

Mexican Americans and the American Nation

A Response to Professor Huntington

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ABSTRACT: *This essay is based on a talk I delivered at Texas A&M University on December 10, 2005, in response to an earlier lecture at the university by Professor Samuel P. Huntington. It relies on social science evidence to first address Huntington's contention that Mexicans are overwhelming American borders. It then turns to evidence that Mexican Americans are in fact assimilating culturally but still have been less economically successful than the descendants of earlier European immigrants. The essay examines factors that have differentiated the Mexican American trajectory of incorporation and are likely to continue to do so. Finally, it calls for the American public and policy makers to make well-informed choices about what levels of immigration are desirable and who should be admitted, to improve immigrants' economic opportunities through education, and to embrace a multilingual and multiethnic future for the country.*

The classic American assimilation story tells of the European immigrants who came to the United States a century ago and of their descendants who were absorbed into U.S. society. These immigrants, notably Germans, Irish, Italians, Poles, and Jews, left their native lands in several waves between 1850 and 1930 to make new lives in the New World. Although they were not able to move up the ladder of the class structure, remaining on the lower rungs, their children and grandchildren would successfully ride the mobility escalator and become "regular Americans": middle class, intermarried with other ethnic groups, and monolingual in English. By the third generation most would hardly consider themselves "ethnic" at all. There are important differences among these groups that should not be trivialized, as many romanticized versions of the history do, but overall, that is the assimilation story.

Harvard University professor Samuel P. Huntington has attracted much attention with his contention that today's immigrants are following a fundamentally different path.¹ Latinos, particularly Mexicans, he claims, are overwhelming American borders and labor markets, and their descendants are failing to assimilate as European immigrants did before them. According to Huntington, this threatens to create a separate Latino society, with a distinct culture and set of values, that does not mesh with the rest of U.S. society. However, his conclusions are based on flawed assumptions and anecdotal evidence that run counter to contemporary social science data and notions of labor markets, culture, and assimilation.

To begin with, Huntington chooses to ignore the large amount of social science research on the volume and impact of immigration, both legal and illegal. Indeed, his perceptions are not much different from those of avid immigration restrictionists or even of vigilante groups such as the Arizona Minutemen. Certainly, perceptions are important, but for academics, at least, they need to be accompanied by serious analysis.

By far the best scholarly work on this topic is the landmark two-volume series by the National Academy of Sciences titled *The Immigration Debate: Studies on the Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration* (Smith and Edmonston 1998). The study shows, first of all, that even when legal and illegal immigration are combined, current levels of immigration (in proportion to the native-born population) are still below the levels reached at any time during the eighty-year period from 1850 to 1930. Second, the study finds that immigration overall is beneficial to the U.S. economy and to native-born workers, although there may be a small negative impact on the least educated. The study refutes Huntington's assumption that labor markets are static institutions in which immigrants simply become low-cost substitutes for U.S.-born workers. Rather, labor markets are dynamic and very complex, and immigrants often complement native workers by preserving entire industries in the United States and thus creating more jobs while providing American consumers with low-cost goods and services. In terms of fiscal costs, there are none at the federal level, but states with large numbers of immigrants do spend disproportionately on education for immigrant children. This, however, may be a necessary investment:

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the American population is aging, fertility is below the replacement level, and rising educational levels are changing the nature of the work force. Economics studies predict that our economy will need millions of additional workers to keep growing as it has been for decades.

The possibility of even a small negative impact on low-skilled American workers is legitimate cause for concern. However, the National Academy of Sciences report and other analyses also make clear that the effects of free trade are just as harmful to the least-educated workers as competition from immigrants, and that both free trade and immigration have been a boon to the large majority of Americans. For poorly educated Americans, greater investments in schooling would do much more to improve their situation than ending or sharply curtailing immigration.

Cultural Controversies

Immigration restrictionists like Huntington worry mostly about the so-called cultural differences between Hispanics and the rest of American society. For Huntington, the problem is the “cultural inferiority” (the modern term that has arguably replaced racial inferiority) of new immigrants, and he believes these differences persist well beyond the immigrant generation. This seems to be a sentiment popular among a sector of the American population, but one that is not substantiated, as I will show later. To throw in some of my own anecdotal observations, I have read many interviews with some of these restrictionists in newspapers and on the blogs. Many fret that the problem is not cheap labor so much as a supposed refusal to assimilate: immigrants are bringing in their wives and children, they refuse to speak English, they want to create illegal immigrant communities, and so forth. These critics ask why we should invest in educating the children of immigrants if they will never adopt American values or culture.

