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The Current American Immigration Debate: Assessing the Potential Benefits of a Splintered Nationalization

Is nationalism a useful corrective to ideological obscurity? Decades of paralysis over several crucial political decisions left to fester are coming to a head in the current viciously fought immigration debate in the US. These issues involve the ideal characteristics of national identity, the extent of desired exposure to globalization, the value of empire in a politically resurgent third world, and the fate of entitlement programs in an aging society. Whereas even the Iraq war didn't allow these necessary debates to come to the forefront, because foreign policy is always couched in a veneer of idealism which doesn't allow for real honesty, the immigration wars have served as an outlet for all sides of the debate to express full-throated passion. When it comes to immigration, Americans' feelings can be, and often are, naked and raw; the very nature of the issue lends itself to an us-versus-them dichotomy, legitimate under the acknowledged exceptionalism of the American citizenship model, to which all comers are expected to subsume their particular national identities. This is different from other contentious issues where politeness prevents acknowledgment of the chasm between different sides of the ideological divide. As usual in politics then, nationalism is serving as a useful corrective to ideological paralysis. When things have finally shaken out, we'll know which side of history—progressive or retrogressive—the American polity will decide to settle on in this current phase of global integration. The final outcome is still in doubt, although it can be predicted with assurance that if this debate is allowed to proceed to its logical conclusion, a lot of necessary clarity will ensue in matters that have too long been papered over by the ruling elites.

The Four Great Unmentionables in American Political Discourse

The first of these issues is a redefinition of national identity, which has been under tremendous stress since the floodgates of immigration were reopened in 1965, only to accelerate in the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties, and because of the increasingly Hispanic flavour of the Southwestern part of the country, primarily due to the overwhelming representation of the Mexican component in overall immigration. Whereas it used to be popular for the liberal agenda to support a degree of separateness, by way of bilingual education and acknowledgment of historical wrongs to Mexico, in the increasing tensions of the nineteen-nineties a number of commentators were able to establish widespread general annoyance with bilingualism and special concessions to Mexicans to make up for historical oppression by America.[1]

The advent of NAFTA in the early 1990s put the brakes to open discussion of the degree to which Mexicans should immediately and comprehensively assimilate in American society, since part of the impulse behind globalization is the rather optimistic belief that cultural particularism will simply melt away in the wake of the forces of economic integration: commerce over commonality, in other words. Meanwhile, all over the Southwest, and in the northern parts of the country in more recent years, local communities were becoming increasingly frustrated by (probably exaggerated) perceptions of demands on social services, particularly education and health care, by "those illegals," depriving the American-born citizen of similar services. The whole discussion became rooted in the paradigm of a zero-sum game, where for Mexicans (or immigrants in general) to gain something, Americans were bound to have lost something.[2] Rather than immigrants cumulatively adding to the existing American fund of social and political capital, it began to be seen as a matter of a vulnerable American tradition

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[1] Among the key alarmist, nativist forerunners of the explosive current debate were Brent A. Nelson, *America Balkanized: Immigration's Challenge to Government* (Monterey, VA: The American Immigration Control Foundation, 1994), which argued that for a number of historical reasons American exceptionalism had ended; Chilton Williamson Jr., *The Immigration Mystique: America's False Conscience* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996); Dale Maharidge, *The Coming White Minority: California's Eruptions and America's Future* (New York: Times Books, 1996); and more recently Patrick Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Declining Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2001).

