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The Real Threat To America Is Not Immigrants, But Ourselves

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Donald Trump's ascendancy in the race for the GOP's presidential nomination has placed immigration in the center of our political discourse. Writing in defense of Trump's anti-immigrant views, Pat Buchanan, himself an erstwhile GOP presidential candidate, warned, "Will the West endure or disappear by the century's end as another lost civilization? Mass immigration, if it continues, will be more decisive in deciding the fate of the West than Islamist terrorism. For the world is invading the West."

True, parts of Europe have failed to assimilate some of their immigrants. And failed government policies, such as onerous labor regulations that kept immigrants from working and created welfare dependency, are largely to blame. But are Trump and Buchanan right about an immigrant threat to the United States?

America has managed to assimilate tens of millions of immigrants and their descendants in the past and will surely do so again. But reviving some of its core values will make that process smoother.

When Assimilation Happened

In the past, the United States was remarkably adept at dealing with large-scale immigration. Immigrants whom some considered "unassimilable," such as Germans, Eastern European Jews, Irish, and southern Italians, have assimilated so well that they are rarely ever thought of as different groups today. Time and successful assimilation erased the ethnic and racial animosities that accompanied those previous waves of immigrants.

Famed baseball player Joe DiMaggio, who was born in California to Sicilian parents and who began to play for the New York Yankees in 1936, is a prime example. By 1939, DiMaggio was generally considered a great center fielder. That year, *Life*, the magazine with the largest U.S. circulation at the time, ran an article about DiMaggio. It paid the baseball player the ultimate compliment, noting that DiMaggio "is well adapted to most U. S. mores. Instead of olive oil or smelly bear grease he keeps his hair slick with water. He never reeks of garlic and prefers chicken chow mein to spaghetti."

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The language of the *Life* article is both anachronistic and offensive, but the issue of assimilation of immigrants remains relevant to this day. Assimilation is a process by which immigrants

acquire the social and psychological characteristics of the American mainstream. It increases the long-term benefits of immigration for everybody by allowing immigrants fully to participate in their adopted country's social and economic life, and by lowering tensions between different groups of people.

Assimilation stands in contrast to multiculturalism. Multiculturalism, at least in so far as it was practiced over the last few decades in Europe, refers to government promotion of multiple cultural traditions within a single jurisdiction. The negative consequences of the multiculturalist approach to immigration, including increased social tension between ethnic groups, prompted German Chancellor Angela Merkel to denounce multiculturalism as an "utter failure" in 2010.

Assimilation Works Both Ways

Yet, assimilation is seldom a one-way street. Immigrant culture does occasionally "rub off" on the dominant culture. As such, American "culture" has always been in a state of flux. Just consider how DiMaggio became an American—by eating Chinese food! Chinese food was brought to the United States by immigrants to the gold fields of California in 1848. Their food, customs, and race were so strange and threatening that labor unions and parochial nationalists united in their support for the first blanket ban on an immigrant group, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

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Although the Chinese, and later other Asian immigrants, were banned, their culinary influence stayed and grew. Generations later, chow mein had become as American as apple pie. Enjoying it was a sign of successful assimilation for DiMaggio, the descendant of Italian immigrants. Chinese and Italian food, now mainstays of American cuisine, were not the only culinary import that was originally scorned. Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe brought the pickle to New York City in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The outrage was stupendous. Susanna Way Dodds, an influential writer and public intellectual of the day, wrote, "the spices in it are bad, the vinegar is a seething mass of rotteness ... and the poor little innocent cucumber ... if it had very little 'character' in the beginning, must now fall into the ranks of the 'totally depraved.'" The American revulsion over pickles was so extreme that well-intentioned Americans offered cooking classes for immigrants and New York City's Board of Education began to offer lunch to take pickles out of the mouths of children. Fast-forward a century, and pickles are a regional specialty in New York. It is hard to imagine a hamburger, another partial culinary import, without one. The acceptance of Chinese food, spaghetti, and pickles has also extended to Mexican food and now to Indian cuisine.

Consider the Roman Approach to Immigration

Of course, assimilation is about more than just adopting or adding to American food habits. Americans expect immigrants and their children to conform to such American values as freedom of the individual, equality before the law, liberal democracy, and a market-based economy.

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But is today different? Will the millions of immigrants who live in the United States be assimilated in the way that DiMaggio was, or will they overwhelm our values and institutions, turning the United States into a lost civilization? Writing in 2006, Buchanan likened Latin American immigrants in the United States to the Goths who immigrated to Rome and, in time, overthrew it. Others have made similar claims. Yet the Roman approach to immigration was surprisingly liberal and, for a long time, very successful.

Like the United States, Rome was a magnet for immigrants. From humble origins in eighth century BC, the Italian city-state reached its territorial and economic apogee in the second century AD, when it dominated the Mediterranean Basin. As Edward Gibbon noted at the start of his “Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” “In the second century of the Christian era, the Empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valor. The gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury.”

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Actually, there were very few “real” Romans. At its zenith, the city’s population was about one million, free-born and slave, while the provinces, spanning from England to Egypt, contained an additional 60 million inhabitants. For much of Rome’s history, Roman citizenship was a precious commodity and a source of immense pride. Even so, the Romans had a virtually open-door policy to settlers and generally extended citizenship to conquered peoples in stages, awarding the latter with increasing legal protections and political participation in return for loyalty.

Many famous Roman families were the descendants of immigrants, including the Julii from Alba Longa, the Coruncanii from Camerium, and the Porcii from Tusculum. Attius Clausus immigrated to Rome in 504 BC from Regillum, eventually becoming a senator and consul. His descendant was the famous Emperor Claudius, who extended Roman citizenship to one tribe by appealing to the pro-citizenship and immigration mythology of the Roman foundation myth. As Claudius noted, “Our founder Romulus was so wise that he fought as enemies and then hailed as fellow-citizens several nations on the very same day.”