Like the views of these restriction activists, Huntington’s comments regarding the prospects for assimilation are misinformed. The *New York Times* on October 7, 2005, ran a front-page article titled “San Antonio Proudly Lines Up Behind the Military Recruiter.” The article revealed that of the 41 army recruiting battalions across the United States, San Antonio was the most successful. If you know San Antonio and its surrounding area, you might correctly guess that about half of the residents aged 18–25 are of Mexican descent. An even higher percentage of the recruits are.

A 1996 article in the *American Journal of Political Science* reports on a national survey that found that Mexican Americans, regardless of whether

they were English dominant, Spanish dominant, or bilingual, were just as patriotic as Anglos of the same socioeconomic status and sometimes more so (De la Garza, Falcon, and Garcia 1996). That is, they expressed equal or stronger love for the United States and pride in being American. This hardly sounds like the makings of a separate society. One could almost say that if Mexican Americans have different values from other Americans, greater American patriotism must be one of them. For Mexican Americans, at least, ethnic identity does not challenge national identity. Rather, they are compatible.

Another problem with Huntington's arguments is his understanding of what it is that immigrants, not Hispanic ones of course, have assimilated to. He seems to prefer the early-twentieth-century ideas of assimilation, which stressed a white Anglo-Saxon and Protestant core. However, this assumption of a WASP essence in American culture gave way to the idea of a melting pot by the 1960s if not earlier, and more recently the concept of a changing American mainstream has gained currency. The more modern view of assimilation recognizes a changing, rather than a static, American culture that has been historically affected by trends outside our national borders, including the French Enlightenment, as well as the contributions of successive immigrant groups. The latter is most noticeable in the cuisine that immigrants have brought with them, including tacos and pizza, which today are commonly accepted as American foods. This ever-changing "American culture," which has included the descendants of the straitlaced WASP Puritans, incorporated the German immigrants' ideas of leisure in the 1880s as well as the music and dance forms of Africans and their descendants. Assimilation is a two-way street, as immigrants and their descendants become part of the mainstream while at the same time the mainstream changes. Today, Americans would not recognize the WASP culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as their own. Nor, for that matter, would the contemporary British.

Modern concepts of assimilation also recognize that immigrants and their descendants assimilate even though they may not actively seek to. While many immigrants would like to preserve aspects of their native culture and way of life in the new land, many do assimilate, consciously or unconsciously, as they go about their daily lives and strive to become comfortable members of the middle class. In the process, they usually must learn English, and successful mobility implies taking a job in a well-paying occupation, where one is likely to have many nonethnic co-workers. Moving up often also means moving to a middle-class neighborhood,

which is likely to be dominated by people outside one's ethnic group. It is hard to avoid the influence of proximity to nonethnic co-workers and neighbors as one ends up talking with them in English, socializing with them, and establishing commonalities of all sorts. In the process, these economic and residential changes shape immigrants' political, religious, and even marriage choices.

Finally, these new concepts of assimilation incorporate the idea that the pace of assimilation may vary across immigrant groups, as was also true in the past. Factors that serve to hasten or slow assimilation include the economic opportunities that await particular groups of immigrants; the human capital that immigrants bring with them, especially their level of education; and the reception given to them by the U.S. and state governments, which extend generous governmental assistance to certain refugees while treating other immigrants as illegal and barring them from public services such as health and education. Social constraints, including race, further affect assimilation rates, a topic I will address later.

Mexican Assimilation: Trends across Generations

There have been two major waves of immigration in U.S. history. The first wave, roughly from 1850 to 1930, was mostly European. The second wave began in 1965, after changes in immigration law increased the entry quotas, gave preference to persons with professional skills, and repealed national origin restrictions. The new immigrants who have taken advantage of this opportunity have come mainly from Latin America and Asia, with Mexicans easily the largest group. Many of these newcomers, especially those from Asia, are professionals with levels of human capital that exceed those of the average American. Mexicans, on the other hand, as well as Central Americans, Dominicans, and some Southeast Asian groups, come with very low levels of human capital, much like the majority of Europeans in the first wave.