[2] The most prominent organization arguing for a moratorium on immigration has been the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), led by Dan Stein—a precursor to the Minutemen vigilante group currently operating along the Mexican border.

under determined onslaught by the dark-skinned foreigners from the South, willing to suffer the economic consequences of self-chosen marginalization by continuing to prefer their language and heritage to that of the American mainstream, unlike previous waves of immigrants (of course, the same fear has been expressed toward every previous large group of immigrants—the Irish and Italians, the Germans, the Jews, the Eastern Europeans—in the past, correlating with each period of anxiety over the precepts of globalization gaining superiority over supposed national interest). As long as Mexico was seen primarily as a valued partner in NAFTA in the money-oriented 1990s, which after all were appearing to produce real gains for the American population as a whole, even if certain segments, particularly the traditional manufacturing industries, did appear to be losing out, Mexicans themselves couldn't be made scapegoats for American ills. But when, in the last five years, globalization started taking second place to the need to "protect and defend" America in the alleged "new age of terror," the gloves came off, and the problem of American national identity resumed centre stage.[3]

Similarly, the elites were in a position to postpone real debate about the very visible costs and consequences of unfettered globalization, where American manufacturing and service jobs were being outsourced at an increasingly blinding pace in the latter half of the 1990s and in the early years of the twenty-first century. There are bounds on the extent to which pure economic debate allows for clarity of definition. The hold of orthodox economics on the minds of decision makers who count is too strong to allow encroachment of such a disturbing phenomenon as the rapid evisceration of the half-century-old security of the middle class; instead, displaced middle-class factory workers, often unionized, were left to fend for themselves in the "new economy," the vague hope being expressed that somehow "job training" and "reeducation" would lead to reasonable employment at previous levels of compensation. Of course, this hasn't happened to any appreciable extent, and it appears that the problem of unemployment in America has been expertly disguised and understated by various computational subterfuges.

As a corollary of global or regional trade agreements, whether the WTO or NAFTA, ideological clarity remains muddled; trade agreements are simply too vulnerable to obfuscation by economic experts, who walk in on the stage with what appears to be their irrefutable arsenal of empirical data and quantitative analysis. But when the problem becomes reframed as Mexican workers, here without valid social security numbers and driver's

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[3] For example, in such vicious polemics as Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

licenses, taking jobs away from American workers, or forced to come to the US to seek work because of the displacements NAFTA is supposed to have caused in Mexico itself, then for the first time a no-holds-barred discussion of the costs and benefits of globalization becomes possible.

The liberal Wilsonian idealist veneer that has prevailed over foreign policy decisions since the First World War, even when Republican administrations like Eisenhower's, Reagan's, or Bush the First's have been in power, similarly disguises the purely economic interests that motivate much of American foreign policy, turning the discussion into a polemic on America's "duties and obligations" to the rest of the world, even when aggression is the issue at stake. So the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam, and all other modern foreign interventions have been presented in terms of the behemoth reluctantly stirring itself to get engaged in fighting off the demons abroad, who don't know any better than to let peaceful Americans get on with the business of making money and being pragmatic.

The attempt was made after September 11, 2001 to present America as being vulnerable, for the first time since the War of 1812, on its "home front," because globalization has supposedly made America's porous borders too susceptible to infiltration. But the spectre of an Osama bin Laden, hiding out in an Afghan cave, was simply too distant and illusory to stoke the fires of paranoia for too long by itself; the diffusion achieved momentum with the war against Iraq, which further lessened the notion that America was somehow penetrated from the inside, by "strangers who live and work amongst us, and yet mean to do us harm." Of course, the aim of Homeland Security over the last four years has been singular: to inscribe, as much as possible in the American imagination, the erasure of the boundary between what used to be the invulnerable home front, where everyone desires only to work hard and contribute peacefully to American economic advancement, and foreign lands where war and disease are perpetual problems which prevent the people there from getting on with their lives. But not all the scare tactics, not all the false cases built up against evil-doing outsiders of Muslim or Arab origin (without a single case of any remotely terroristic action having actually been filed or proven in the annals of Homeland Security to date), managed to create the necessary blurring of the homeland's secure boundaries.

