

Feature Articles

Understanding Multiculturalism

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A new era in the United States is struggling to be born. Population shifts, a constant influx of immigrants, and a high birth rate among Hispanics and Asians are reshaping America's character. America is becoming a city of groups, distinct in their ethnic identities and loyalties.

Already, 28% of Americans belong to a minority group. By the year 2000, most of the people entering our country's workforce will be non-white, female, or immigrants—not young Anglo men who grew up in the suburbs and earned college degrees financed by their parents. The average worker will be African-American, Asian, or Latino, likely to have grown up in poverty, and lucky to have graduated from high school. Contributing to the problem will be disenfranchisement from the education system.

What is ahead for our country is completely unlike anything our parents could have imagined. Nationwide, Anglo males make up 47% of our labor force. Within 10 years, only 15% of new workers will be young white men. Project that picture onto a city like Houston and you can begin to see the kinds of problems we will face in the next decade: Hispanics experienced a 100% growth rate between 1970 and 1980 and now make up 28% of the Houston population. Almost half of Houston Independent School District students are Hispanic, and almost half of those students drop out of high school before they graduate. If current trends continue, Houston will become a city with a vast, undereducated, unemployable population. Houston is not alone. Sheer numbers dictate that whatever the future holds for minorities will profoundly affect the futures of all Americans in all cities. As we move into the greatest demographic shift this nation has ever seen, minority issues are no longer issues of right or wrong. They are issues of survival.

What's more, at the very time when America is in this major transition, we are suffering from a case of "white flight" as many people retreat from our cities. With this kind of exodus comes a false sense of security. Over and over again as I talk with upper and middle income Americans, I find that they are so focused on their own worlds that they miss the big picture. While I enjoy hearing proud parents describe how well their children are doing in school, the fact is that when it comes to our country's future, it doesn't matter how many accelerated courses their children take or how high they score on their

SATs. No matter how exemplary these students are, these children do not make up a large enough percentage of our population to insure that we will have the kind of educated, technologically literate workforce crucial to our economic survival in the next decade. It is no longer enough to “do the right thing by those people” out of a sense of charity or because the federal government is looking back over everyone’s shoulders. Our educational systems now need to pay closer attention to “minority” issues and needs, as current minorities will make up the bulk of our workforce.

Whenever I make this point in a speech, invariably there are those in the audience whose knee-jerk reaction is: “Close the borders. The solution is to stop those people from coming in.” Because the United States has been in a recession and many regions of the country are undergoing hard times, our new immigrants have become a lightning rod for the wrath of the economically distressed. But the fact is, we need immigrants. Our growing elderly population combined with lower Anglo birthrates means we will have more and more senior citizens and fewer people in the workplace to support them. In the years ahead, while Europe is uniting into a single, strong economic power, the American population—and with it the American work force—will be shrinking.

We are a country of immigrants anxious about immigration. Yet we need immigrants for more than just their numbers; we need the infusion of the immigrant spirit. One of our country’s greatest strengths has been that it was created and continues to be defined by voluntary immigration. The majority of our immigrants are people of strength--steel-willed individuals with dreams. There are Hispanics who want to be in America so desperately that they allow themselves to be stuffed into railway cars knowing, as others knew before them, that they risk death by asphyxiation before they arrive. There are Asians who allow themselves to become human cargo on ships, enduring cramped, dark, unsanitary quarters for weeks at a time. There are people who swim the Rio Grande or walk across the hot border carrying everything they own in a shoe box. Some of these new immigrants live along the Texas-Mexico border in houses built from cardboard and scraps of metal. Others live with relatives in city apartments so crowded that they are lined with mattresses and people must live shoulder to shoulder. All of these people are full of hope when they come to Texas, California, and other parts of the United States from Asia, Mexico, and Central and South America. Once here, they start to build new lives, often accepting the menial jobs that no one else will take: they pick crops, dig ditches, take in other people’s laundry and sewing. They expect to work hard.

It’s pointless to turn away “those people,” because they are here and their numbers are growing. So the question is not: “How do we stop more of ‘them’

from coming?" but: "How can we do a better job of ensuring that our immigrants have the opportunities in life—like education—that will help them reach their full potential?" I believe our country is courting disaster in its unwillingness to make an investment, particularly with regard to education, in minority populations. As I see it, if the social fabric of America is to remain intact, we must develop the vast human capital that is our ethnic population—develop, not culturally recast.