There is some debate among sociologists about how the second wave will be incorporated, especially in the case of those with low levels of human capital. Will those groups assimilate by the second or third generation, as European ethnics did? In particular, how will the descendants of the new Mexican immigration fit into this American social structure? Sociologist Alejandro Portes and his colleagues expect that we will have a future of "segmented" assimilation in which some groups, particularly those who arrive with high levels of human capital, will do well, while other groups

such as Mexicans will assimilate in a downward fashion (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Other scholars such as sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003) are more optimistic. They expect that assimilation will proceed pretty much as it did for the Europeans. Empirically, we don't know for sure, since the children of this new wave are still too young to provide us with definite answers. But we do have some indicators. The best evidence may be found by examining the experiences of the descendants of the sizable number of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans that resided here prior to the second wave.

Unlike immigration from any other country, immigration from Mexico has been part of both waves, and it continued in the period between them as well. Moreover, twentieth-century Mexican immigration added to a population of about 400,000 Mexican Americans who were already in place and were counted by the U.S. census in 1900. Of course, many of those people were descendants of Mexican nationals whose citizenship changed not as a result of immigration but because of the American conquest of Mexico in 1848. During the 1910s and 1920s, the period that included the Mexican Revolution, about 10 percent of Mexico's population came to the United States. With the Great Depression, many Mexican immigrants as well as their U.S.-born children were "repatriated" in the 1930s as their labor was no longer needed. But Mexican immigration continued, especially through a guestworker program, in the period from 1942 to 1964, and it kept on growing after 1965.

I have been involved in a large longitudinal survey with Professor Vilma Ortiz, also of UCLA, that looks at the experiences of four generations of Mexican Americans between 1965 and 2000. Our research team, with generous funding from the National Institute of Child and Human Development, is tracking Mexican Americans who were originally part of a random survey study in 1965 in Los Angeles County, California, and the city of San Antonio, Texas. An interdisciplinary research team of UCLA faculty produced a volume with data from that survey, titled *The Mexican American People* (Grebler, Moore, and Guzman 1970). We sought to re-interview the respondents who were under 50 in the original survey, wherever they now live, and we successfully found and interviewed about two-thirds of them, as well as a sample of their children. In total, we have about 1,500 respondents for our survey, which I will refer to as the 2000 survey since we interviewed them between 1998 and 2002.

In seeking to determine whether and how these Mexican Americans assimilated, we asked about several indicators that are often associated

with assimilation or incorporation into American society. Among the most important of these are educational attainment, language proficiency, intermarriage, religious affiliation, and political partisanship. We examined differences between the responses of the original respondents in 1965 and those of their children in 2000, looking at three separate generations in each case.

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

Figure 1 shows trends across the generations in schooling attainment and Spanish proficiency, based on our data. We used a statistical model that controls for a host of variables including age, gender, parents' education, and whether the respondent's parents were ethnically intermarried.

Regarding language, Huntington curiously laments that Mexican Americans do not lose their Spanish, even though he correctly recognizes that the U.S.-born children of immigrants universally acquire English language skills by the second generation. Our data show that Mexican Americans do retain Spanish longer than other groups of U.S. Latinos, but they don't keep it forever. They eventually lose it, which is consistent with reaching full assimilation on the linguistic dimension. Indeed, as the figure shows, loss of Spanish proficiency among the descendants of Mexican immigrants exhibits a linear, assimilatory trend. By the fourth generation, only about 5 percent speak any Spanish to their fifth-generation children. I will address the issues of the value of Spanish maintenance later.

The greatest problem in the incorporation of Mexican Americans is not in language but in education. They show a persistent lag compared to whites in average educational levels and in the socioeconomic mobility that comes with schooling. On average, Mexican immigrants who arrived here as children or teenagers (the so-called 1.5 generation) and the U.S.-born children of immigrants (the second generation) attain the highest levels of education, though these levels are still well below those of the "non-Hispanic white" population. This is similar to the experience of Italian immigrants, in which the second generation leaped well ahead of the first but still did not attain the educational levels of the general American population. However, third-generation Italians continued to move up and did match the average educational levels of whites, whereas third- and fourth-generation Mexican Americans experience worse educational outcomes than the second generation. For Mexican Americans, then, the traditional direction of continued upward mobility and educational

assimilation is reversed after the gains of the first and second generations. The education of Mexican Americans stops short of full assimilation and peaks at the second generation.