Until, that is, the Mexican invasion assumed centre stage in the national consciousness, and it became once again possible to shamelessly strip away any dissembling niceness about American foreign policy from its established discourse over eighty years. An impenetrable wall, protecting the 2000 miles of the Mexican-American border; mass deportations of as many as twelve to fifteen million workers with undocumented presence

in the country; and an all-out assault on the privacy of individual families and integrated communities, to root out those lacking the papers to be entitled to be serviceable cogs in the American economic juggernaut—all these propositions reintroduce an openly vicious element of brute power and self-interest into polite, Wilsonian foreign policy discourse. The failure of foreign policy truly comes at home in the listless Mexican worker loitering at a street corner to be picked up for a day job. Its antidote must be aggressive local action.[4] And when we can be so blatant about defending the white, middle-class "American" worker from the shiftless Mexican, why not go whole hog and admit that we're in the Middle East for oil, that we want to assure our own access to precious natural resources in anticipation of a showdown with China and India, and that we will do whatever is necessary to preserve the hyperconsumerist American way of life from all those with misguided notions of some new world order, where resources are distributed more evenly and military action must always be couched in diplomatic terms.

Finally, there are the dilemmas associated with an inexorably aging population: having to live with an inefficient health delivery system (undoubtedly the most wasteful in the world, even if perhaps the most proficient in quality of care in individual instances), entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare that are founded in an outdated pastoral vision of an America taking care of its old while the young fend for themselves (our expression of compassion for the elderly, who, when they were workers, put in the best years of their lives in the build-up of American economic power), and the long-term insupportability of these programs for the enrichment of the old from the foundation of a thin manufacturing base and unionized work force, a hypercapitalism that would rather do away with any share of corporate contribution to retirement and pension resources.

What happens when all those workers, the current boomers who're now in managerial and administrative positions throughout the economy, get old and frail, and we have to support them with perhaps a fifth of the national product devoted to health care alone, and a declining worker-to-retiree ratio, down dramatically from the time social security was formed

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[4] Max J. Castro, in *Free Markets, Open Societies, Closed Borders? Trends in International Migration and Immigration Policy in the Americas* (Miami: U of Miami Press, 1999), describes the history of local nativist initiatives through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The first contemporary local "English Only" efforts date back to the late seventies and early eighties. The connection to the rebirth of scientific racism, in tracts such as Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), is also noted.

in the 1930s? Even if technically, social security is not really in dire crisis, and the problem of the diminishing worker-to-retiree ratio is manageable with some accounting adjustments, the real issue is what it does to the national psyche, for a nation so reliant on its self-image as the sum of the brash, young, frontier adventurer in all of us, to become one that actually resembles greying Japan and Western Europe in actual demographics. Is this outcome actually acceptable to the national consciousness? But if not, how can we go about accepting the immigrants' absolutely crucial role in keeping America young and dynamic over the last quarter century, when other societies with less open immigration policies have rapidly reached the sunset age within a short period of time?[5]

Until the immigration wars burst out into the open in the last few years, we were content with issuing monographs showing that Mexicans took out a little bit more from the economy than they put in (actually, a false proposition) or that Mexicans (a convenient synecdoche by now for immigrants in general) slightly depress national wages (another false proposition, as it turns out).[6] But for the first time in recent memory, when the undoubtedly young and vigorous Mexican (and immigrant in general) makes his presence felt on the street, then the convenient stereotype has to fall by the wayside for a more nuanced acknowledgment of the extent to which America too is vulnerable to the problem of aging.

The Immigration Wars as a Reflection of the American Psyche

In recent months, there have been what would have to be considered the most positive, uplifting, future-oriented marches and demonstrations in the streets of American cities, large and small, in at least forty years.

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[5] John Isbister has been a leading contributor to the rationale for open borders, questioning the ethical foundation of immigration controls under the presumption of equal moral worth. See, for instance, his succinct contribution, "Are Immigration Controls Ethical?" in *Immigration: A Civil Rights Issue for the Americas*, ed. Suzanne Jonas and Suzie Dod Thomas (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999). Saskia Sassen, in her contribution to the same book, "Beyond Sovereignty: Immigration Policy Making Today," and elsewhere, suggests a necessary loss of national sovereignty if fidelity to the principles of globalization is to be maintained.