The "browning" of many cities is a certainty. What that means for the future is yet to be determined. When the European immigrants arrived, they found a country that expected them to "melt" together into a cultural conglomerate. The world that ethnic groups are living in today is one in which the momentum is not toward assimilation, but toward acculturation. Today's immigrants enter a country where, when they look at other minority groups, they see cultural pride and celebration of heritage. And, whereas an ocean separated our earlier immigrants from their roots, basic geography keeps some immigrants, especially Mexican-Americans, close to their homelands. Tucson, Arizona, is less than 100 miles from the border of Mexico. San Antonio is only 150 miles from the border, Houston 350, and El Paso just a shallow ribbon of river away. Look at the fervor with which many ethnic groups of earlier immigration waves celebrate St. Patrick's Day or Greek Festivals, and then imagine how ingrained the traditions of those ethnic groups would be if U.S. citizens of Greek and Irish descent could drive to Greece or Ireland and back in a few hours. For immigrants from earlier times, a trip back to the homeland might happen once in a lifetime. For many new Americans, it is a weekly event. Their task is to find a balance between living and functioning in the greater society and their culture of origin without committing cultural betrayal.

There are those traditionalists who compare cultural differences and can only see a future of chaos where the collision of values and principles will result in cultural tension and confusion. They foresee a battle of wills over which culture authentically represents the new America. What I see for our minorities is neither cultural separateness nor cultural recasting into the mainstream, but something more complex. For Hispanics, as an example, I see an identity that embraces both the sense of community of Latin America and the "rugged individualism" of the United States. I see a very complete human being, a person with Latin roots that foster an ability to cope with the essence of life and are matched with the imperative to succeed. This same kind of cultural synthesis can occur for all minority children growing up in America. Their self-images and senses of identity will evolve from the power-pull of American culture—schools, friendships, work relationships, television—combined with their own cultural traditions, passed on by parents and church.

At a time when we are seeking to strengthen our economic and diplomatic relationships with the Orient, Latin America, Eastern Europe and other regions, it is to our benefit to have part of our population—an educated part—closely in touch with those cultures. It seems very likely that as common-market Europe becomes a reality, the United States will be more marginalized on the European scene; it simply won't need us--not our military and not our money. Our survival as a major world power will hinge on forming new alliances. One alliance unfolding at present is an alliance of the Americas, uniting Canada with the United States and all of Latin America. Our Hispanic population is a critical building block in what may become the largest alliance in the world. Instead of seeking to blunt our differences, we must learn to respect them and realize the broad power base which can result from Americans with varied backgrounds all playing to their strengths.

Such a power base can evolve only through an education system which is inclusive of the largest number of children possible. At one time there were plenty of jobs that required little more than strong hands and a strong back, but the children who will be adults in the year 2000 must be able to understand the complex underpinnings of a high-tech world. A consistent and productive bilingual education program is a good place to start moving toward this goal.

Every time we relegate a Spanish-speaking student, for instance, to a remedial program or a regular class where he or she will probably learn just enough to get a factory job, we cheat that child and we cheat ourselves. Sound and culturally sensitive bilingual education programs are crucial to resolving the dropout problem among Hispanic youth. In my hometown of San Antonio over 30 percent of students drop out before finishing high school. Statewide, one year's class of dropouts results in a loss of billions in earnings, much of which would otherwise be paid to the government in taxes. One dropout prevention program I supported had a price tag of \$1.9 billion, which sounds like a huge expenditure to most taxpayers. In reality, it saves billions down the road through a more productive workforce. Bilingual education programs are an example of solid and sound investment in our nation's future.

Yes, it costs money, but we can pay now--or pay more later. The need is to teach, to make productive as much of the population as we can. The return is a sustainable workforce that is able to contribute to the local community.

No matter how you feel about multiculturalism, the practical thing to do is embrace it. We live in a multi-ethnic society, and that is how it is going to be for the rest of our lives and the lives of our children and their children. Because of today's demographic realities, we must understand multiculturalism, recognize diversity, and employ it to our advantage.