Why should this be? One factor may be traditional immigrant optimism: new immigrants typically come to the United States determined to make it in America and aware of their gains in comparison to the lives they left behind. Supported by tight-knit immigrant communities, they push themselves and their second-generation children to do well. However, by the third generation, that optimism has receded for many Mexican-origin youths, who sense that they are not valued in school or in the wider society. Although some Mexican American young people do well and attend top universities like Texas A&M and UCLA and even Harvard, for the most part these children are limited in the quantity and quality of education they receive. A growing body of research supports this discouraging analysis.

The problem is not the unwillingness of Latinos to adopt American values and culture but the failure of societal institutions, particularly public schools, to successfully incorporate these individuals as they did the descendants of European immigrants. Education is precisely the area where nearly everyone would like to see greater assimilation, but this has not occurred. Instead, the most striking assimilation has been in the dimension of ethnic language loss. This is unfortunate, because ethnic language retention, to the extent it occurs, is desirable in an increasingly globalized society, and the social science evidence shows that it does not diminish national identity.

INTERMARRIAGE

Figure 2 shows rates of intermarriage for the original respondents and for their children, with each of these categories further broken down by generation. The original respondents are divided into the first generation, that is, the Mexican-born immigrants; the second generation, people born in the United States to immigrant parents; and the third generation, people born in the United States to U.S.-born parents. The original respondents' children, who were almost all born in the United States, are divided into the second generation, the third generation, and the fourth-plus generation. The same divisions are used in figures 3 and 4.

Figure 2 shows clear patterns of assimilation through intermarriage with other ethnic groups, both across time (columns) and across generations (rows). Among the original respondents, intermarriage rates ranged from

a low of 9 percent in the immigrant generation to a high of 17 percent in the third generation. However, between 21 and 29 percent of the original respondents' children, who are second-, third-, or fourth-generation, intermarried. By comparison, recent data show an intermarriage rate of about 60 percent for people of Irish or Italian ancestry (Lieberson and Waters 1988, 173), but only about 1 percent for African Americans.

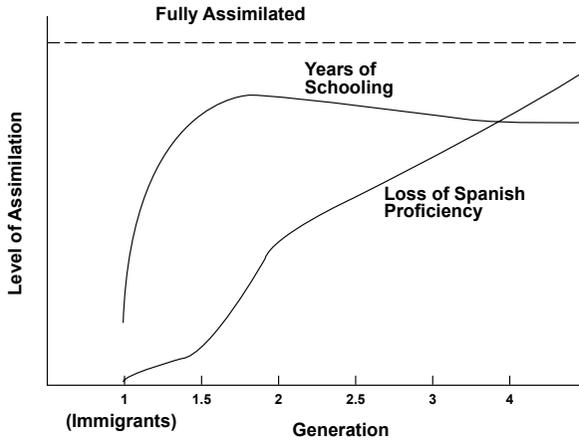


Figure 1. Trends in language proficiency and educational attainment.

| Immigration generation | Original respondents | Children of original respondents |
|------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| | 2000 | 2000 |
| 1 | 9% | -- |
| 2 | 15% | 21% |
| 3 | 17% | 23% |
| 4 + | -- | 29% |

Figure 2. Trends in intermarriage: Percentage who married outside their ethnic group.

RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL AFFILIATION

The pace of acculturation in religion is startling (fig. 3). There is a steady and rapid decline in Catholicism across the generations. By the fourth generation, just over half of Mexican Americans are Catholic. Mirroring general U.S. trends, most of those moving away from Catholicism (and other more established religions) converted to evangelical or fundamentalist Protestant denominations.