[6] George J. Borjas, of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, has been the leading exponent of the supposed economic costs of immigration. See, for example, "The Economics of Immigration," *The Journal of Economic Literature* (Dec. 1994): 1667–1717. As John Isbister shows in *The Immigration Debate: Remaking America* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1996), numerous economists have debunked Borjas's controversial claims, including Julian Simon in *The Economic Consequences of Immigration* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989).

It began with a spontaneous march in Chicago amounting to 100,000 on 10 March 2006,[7] then one in Los Angeles two weeks later on 25 March to the tune of a stunning 500,000,[8] then another two weeks later in Dallas also adding up to 500,000,[9] and finally the 10 April National Day of Action for Immigrant Justice with massive, often unprecedented demonstrations adding to millions of people, all over the country, even in small towns like Lake Worth, Florida, or Garden City, Kansas, where one wouldn't have thought immigrants would be present in large enough numbers or emboldened enough to show up in the many thousands.[10] In each instance, the police and authorities at first understated the numbers of people, sometimes by as much as a factor of 100. The unprecedented half a million-strong Los Angeles demonstration was supposed to have been 5000 at first. But the magnitude of sheer numbers was so overwhelming that the mass media simply couldn't filter it out. More than official organizers like La Raza or LULAC, the demonstrations were prompted in the first instance by Spanish radio DJs and other local personalities calling for people to show up in force.

The spontaneous joy of these marchers has been in sharp contrast to the many angry marchers who've taken to the streets in recent years, including women fighting anti-abortion laws throughout the 1990s, Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March of 1995, the anti-WTO and anti-globalization marches of the late nineties, and most recently the 2003 anti-Iraq war demonstrations. In every previous instance, privileged segments of society (even the black marchers of the mid-nineties sought to preserve special entitlements like affirmative action and quotas in jobs and education) angrily demanded conservative sets of actions to preserve the status quo.[11] In contrast, the immigrant marches have been *American* in the best sense of the word, simply pleading their case for humane and dignified treatment. Their supporters in the Democratic party might be prone to interpret these

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[7] *The Chicago Tribune* (11 March 2006).

[8] *The Los Angeles Times* (26 March 2006).

[9] *The Dallas Morning News* (10 April 2006).

[10] Reported at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/10/us/10cnd-rallies.html>

[11] It is noteworthy that leading immigrant advocacy organizations like La Raza and LULAC have failed to throw their full weight behind the 1 May economic boycott, perhaps the one thing that might truly register with the average American not yet paying attention. The organizations have also been restrained in their support of the spontaneous walkouts by school children that have occurred throughout the nation, demanding humane treatment for themselves and their parents and relatives.

marchers as wanting mere programmatic adjustments, more lenient treatment in any proposed "guest worker" or "temporary worker" plan, but in fact, as the marchers made it very clear, they want nothing less than respectful treatment as full human beings. They *have* come out of the shadows, which was supposed to be the stated intent of all the potential immigration legislation under discussion, but never, of course, the actual intent, since for immigrants to come out of the shadows means that they must be treated as human beings. Those who are anti-immigrant have condemned the daring of the immigrants in coming out so openly, when they were supposed to be cowed by the whole array of repressive legislation meant to drive them further underground.

