

How Our "Nation of Immigrants" Works.  
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We are a nation of immigrants, including even the "Native Americans" who just migrated here from Asia earlier. Human beings are a mobile species, having migrated from Africa to settle every continent 50,000-100,000 years ago. Even these early migrants had trouble with others either already there or coming from elsewhere. How else did the Neanderthals, our cousin species, get wiped out? Our species has always believed that when newcomers arrive, "there goes the neighborhood."

Our own country's absorption of immigrants is a new model for the world. Most came seeking a better life. Others came involuntarily, as slaves, or as starvelings taking any work they could find (the railroad building Irish, Chinese, and former Black slaves). We could not have built this country without them.

Each group of desperate immigrants was greeted with hostility by earlier arrivals, declaring migrants would ruin the culture, bring crime and disease, and be incapable of integrating. These fears proved wrong. Germans, Irish, Italians, Jews, Lebanese, Norwegians and Swedes, Chinese, and Japanese all settled in, went to public schools and colleges, and brought with them cultural gifts (food and arts) that enriches our lives today.

These people wanted to integrate (exceptions: the Amish and militant Islamists), and some within the first generation of arrival (Jews) excelled in every sort of occupation: doctors, lawyers, scientists, actors and artists, as well as distinguished service in the military and Supreme Court. Many of these people arrived with nothing but the shirts on their backs and had only known brutal exclusion, from which they fled.

Our "melting pot" only works when all these immigrants share a common creed: belief in the Constitution, belief that everybody should be treated equally under the law, and belief in service for the common good. Such service includes voting and accepting gracefully winning or losing. The only acceptable ideology for us is that of democratic and participatory governance and rule of law. It unites, not divides.

I happened to watch President Obama's final opportunity during his presidency to award our highest civilian honors (Presidential Medal of Freedom) to 21 Americans. The recipients all sat on the stage together, a range of color, age, height (very tall to very short), gender, and ancestry. This diversity was not the result of a quota system; no "identity politics" here; it was a display of excellence! The medal recognizes "especially meritorious contributions to our national interests and culture."

In the cinema, America's great gift to the world, Obama honored Tom Hanks, Robert De Niro, Robert Redford, and Cicely Tyson (Black and female). Two of our greatest basketball players were honored, Michael Jordan and Kareem Abdul-Jabar, both African-American and one a convert to Islam. Bruce Springsteen and Diana Ross represented music. Philanthropists Bill and Melinda Gates, comedian Ellen DeGeneres (gay), and beloved Dodger broadcaster Vin Scully, were all honored. President Obama noted that all these people helped push America forward and inspired millions around the world.

Also honored were Richard Garwin (physicist), Frank Gehry (architect), Margaret H. Hamilton (mathematician and computer scientist), Maya Lin (designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial), Lorne Michaels (producer of Saturday Night Live), Newton Minow (former Federal communications chairman), and Eduardo Padron (president of Miami Dade College). Posthumous awards honored American Indian advocate Elouise Cobell and Rear Admiral Grace Hopper.

The best tribute to the diversity of America is seen in the unity of excellence. Every one of these people served our society, making it the wonder of the world. There were no exceptions here, no tribes unwilling to recognize others, no ideologies other than devotion to the United States.

Those few thugs who shout at and beat up whom they think are immigrants are just throwbacks to the first Homo Sapiens who wiped out the Neanderthals. What is new in the world is the unity, despite origin, gender, or sexuality, that makes us the amazing country that we are.

Tribalism is a throwback to our most primitive instincts. Love of country is a much nobler quality. E Pluribus Unum. All of us matter.

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