There are also signs of assimilation in political partisanship (fig. 4). Today’s Mexican Americans are less overwhelmingly Democratic than those who went before. Our study compared voting in the 1964 presidential election (Johnson versus Goldwater) and the 1996 election (Clinton versus Dole). In 1964, the vast majority of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio voted for the Democrat, but by 1996, only about three-quarters of their children did, although a higher proportion of the original respondents continued to vote Democratic. This compares to Democratic partisanship of 90 percent or more for blacks and Jews. These ethnic voting patterns reflect national voting trends to some degree, but not completely: in 1964 Johnson won with 63 percent of the popular vote but Clinton had only 49 percent in 1996, both well below the levels of Democratic voting among Mexican Americans.

| Immigration generation | Original respondents | | Children of original respondents |
|------------------------|----------------------|------|----------------------------------|
| | 1965 | 2000 | 2000 |
| 1 | 91% | 81% | -- |
| 2 | 90% | 82% | 75% |
| 3 | 86% | 84% | 68% |
| 4 + | -- | -- | 57% |

Figure 3. Trends in religious affiliation: Percentage identifying as Catholic.

| Immigration generation | Original respondents | | Children of original respondents 1996 |
|------------------------|----------------------|------|--|
| | 1964 | 1996 | |
| 1 | 96% | 93% | -- |
| 2 | 91% | 85% | 77% |
| 3 | 89% | 80% | 78% |
| 4 + | -- | -- | 75% |

Figure 4. Trends in political partisanship: Percentage who voted Democratic in the 1964 or 1996 presidential election.

Factors Shaping the Mexican American Experience

In sum, our data show steady assimilation in the realms of language, intermarriage, religion, and politics—perhaps slow compared to other groups, but proceeding nonetheless. Education and social mobility are another story. On average, a stubborn persistence of low educational levels has kept Mexican Americans concentrated in working-class positions. Why has Mexican American incorporation into American society differed so fundamentally from the assimilation experiences of European Americans in this regard?

First, the context of Mexican immigration is unique in American history. The influx of Mexicans has continued for at least 100 years, driven by the long-standing reliance of the U.S. economy on Mexican workers. This is a hard reality that characterizes the Mexican American experience, and it will not easily change. This country is unlikely to experience the sudden end of large-scale immigration from Mexico, as happened with immigration from Europe, given our labor needs, a shared 2,000-mile land border, and the large disparities in development between the two countries.

Second, the persistence of low status seems to reflect a process of racialization, by which I mean the societal assigning of undesirable characteristics to people of a particular ancestry or phenotype (Feagin 2006), as well as the institutional consequences of this exclusion. The treatment of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in this country is rooted in racial difference and racial hierarchy and in the history of colonization and conquest.

Mexicans have historically been treated as a desirable labor force, but one whose language, culture, and even biology have been deemed undesirable and inferior. This thinking continues today, as Professor Huntington's work makes clear. Although the early Italian and Irish immigrants were treated as foreign and undesirable, their children all became socially "white" and thus qualified for the privileges and benefits of the highest class of citizenship. Mexicans, unfortunately, have not been able to get on the white track.

In the 1830s and 1840s, many American leaders explicitly argued that Mexicans (and other dark-skinned peoples) were unable to govern themselves. The vision of Manifest Destiny called for the United States to expand southward so that enterprising and intellectually superior white Americans could develop these rich lands. Although the United States was eager to annex Mexican territory, it was less enthusiastic about acquiring the Mexicans that came with the land. A senator from Michigan seemed to speak for the congressional majority when he argued against annexation of more than the sparsely populated northern Mexican territories: "We do not want the people of Mexico either as citizens or subjects" (quoted in Gutiérrez 1995, 16). This sentiment reflected a widespread view that Mexicans, as a "partly colored race," were alien, "unassimilable," and intellectually inferior (Montejano 1987, 181; Gutiérrez 1995, 16).

A hundred years later, when the children of European immigrants became undifferentiated white Americans rather than ethnics, Mexicans were given a separate race category in the 1930 census. This reflected their actual experiences of separation, which included segmented labor markets, administrative segregation from whites or Anglos in many localities, having to pay poll taxes in Texas until 1966, and lynchings at rates not much less than those for African Americans. To be sure, racial classification and discrimination have been more complex and usually more subtle for Mexican Americans than they have been for blacks, and their harshness and scope have varied widely by historical period, across local areas, and among individuals. Nevertheless, such discrimination continues. In complaining of the "Mexican problem," today's immigration restrictionists apparently are taking aim not only at the Mexican immigrants themselves but also at their presumably unassimilable descendants.