This mass expression of the demand to be treated humanely is in response to legislation which aims to criminalize mere illegal presence as an "aggravated felony" or at the very least as a "misdemeanour," both punishable by jail time, deportation, and permanent exclusion from the United States. The US House passed the most draconian anti-immigrant bill in this nation's history, HR 4437,[12] which makes not only the estimated twelve to fifteen million undocumented workers in this country aggravated felons, but also anyone at all, from priests and counsellors, or friends and neighbours who are aware of but don't report the illegal alien to the authorities, aggravated felons as well. It calls for the deportation of all twelve to fifteen million illegal aliens, in addition to many among their families as well. An impenetrable physical fence is to be built along the entire Mexican-American border, massive new room is to be made for apprehension and detention of not only Mexicans but non-Mexican illegal immigrants caught both at the border and in the "interior," judicial review of arbitrary and hasty administrative decisions by immigration officers is to be all but demolished, and a system of biometric identification is to be extended to the entire population, so that any employer hiring an illegal worker is to be subject to criminal prosecution as well. In 2004, Congress passed the REAL ID Act, in effect the implementation of a single national database, which would prevent the issuance of driver's licenses to anyone who can't prove their presence in the country legally, and which would link up all fifty states in a coordinated attempt to track the movement and activities of all Americans, regardless of whether or not they are immigrants. In addition,

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[12] HR 4437 (The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005) was passed by the United States House of Representatives on 16 December 2005 by a vote of 239 to 182. A summary of the key provisions of HR 4437 is at <http://www.nclr.org/content/resources/detail/35613>

states like Georgia, Arizona, New Mexico, Florida and others have been attempting to pass exclusionary measures like barring even the US-born children of undocumented workers from access to public education and health care.[13]

Regardless of the eventual form of the legislation adopted by Congress and signed into law, some form of (retroactive) criminalization of actions that used to be minor civil offences, or overlooked in the interests of pure economic gain, is likely to be the outcome.[14] Peter A. Schey, legendary champion of immigrant rights at the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law, demonstrates that the so-called Hagel-Martinez compromise pending in the Senate is likely to perpetuate the ambiguous twilight status of most of the undocumented workers in this country, rather than offering them a clear path to legalization. Unless, that is, the suppressed debate over crucial national issues comes full circle, is allowed to go forward in something resembling democratic discourse, and the weight of majority feeling is permitted to prevail.[15] The most significant strands of national division have converged on the immigration issue. The gridlock in national political discourse over the last few decades, which has prevented rational solutions to the most important national problems, has finally found an outlet in the immigration debate, since people are given leeway to put on their most passionate colors when it comes to this issue. But what will the freeing of the gridlock unleash?

The choice in terms of national identity is the reclamation of some form of universal enlightenment ideal, which has been lost to a great extent

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[13] The legislature in Georgia has been wanting to impose a surcharge on remittances by undocumented workers to Mexico; New Hampshire has used an obscure legal provision to declare undocumented workers subject to arrest and deportation because of "criminal trespassing" on American soil; localities in Virginia are conducting searches of houses where immigrants' extended families reside, on the grounds that this constitutes overcrowding. In late April 2006, the Georgia legislature passed a bill requiring employers to withhold special taxes from undocumented immigrants, the New Hampshire legislature passed a bill requiring employers hiring foreign workers to register with the state, and the Ohio legislature passed a bill mandating the discounting of immigrants in census research to determine congressional representation.

[14] The feature of some form of retroactive, punishable criminalization is common to all the so-called compromises liable to come up for discussion in the balance of 2006 and later in the Bush administration, including the so-called "Hagel-Martinez" compromise pending in the Senate.

[15] Despite all the media frenzy whipped up by right-wing fanatics, polls even now consistently show two-thirds of white Americans wanting a clear path to legalization and citizenship for undocumented workers, rather than exclusion and debarment.

amidst the identity politics of the last few decades. Not only has the issue now far transcended the relatively trivial debates over bilingual education and retention of Mexican heritage, but there is likely to be tremendous spillover in the mainstream national discourse about the extent to which particularistic strands of racial, gender, and religious classification in general ought to be reconsidered for their effects on national cohesion. Once national cohesion is reestablished to some extent—and this is likely to happen only after the deviant Bush administration, with its extreme manifestations of American military and economic dominance over the rest of the globe, is gone, and replaced by a more consensual, probably Democratic, administration—then reclassification along particular branches is likely to take place again along naturally evolving lines. Immigrants, far from being the final downfall of the fractured national identity, will assume their traditional role in reiterating the classic parameters of American national identity, flowing from the foundational principles enshrined in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The extent to which immigrants are absolutely crucial to this presumed resurgence of liberal constitutionalism in America is underappreciated, but this is the positive side to the current backlash against their very presence, criminalizing their exercise of the basic guarantees of the foundational documents.