Immigrants Didn’t Topple Rome

Rome’s collapse in the fifth century AD is often ascribed to Rome’s inability to guard its territory from what came to be known as the “barbarian invasions.” The problem, however, was not with the immigrants *per se*. Under normal circumstances, Rome was fully able to deal with foreigners.

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For example, the Romans “pacified” the province of Gaul, a vast territory spanning from the Pyrenees to the river Rhine, with so much vigor and effectiveness that the territory was, for generations, garrisoned by a mere 600 legionaries based in Paris. Within a few short years of defeating the Gaulic leader Vercingetorix at Alesia in 52 BC, Julius Caesar inducted a number of Gaulic chieftains into the Senate—Rome’s highest legislative body.

As today, not all peoples could be, or wanted to be, assimilated. The Germans, for example, posed a perpetual problem for Rome. In the first century BC, Gaius Marius and Julius Caesar scored a number of military victories against the Germans, stopping the latter's spread into Italy and Gaul. The catastrophic defeat of three Roman legions in the Teutoburg Forest in AD 9 permanently ended Roman territorial ambitions east of the Rhine. The Roman failure to subdue and civilize the Germans was to have far-reaching consequences for millennia.

Rather, the problem with Rome in the fifth century AD rested with the decline of the Roman polity in general and Roman leadership in particular.

For much of the third and fourth centuries, Rome was almost constantly in a state of war, with the military, especially the elite Praetorian Guard, increasing its power over the political process and, ultimately, the emperor himself. The economy suffered from repeated bouts of hyperinflation, attempts at price and wage controls, the mounting cost of welfare (chiefly free grain for the citizens to which later rulers added free olive oil, pork, and wine) and confiscation of private property—all of which made doing business in the Empire very difficult.

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The increasing fragility and unpredictability of the political process favored the rise of the corrupt and of the depraved, whose stay in power further undermined the rule of law. By the time Rome fell to the Visigoths in AD 410, the city was a pale reflection of its former self. The capital of the impoverished western half of the Roman Empire moved to Ravenna, while power, wealth, and prestige moved to Constantinople in the east. Rome retained a symbolic value for the nostalgically inclined, but it had long ceased to be a city that Cincinnatus, Augustus, or Marcus Aurelius would have recognized, let alone fight for. Rome fell not because of an influx of immigrants, which was always very high, but because, in the end, "being Roman" meant nothing.

Can We Compare America to Rome?

Is America facing a similar crisis?

We have to recognize that assimilation always looks ineffective from the middle of any mass wave of immigration. Economist Jacob Vigdor, the foremost scholar who compares the rates and trends of immigrant assimilation over time, writes, "While there are reasons to think of contemporary migration from Spanish-speaking nations as distinct from earlier waves of immigration, evidence does not support the notion that this wave of migration poses a true threat to the institutions that withstood those earlier waves. Basic indicators of assimilation, from naturalization to English ability, are if anything stronger now than they were a century ago."

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A 2009 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 98 percent of second-generation Hispanics were fluent English speakers—remarkable for a group that supposedly does not want to learn English. A famous 2007 paper testing the patriotism of Hispanic-Americans found that they are *more* patriotic than their fellow Americans in the same age or education group. Perhaps

family memories or stories of how bad life was in the “old country” makes them appreciate the United States more than those of us whose families have been here for generations.

Perhaps, the immigration debate in the United States has less to do with the actual immigrants and more to do with a loss of confidence brought about by a sense of national decline. Many of the worrying signs are easy to see: a stupendously large national debt approaching \$20 trillion, an economic growth rate that seems permanently stuck below America’s historical average, the lowest labor participation rate since the late-1970s, close to 100 million people on some kind of government dole, perhaps as much as \$127 trillion in unfunded Medicare and Social Security obligations, crony capitalism that privatizes gains and socializes losses (i.e., Wall Street bailout), public-sector unions that enjoy remuneration and perks unattainable to most working Americans, unaccountable and venal bureaucrats who all too often ignore due process and property rights (i.e., Internal Revenue Service, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the Food and Drug Administration), and rising racial tensions.

Republicans and Democrats Both Deserve Blame

Yes, America still leads in innovation and, consequently, high-end medicine, information technology, and, increasingly, cheap and plentiful energy. And, yes, our military is second to none. But international indexes tell a depressing story. At the start of the new millennium, America had the third freest economy in the world. By 2012, our economic freedom had declined to twelfth place. In 2010, we had the fourth most welcoming business environment. Today, we have the seventh. Our country is sliding in freedom of the press, corruption, and many other measures of institutional health.

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Republican Party leaders like to muse about the United States being “the greatest country in the history of the world.” But, along with the Democrats, they have been complicit in making America less extraordinary.

Our slide toward mediocrity, after all, did not start with Barack Obama or even George W. Bush. Is it any surprise that following the massive expansion of the surveillance state, corporate bailouts, foreign wars, and other “bipartisan initiatives,” America ranks in twentieth place on the Cato Institute’s Human Freedom Index?

Our loss of American vigor, vitality, prestige, and confidence has little to do with the illegal tomato-pickers from Mexico or Indian engineers working in Silicon Valley. Immigrants are not the ones who have elected a succession of pathetically inadequate leaders. They are not the ones who have voted themselves a plethora of unsustainable perquisites. If you are looking for a threat to America’s long-term prosperity and tranquility, do not look toward immigrants. Look into the mirror instead.

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