A third factor in the Mexican American experience is that the public schools that serve Mexican American communities, which are mostly in the central cities and in rural areas, have been among this country's worst. In addition, Mexican Americans in integrated schools have been disproportionately tracked into a lower-level curriculum. A persistently

high dropout rate has made Mexican Americans the group with the lowest levels of education in the country. Indeed, it is safe to say that schools have been the single greatest institutional culprit in ensuring the persistent low status of U.S.-born Mexican Americans.

For descendants of the current wave of Mexican immigrants, these patterns will continue. But three key factors are also likely to affect assimilation in different ways in the future.

First is the changing structure of the U.S. economy, which is likely to further slow the economic assimilation prospects for descendants of today's Mexican immigrants. Since the late 1970s, schooling has become an ever more important predictor of economic success in American society. Incomes have increased for the college-educated and decreased for those with only a high school education or less, leading to growing income polarization. With the decline of heavy industry and consequent loss of highly paid manual jobs for the less educated, the income returns to a college education have been increasing, giving an hourglass shape to the economy. The middle-rung jobs that allowed earlier immigrants and their descendants to gradually work their way up are gradually disappearing. Education is needed to bridge the growing gap.

Second, the undocumented status of many of today's immigrants is also likely to hamper mobility for their children and their children's children. The children of the undocumented suffer when they are barred from receiving the public services available to legal immigrants and citizens, including the unemployment insurance or welfare benefits that shield them from economic downturns.

Third, globalization may hasten assimilation for future Mexican immigrants and their children. Globalization makes the learning of English, the new lingua franca, accessible in many of the societies from which immigrants come. Many become familiar with English and with American culture and customs through television and other media, as well as through the influence of returned immigrants, well before they come to the United States. As Huntington interestingly noted in *The Clash of Civilizations* (1997), Mexico and much of Latin America are moving toward the "American civilizational bloc," so that American culture is not completely unfamiliar to Mexican immigrants. Here I agree with Huntington, although this assertion contradicts his more recent claim of an unusually great cultural gulf between Mexicans and Americans.

Policy Choices

What should we do about immigration? The nation's current policies are contradictory. We depend on immigrants, yet at the same time we tell them to go away. The contradictions are especially sharp with respect to illegal immigration. Undocumented immigrants receive resident college tuition in California but do not qualify for federal education loans. They can buy cars and car insurance but in most states cannot get driver's licenses. They can find jobs, often in federally funded hiring halls, but cannot lawfully work. The contradictions extend to our relations with Mexico, our neighbor and second-largest trading partner, as Mexico-bashing becomes more popular (Gorman and Delson 2005).

We have millions of residents who are not supposed to be here by law, but in economic terms at least, the country needs them as a source of cheap and willing labor. A sudden end to immigration from Mexico would mean disaster for many sectors of the American economy. Just as Prohibition denied a strong American dependence on alcohol, our current immigration policy reflects a denial of another kind of dependence.

However, we can achieve a practical outcome where almost everyone can benefit. A program with realistic immigrant quotas to meet labor needs would certainly be more fruitful than continued efforts to seal off the border, which cannot succeed in practical terms and which serve merely to antagonize Mexico. A realistic program of entries would allow greater control over immigrants and the border. This should be combined with reforms that allow immigrants to choose either a path to citizenship or an easy return to their country of origin. Immigration reform has recently risen on the political agenda, and the ideas being proposed need to be carefully evaluated and discussed.

Such reasoned consideration is not helped by the intervention of Huntington, who produced important early works but has left behind his training as a dispassionate and systematic social scientist in his arguments on the immigration issue. I am afraid that because these observations come from an eminent Harvard professor, they may encourage scared Americans in the post-9/11 world to mistakenly believe that Mexicans pose a major threat to their way of life. Little could be further from the truth.