The alternative in terms of globalization is an outward-looking participation that lets the middle class find new ways to regain its secure identity, as opposed to an inward-looking retreat that turns its face away from even a definition of the problems and challenges of globalization, and pretends that its harsh realities don't exist. Here again, the presence of very large numbers of new immigrants means that some form of clarification of the future American stance toward globalization is likely to occur. The guess is that it will be a reiteration of America's traditional risk-seeking behaviour with respect to trust in science and technology leading to ever-elevated platforms from which to participate in the activity of globalization, shepherding off work and services demanding lesser skills to countries more suited to do them, and focusing on creating and developing higher-skilled work and services. The baseless myth that immigration means only unskilled Mexicans who barely speak the English language, desperately seeking day jobs on the street corner and surviving at the mercy of ruthless white employers, is likely to become shattered during the course of any rational debate, as the complex reality emerges that in fact immigrant males are more likely to be employed than their non-immigrant male counterparts, that the striving for education is no exception among the children of Mexican immigrants as it has been for generations of previous immigrants, and that by any measure

of integration, assimilation remains as ferociously present among this latest batch of immigrants as it was for the previous ones.[16]

The demands made by immigrants to be treated humanely in this country, if they have any effect at all in political action, are likely to find their counterpart outside the country in a more humane treatment of developing countries yearning to seek similar recognition of their legitimate goals and interests. It simply cannot be that immigrants in this country might end up being treated more fairly, their demonization as terrorists and criminals done away with, and yet that this should have no effect on America's pernicious foreign policy of recent years, which treats every other country as menial or barbaric, when it comes to making determinations about global law and order, and the worldwide distribution of goods and resources. The split in the national consciousness, which has permitted white, middle-class Americans to drive gas-guzzling SUVs and inhabit multimillion-dollar McMansions, while letting the same folks maintain what they think is smart political consciousness about our treatment of the rest of the world, must simply come to an end, and the links between America's unfair and unequal standard of living, which comes at the cost of disproportionate utilization of the world's scarce natural resources, must be reestablished. The schizophrenia which allows well-meaning white suburbanites to believe that they are actually environmentally conscious, if only they castigate the mean alien right-wing fanatics as exploitative of the world's resources, even though they themselves are the real beneficiaries of the exploitation, ought to come to an end. This must be an inevitable corollary of the fair treatment and comprehensive incorporation of immigrants in the American labour force.

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[16] Leo Chavez, in *Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), shows that not all migrants want to reside permanently in the United States. Richard Alba and Victor Nee, in *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), provide clear evidence of assimilation at every level for this newest wave of immigrants, in terms of secondary and higher schooling, socioeconomic attainment, labour in the open economy, and intermarriage, particularly for the 1.5 and 2nd generations. The Pew Hispanic Center's Research Report of 7 March 2006, "The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the US," shows relatively wide dispersal across broad occupation groups, and even more so across broad industries. The same organization's 6 December 2005 "Survey of Mexican Immigrants: The Economic Transition to America" shows that only five per cent of Mexicans are motivated by unemployment to migrate to America, and that upon arrival smooth transitions are typically made to the labour market amid very low levels of unemployment (contrary to the popular claim of immigrants draining welfare services because of unemployment).

