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Assimilation's the Problem

by Jeffrey A. Singer

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The outcry grows louder in this time of heightened national security concerns. State budget crunches, high taxes, and recession-caused job losses make the issue more acute. Hardly a day goes by without some call for the federal government to curtail immigration and get tough on those who enter our country illegally.

This is easy to understand. Our federal and state governments have developed an elaborate cradle-to-grave welfare state, funded by taxing the earnings of every working person. The economic downturn that began in 2000 left the government with a smaller pool of earnings to tax. It also meant more people, victims of the economic recession, accessed the various “entitlement” programs erected by government. This squeeze on government budgets appears to be aggravated by the large influx of immigrants (legal or illegal) who compete with citizens for the array of taxpayer provided services. The politicians’ answer to the budget crunch is to raise taxes, further impeding economic recovery.

Immigration opponents cite security concerns as one justification. But it’s money that really fuels national anti-immigrant sentiment. It always is. This is not new.

For example, in the mid-1800s, the “Know-Nothing Party” became a major force, supported by the fear that immigrants from Ireland and Southern Europe, willing to work for lower wages, would take away the jobs of native-born Americans. Those were days without passports or visas. All that was needed to enter this country was the desire and means to come. In those days, there was no taxpayer-funded safety net for the poor. Immigrants got support from benevolent associations created by those who had arrived earlier. Within a generation or two, the immigrants had become assimilated into the fabric of mainstream American society. They added to the strength and depth of society in the process. The “Know-Nothings” are now an embarrassing footnote in American history books.

The strange irony is that America, a land made great by centuries of immigrants in search of a better life, has always had a large anti-immigrant streak. It wasn't until the 20th century, however, that the federal government placed a tight control on immigration flows.

An irony not grasped is the fact that, while Americans throughout the ages have viewed immigration as an economic threat, it is the constant influx of poor, ambitious people from around the world, in search of their own "American Dream," that is responsible for our nation's great wealth.

There is even more irony. Despite the public perception that immigrants are stressing our already-strapped welfare system, research by institutes on opposing ends of the political spectrum—the Urban Institute and the Cato Institute—have backed up earlier work done by the late, renowned economist Julian Simon, showing that, on balance, immigrants provide a net plus to government budgets. Sure, many take advantage of taxpayer-funded aid programs. But it turns out the overwhelming majority come here to work. They are generally unaware of the "handout programs" that exist, so they rarely seek them out. They tend to rely on families and friends as their social support system. And they work and pay taxes. Their more-assimilated descendants, however, tend to take advantage of the entitlement system with a fervor equal to other native born Americans.

The data suggest that immigrants are getting a bum rap—as they've always gotten—when it comes to their economic impact. The real source of Americans' economic distress is the bloated welfare state, and its insatiable appetite for taxes, created by pandering politicians.

There is one important factor that separates today's immigrants from those who came in earlier times: today's immigrants have less incentive to assimilate. And therein lies a major problem.

For example, today's well-intended but misguided laws have taken away incentives for new immigrants to learn English. Bilingual and multilingual programs, intended to demonstrate respect for America's diverse cultures, have had the unintended effect of keeping many immigrants trapped, by language, in an underclass from which they were trying to escape.

Like it or not, English is the language of business and success in this country. Throughout history, America's immigrants have learned the language and customs of America. Then they became a part of the cultural fabric and, in the process, changed it for the better.

Furthermore, the failure to facilitate legal immigration by enacting "guest worker" programs and increasing the legal rate of influx—combined with the mixed signals we send when we build water stations in the desert to assist illegal border-crossings, grant them drivers licenses, and our federal laws require hospitals to provide free health care to these trespassers—result in a growing, extralegal mass of people, prevented from mainstreaming into our society.

Today's social and immigration policies actually foster a segregated, apartheid society of mutually-exclusive cultures. This threatens to shred our cultural fabric, leading to a condition reminiscent of the Balkan states that used to comprise Yugoslavia.

Americans need to turn their anger away from immigration and towards the true source of economic distress in this country: our welfare state and its array of regulatory spin-offs that place economic shackles on everyone—immigrant and native born. When it comes to immigration policy, we need to repeal the laws that impede assimilation.

To paraphrase a slogan from the early 1990s, "It's assimilation, stupid."

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