizens, native as well as naturalized, possess civil and religious liberty as a matter of inherent natural right. All that is required of them is that they conduct themselves as good citizens and be faithful to American constitutional government.



The Founders expected that the best immigrants would add to the moral capital of the growing country, bringing with them the

attributes necessary for the workings of free government. America promised advantages to those “who are determined to be sober, industrious and virtuous members of Society,” Washington told a Dutch correspondent in 1788. “And it must not be concealed,” he added, “that a knowledge that these are the general characteristics of your compatriots would be a principal reason to consider their advent as a valuable acquisition to our infant settlements.”<sup>2</sup>

The Founders were not afraid that immigrants, by themselves, would subvert the American republic. As long as good sense and virtue remained strong among the American people, the democratic process and the broader influence of society would mitigate the influence of foreign principles on domestic opinion. Once immigrants’ “habits as well as interests become assimilated to our own,” Fisher Ames of Virginia noted, “we may leave them to cherish or to renounce their imported prejudices and follies as they may choose. The danger of their diffusing them among our own citizens, is to be prevented by public opinion, if we may leave error and prejudice to stand or fall before truth and freedom of inquiry.”<sup>3</sup>

The Founders recognized that immigration would necessarily—and desirably—bring a diversity of beliefs to America. But they

also understood that there needed to be a certain uniformity of opinion about America and the fundamental principles of the Revolution. As Hamilton put it, our policy on immigration should strive “to enable aliens to get rid of foreign and acquire American attachments; to learn the principles and imbibe the spirit of our government; and to admit of a philosophy at least, of their feeling a real interest in our affairs.”



Diversity is a fact of life, but a unity of first principles is necessary to assimilate citizens and turn a *pluribus* into an *unum*. Yet because America is founded on the principles of republican self-government, it cannot force its citizens to be free. Immigrants, like all Americans, must ultimately acquire for themselves the qualities and sentiments essential to republicanism. They must freely decide to become enlightened friends of liberty and partisans in America’s common experiment in self-government.

Through its laws, the people of the United States consent for immigrants to join them, under certain conditions, as

residents, and in many cases, as fellow citizens. Congress has the constitutional responsibility both “to establish a uniform rule of naturalization” that sets the terms and conditions of immigration and citizenship, and to ensure the fairness and integrity of the legal process by which immigrants enter the country, establish residency, and gain citizenship. Naturalization laws must be equitably and consistently enforced, for the sake of both America’s current citizens and those who obey the law and follow the rules to enter the country.



“Every species of government has its specific principles,” Jefferson noted. “Ours perhaps are more peculiar than those of any other in the universe.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we must take great care to afford citizens the opportunity to learn these principles.

For Americans born in this country, citizenship education occurs primarily at home and through childhood schooling. Because immigrants lack the natural advantage of having been born and raised in this country, they must, as a matter of public policy, receive

**“I’ve continued to be amazed by the fact that as I progressed through school and my career, no one has ever resented my success on account of being an immigrant.”**



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**–Andrew Grove,  
Co-Founder of Intel  
2001**



*Nikki Haley, the daughter of immigrants from India, was elected Governor of South Carolina in 2010. America is one of the rare nations where immigrants and their children can go as far as their talents and energy will take them. America's openness to immigrants reaffirms our commitment to the principle of equality, and demonstrates that America is truly an exceptional nation.*

specific education in the history, political ideas, and institutions of the United States.

They must know who we are, what we believe as a people, and what we stand for as a nation. They must know the principles of the Declaration of Independence: that legitimate government is grounded in the protection of equal natural rights and the consent of the governed. They must understand and appreciate how the Constitution and our institutions of limited government work to protect liberty and the rule of law.

It is through their neighbors, friends, and fellow countrymen—in local communities, churches, schools, and private organizations, not to mention in the workplace and the marketplace—that immigrants acquire the habits, practices, and spirit of Americans, strengthening their virtues, fostering their work ethic, and building their social responsibilities. Civic education, in particular, works as immigrants observe and then participate in American political life, seeing equality before the law and the consent of the governed being translated into local, state, and national policies. In this way, as Washington predicted, immigrants “get assimilated to our customs, measures and laws: in a word, soon become one people.”<sup>5</sup>



“Citizens by birth or choice, of a common country,” Washington reminds us, “that country has the right to concentrate your affections.”<sup>6</sup> The very word citizen, stemming from the Latin *civis*, is associated with membership and participation in one particular political order. American citizenship is by definition bound to the United States. Thus, becoming a citizen of the United States, either by birth or through naturalization, necessarily means having a primary allegiance to the American political order.