Finally, if the debate takes its natural course, without being disrupted by some forceful intervention, the real sources of dynamism in the American economy, which keep it young and fresh in all senses of the word, will become apparent to the extent that their position will be undeniable and insurmountable through demagogic rhetoric. The very nature of the immigrants' ultimate sin so far—that they reproduce too much—will become a credit to them once it becomes apparent that along with this goes a commitment to family ties that serves as a counterpoise to overreliance on government services, precisely the difficulty with the aging, white, middle-class population. The real nature of the generational challenge should become more apparent: It is not the extent to which Mexican and other immigrants choose, or don't choose, to learn English; they inevitably do, over time, in this country anyway. It is not whether we should exploit young guest workers but then refuse them permanent residence once their prime working years are behind them, having used their contribution to the social security trust fund and the retirement pool for white workers eligible to receive such benefits. The real nature of the generational debate is the extent to which the aging white population should be allowed to have absolute veto power over all crucial domestic policy issues. There needs to be a vast redistribution away from older to younger workers in this country, and a corresponding translation in political power for this generational shift. If young immigrants can help this transition occur earlier and deeper, then that will have been a significant contribution to eroding the false terms of debate when it comes to the generational challenges facing America.

Immigration is Not a Panacea but it is Our Saving Grace

To expect that immigration will remain at the centre of some yet-to-appear rational policy-making apparatus, rather than serve only as a transitory wedge issue for the 2006—and perhaps 2008—elections (just as abortion and gay marriage have been in the last two election cycles), might perhaps be too optimistic. The argument here also expects a lot from liberal elites who in recent years have shown a marked tendency toward self-destructiveness, almost a suicidal ideation, and a harmful deflection away from the very principles of rational inquiry, in the face of evangelical and hypernationalist fervour, that have made this country a model of democratic governance for much of its history.

Nevertheless, if messy, partisan, vocal, free exchange of ideas is allowed to go forward, and the actual will of the electorate is not thwarted by unfair machinations, then there is every reason still to expect that immigration, in the early part of the twenty-first century, will clarify for America, along a number of crucial determining vectors, what role it expects to play in

the world at large—whether that of cooperative older and richer brother to the world's emerging societies, or that of a mean-spirited, isolated, vengeful Uncle Scrooge to any supplicant seeking even a small share of the resources it has so far had unfettered access to. For too long, Americans of political consciousness have looked the other way when it comes to contradictions between our stated goals and our actual practices. The presence of large numbers of immigrants amongst us, who have now for the first time in the current cycle of open immigration, dating back to 1965, made themselves visibly acquiescent in the pursuit of the American Dream, makes this intentional blindness impossible in the long run.

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Postscript

Events have taken an ominous turn. As of early June 2007, S. 1348 (http://www.c-span.org/pdf/Immigration%20Draft%2005-18-07.pdf) looks likely to survive the round of amendments and pass the US Senate. This is a creation mostly of Homeland Secretary Michael Chertoff, who consulted with key Republican and Democratic senators from February through May 2007 in highly secretive meetings, to arrive at a "grand bargain" (manufactured in elite darkness, without any consultation or hearings involving advocacy or business groups). The bill could not have advanced this far without the imprimatur of liberal Senator Ted Kennedy, who is keen to add to his substantial legacy late in his career. Bush was able to charm him into getting behind this radical legislation, which would overturn centuries of US immigration policy, particularly the fundamental principle of family reunification, something which Kennedy himself was instrumental in solidifying in the last landmark immigration legislation of 1965. Kennedy was earlier charmed by Bush to support the No Child Left Behind Act, which has played havoc with education, and the Medicare "reform" bill, which has created fatal contradictions designed to erode Medicare. It is no little irony that the master craftsman of Great Society programs is being used to dismantle his very creations. And it is no coincidence that the grand compromise was announced in late May on the very same day that the minority population in America reached 100 million, a third of the total, generating a great deal of anxiety among rabble-rousers like Lou Dobbs of CNN, the most visible xenophobe in the country.

