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The Migration Muddle

The movement of people across sovereign lines has defined me since my teen years. I joined the Peace Corps at 19, largely because President Kennedy posed “that question” just as I was finding college to be both too much and too little. From my 2 years in a dusty mining town in Chile to 5 as a community development worker and 30 as a lawyer, I have admired the courage of those in the world who choose a better life, and have loved this country, my country, for giving it to them.

I embrace diversity not as a liberal cause but as a profoundly selfish opportunity to learn from and live with the rich tapestry of human behavior and choices. For those who take a more material approach to public policy issues, the fact that this country has welcomed immigrants for more than three centuries, for whatever economic or social motives, has resulted in our being the most powerful, and wealthiest, nation in the world.

Look around you if you don't believe it. Immigrants settled our nation, though the blight of forced migration stains our history indelibly. They provided the labor to fuel every major economic expansion. They increase our math scores, care for our children, harvest our crops, nurse our infirm and make entertainment anywhere in America a United Nations' experience. And within a generation or two, “they” become “us.”

John Maynard Keynes said it best:

Migration is the oldest action against poverty. It selects those who most want help. It is good for the country to which they go; it helps break the equilibrium of poverty in the country from which they come. What is the perversity in the human soul that causes people to resist so obvious a good?

Even our modern-day economic guru Alan Greenspan touts immigration as pivotal to our economic strength and recovery. Without it, we simply do not have the skills or numbers to prevail in capitalism, now a global game.

I am not blind to the hostility against immigration that has always accompanied our new arrivals. I have studied it all my professional life and think I understand it. It is ugly. It is fear-based. It springs from incuriosity, the cerebral cortex of ignorance. It is nurtured by the greed gene that says someone new takes from your share, while in truth someone new makes the pie bigger.

The only cure to that is education, which makes us rub physical and emotional shoulders so that we must look at each other, often in surprise, and recognize the fundamentals human beings share: a commitment to family, a desire to work hard, a chance to do better for our loved ones and ourselves, and above all a deep understanding of the value of freedom.

I do not advocate open borders. A carefully crafted border policy that can be enforced and that targets genuine terror threats is reasonable. But we do not have that. We have a blunderbuss approach where we need a laser. Indeed, with our knee-jerk, post-9/11 reaction that all foreigners are bad,


we have created such a punitive immigration law that it is unworkable at exit or entry.

Our Patriot Act has not caught a single terrorist, but it has short-circuited our Constitution. Our Department of Homeland Security requires us to remove millions of shoes in airports, but has failed to capture a single al Qaeda member. We have killed detainees, and detained innocents, and justify the humiliations as “isolated incidents.”

I travel a lot outside the country. For better or worse, the rest of the world sees our actions against foreigners with great clarity, great sadness and increasing anger. We are providing all the ingredients to ensure ever-increasing violence against us.

The answer to a broken immigration policy is not more punishment and regulation. We need the opposite. Easing the movement of people who mean us no harm—the way leading companies have eased the movement of capital—is our only hope for a world that must live and move together, if not in harmony then at least not in mayhem. Keeping out tourists and students and scholars and workers is the worst thing we can do to our economy. And keeping out terrorists can be done much more effectively if we do not lump all those who seek entry with the very few who may wish to harm us.

The next President has a full agenda before the term even begins: 1,000 Americans and 5,000 Iraqis dead in what was to be a short and happy war; an economy still limping on fallen arches; and too many nations around the world rethinking the American ideal. In that murky stew, migration policy may not make the top of the list. But as a long-term solution to a world seeking to redefine borders and sovereignty, I think it should be at the very top.

Imagine what we could do if we acted not out of fear of our differences but commitment to our connectedness. We just might bring a vision to the troubling topic that is worthy of our history and faithful to our pluralism. Here is a small voice asking that we start. 



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