To begin with, we need an informed discussion about the quantity and type of immigration that the nation should allow. Here, I agree with Huntington that "pluralism and moderation within our society can be worked out." Although public opinion against immigration is growing, this seems to be mostly a response to the issue of the undocumented—to

so-called illegals. The very word raises the specter of criminality and lack of control. But the flow of undocumented entrants is essentially a problem created by an outdated visa system that does not meet the country's growing labor needs. Immigration reform needs to recognize that basic fact.

Second, for assimilation to be successful, we need to emphasize opportunities, not simply preach American values. Professor Mary Waters of Harvard University (1990, 1999) has studied both the old and the new immigration, comparing the incorporation of the early European immigrants and their descendants to the experience of today's immigrants. She finds that the motor force driving the Americanization of earlier waves of immigrants was "not the civics lessons they received in public high school but rather the enormous economic payoff to immigration that the descendants of European immigrants enjoyed. . . . In light of such findings, our society should not merely be asking how we can structure our immigration policy and our institutions to encourage immigrants to adopt our civic culture and become American." Rather, Waters says, society should ask: "What can we do about the pervasive inequalities in American life that often mean that becoming a black American or a Mexican American leads to a less bright future than remaining an immigrant?" (1999, 332).

Third, although Mexican Americans are assimilating culturally, we must ask whether unconditional assimilation, and native language loss in particular, is what we really want. Aren't multiculturalism and multilingualism more valuable? Certainly, being bilingual is valuable to the individual. We know that learning two or more languages in childhood improves cognitive ability, and there is evidence that bilingual children do better in school, with higher self-esteem and lower rates of depression. There are benefits to society as well. The evidence strongly suggests that having a multilingual population will enhance American competitiveness and international relations without fragmenting domestic unity. In the long run, the economic success of Cuban Miami is in danger as many second- and third-generation Cuban Americans are unable to communicate with the Spanish-speaking clientele that has helped to make Miami a truly global city. And, since September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has been desperate to recruit translators of various languages, but the near-total linguistic assimilation of Arab Americans means that there are not enough Americans with fluent Arabic who also qualify for the security clearances denied to foreign nationals.

Many Mexican American leaders as well as many other Americans are calling for an ethnically diverse society. Viable systems of ethnic pluralism exist in societies like Belgium and Switzerland. Why not in the United

States? Certainly, we have made some attempts at bilingual education and ethnic language maintenance, but these seem to be almost entirely attempts to facilitate the Americanization and English language learning of immigrants rather than to preserve or teach non-English languages. Assimilation, despite the wishes of the multiculturalists, is occurring. On the other hand, the persistence of at least some Spanish proficiency among many third- or fourth-generation Mexican Americans is impressive in light of the strong forces of Americanization. We should work to preserve and strengthen this language proficiency, maintaining the Spanish of Mexican Americans and ensuring that all English-speaking children in the United States learn Spanish or another second language.

Rather than making Mexicans an easy scapegoat for a host of American problems, scholar David Gutiérrez emphasizes, we need to move in the direction of a “truly participatory democracy”—a notion that Huntington also endorses. The members of this democracy need to fully “acknowledge their society’s intricate ethnic heterogeneity—and learn to accept and deal constructively with the political consequences” (Gutiérrez 1995, 216).

Note

1. Samuel P. Huntington is professor of political science at Harvard University and author of *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (2004). My essay was prepared in response to a lecture given by Professor Huntington at Texas A&M University as part of the University Distinguished Lecture Series on October 10, 2005 (Huntington 2005). That lecture in turn was largely based on the chapter “Mexican Immigration and Hispanization” in *Who Are We?* Following is an abstract of Huntington’s talk from the university’s lecture series webpage (available at <http://www.tamu.edu/provost/udls/huntington.html>):

September 11th brought a revival of American patriotism and a renewal of American identity. But already there are signs that this revival is fading. America was founded by British settlers who brought with them a distinct culture including the English language, Protestant values, individualism, religious commitment, and respect for law. The waves of immigrants that later came to the United States gradually accepted these values and assimilated into America’s Anglo-Protestant culture. More recently, however, national identity has been eroded by the problems of assimilating massive numbers of primarily Hispanic immigrants, bilingualism, multiculturalism, the devaluation of citizenship, and the “denationalization” of American elites. Huntington argues the need for us to reassert the core values that make us Americans. Nothing less than our national identity is at stake.

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