Polls now show that eighty per cent of Americans support a path to legalization for undocumented persons. But the byzantine concoction created by Chertoff and company, and acclaimed as a bipartisan compromise, seems designed to strike mortal blows at every single component of Ameri-

can immigration law which does work, and to effectively shut down future flows of migration from undesirable countries. America's large bureaucracies work because of built-in redundancies, overlaps, and review possibilities, precisely the right approach for a country this large and complicated. Already judicial review, even of asylum and refugee cases, and of persons who would suffer severe hardship because of longstanding ties with this country, has been severely curtailed. The new legislation would introduce elements of utter arbitrariness so that all immigrants would be officially treated as potential criminals and terrorists, and would be deemed so even if they were lucky enough to get citizenship. Immigration from entire countries could be halted at the Homeland Security secretary's discretion. Not a single business group supports this legislation, which seems to ignore America's desperate need for more, not fewer, immigrants to sustain its comparative economic advantage over Europe. Immigrants have been the driving force behind the strong American economy over the past quarter-century, and they are indispensable in larger numbers to avert the looming demographic and entitlement program crises, so businesses large and small are opposed to this bill, which would provide fewer avenues for skilled and unskilled workers to immigrate.

It sets up a guest worker program (it's back to the bracero days of midcentury) which is designed to be unworkable: under a new Y visa a worker could stay in this country for two years at a time, for a total of three times, but would have to return to his country of origin for a year in between renewals, and would not be able to bring in his family. In all respects, this legislation works against the principle of allowing immigrants to assimilate into American society by bringing family members here, and moving around freely so that they feel part of the American fabric. America does a better job of assimilating immigrants than any other society in history, but this capacity seems to have been intentionally targeted, to prevent this country from turning into a majority-minority country in a few decades, with all the political consequences that would follow from that. The legislation has a so-called path to legalization, under a new Z visa, but it is so onerous that most wouldn't qualify, or wouldn't even consider coming forward to pass rigorous background checks and pay astronomical fines and back taxes. The applicant would have to return to his country of origin ("touchback," in the new parlance) to begin to apply for permanent residency. Most undocumented people would be pushed further underground, and people who make errors in the future will have their possibilities for legal assimilation cut off. The legislation severely restricts the ability of not only permanent residents but also citizens to bring in family members, even spouses and children—not to mention parents, who would find it increasingly difficult

to join their children. Parents could only visit for thirty days, after the sponsoring child posted a bond to guarantee their return. The right wing's favorite *bête noire* here is what has been labeled "chain migration" (formerly family reunification), and the real goal is simply to cut down drastically on the numbers of people immigrating, so that America remains a white majority country. Following the Canadian model, a new point system would devalue family unification, but unlike the effective Canada version there is little chance that it would be a rational system rewarding exceptional skills and economic value to the country. Rather, it would dramatically increase the arbitrariness of the approval process, and create insecurity for intending skilled and unskilled migrants alike. A Nobel Prize winner could end up, under the irrational calculations, with fewer points than a janitor. Persons of extraordinary ability would have no particular preference under this new points system.

The Bush administration is pushing hard for this legislation, knowing it would have more far-reaching consequences, altering as it does the very demographics of the country into the distant future, than anything else they have done so far. Democrats have buckled under, and the only chance that this legislation might be halted is if House Republicans stop it under protest that it offers "amnesty" to illegals and is too lenient. Nothing short of mass deportation, or conditions leading to mass self-deportation, will satisfy right-wingers at this point. A far-right president is offering them a dream opportunity to shut down immigration, but his base is so wrapped up in its resentment against "jobs being taken away by criminal immigrants" that it is now the only obstacle to this legislation. The most desirable outcome would be for the next president, after the 2008 elections, to set up a commission to dispassionately study the question, and have open hearings and consultations, at which point the real value of immigrants to this society (not as welfare burdens, but as key contributors at every level of the economy) would become evident and lead to a more rational policy. Overwhelming majorities of the public and the business community support lenient immigration, which is in the national interest, but political forces are at the moment aligned in favor of an utterly self-destructive departure.