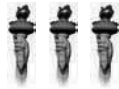
Allegiance is the duty that citizens owe to the country that protects and secures their individual freedoms and fundamental rights. In the United States, the allegiance of citizenship stems from a profound attachment and deference not to political leaders or to the state, but to the Constitution and the rule of law.

The United States must practice assimilation if it is to secure the blessings of liberty and pass them from one generation to the next. We welcome immigrants for the contributions they make and because they accept the allegiance inherent in American citizenship.

In the end, a confident policy to assimilate immigrants must be understood as part of a larger renewal of our principles, a



reaffirmation of what *we* hold to be self-evident. After all, it is our common recognition of transcendent truths that binds us all together, and binds us across time to the patriots of 1776.



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# Enduring Truths

For links to these titles, go to [heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica](http://heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica).

- **James Madison, *Debates in the Constitutional Convention*, August 13, 1787**

As the Founding Fathers debated the future structure of their government, they anticipated the arrival of immigrants and recognized their importance to the success of the American experiment. During the debates, James Madison expressed his hope that the new government would “maintain the character of liberality which had been professed in all the Constitutions and publications of America.” Madison “wished to invite foreigners of merit and republican principles among us.”

- **Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Chicago, Illinois,” July 10, 1858**

In the last paragraphs of his speech, Abraham Lincoln considers how immigrants who have no blood connection to America or its people can relate to this country. He describes the greater bonds created by the principles that define the United States. When immigrants grasp the common principles of the Declaration of Independence they “have a right to claim it as though they were

blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.”

- **Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*, 1903**

This poem written by New York poet Emma Lazarus expresses the republican character of American citizenship. Her words are engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

- **Matthew Spalding, “Making Citizens: The Case for Patriotic Assimilation,” March 16, 2006**

The key to America’s uniquely successful immigration story lies in a deliberate and self-confident policy of patriotic assimilation—welcoming newcomers while insisting that they learn and embrace America’s civic culture and political institutions, thereby forming one nation from many peoples.

# Current Issues

For links to these reports, go to [heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica](http://heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica).

- **CITIZENSHIP.** William Simon, “**On Becoming American: Reasserting Citizenship in the Immigration Debate,**” July 21, 2005.

The challenges of immigration and assimilation are not new to us. *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: we cannot take in the entire world, and those who do come must become American.

- **IMMIGRATION REFORM.** Edwin Meese and Matthew Spalding, “**Where We Stand: Essential Requirements for Immigration Reform,**” May 10, 2007.

Immigration reform in America should be consistent with the traditions and compassionate practices of America’s ongoing experiment in ordered liberty, guided by America’s commitment to equal citizenship, and in keeping with the principles of national security and the rule of law.

## Endnotes

- 1 Thomas Jefferson, letter to Roger C. Weightman, June 24, 1826.
- 2 George Washington, letter to Rev. Francis Adrian Vanderkemp, May 28, 1788.
- 3 *Works of Fisher Ames*, edited by W. B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), Vol. 2, p. 1092.
- 4 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query 8 (1787).
- 5 George Washington, letter to John Adams, November 15, 1794.
- 6 George Washington, “Farewell Address,” September 19, 1796.

# About *Understanding America*

**AMERICANS HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED** that this nation, founded on the idea of freedom, has a vital responsibility to the rest of the world. As George Washington first recognized, the “preservation of the sacred fire of liberty” depended on the American people. These words remain true today.

*Understanding America* explores how the United States’ commitment to the universal truths of human equality and the right to self-government—as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence—requires a vigilant defense of the cause of liberty, both at home and abroad.

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# Why Does America Welcome Immigrants?

*“[The United States] embraces those who come to this country honestly, armed with their work ethic, in search of the promises and opportunities of the American Dream.”*

The United States has thrived because it makes one nation from many peoples—*e pluribus unum*. The Founders knew that America would benefit from immigration, but they recognized that, if the nation was to remain exceptional and free, all Americans would have to be committed to its principles.

This volume in the *Understanding America* series examines how immigration has strengthened America, and it stresses the importance of patriotic assimilation in ensuring that immigrants embrace the civic culture and political institutions of the United States.

