

# Immigrate Assimilate

By Amy Chua

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If you don't speak Spanish, Miami really can feel like a foreign country. In any restaurant, the conversation at the next table is more likely to be in Spanish than English. And Miami's population is only 65 percent Hispanic. El Paso is 76 percent Latino. Flushing, N.Y., is 60 percent immigrant, mainly Chinese.

Chinatowns and Little Italys have long been part of America's urban landscape, but would it be all right to have entire U.S. cities where most people spoke and did business in Chinese, Spanish or even Arabic? Are too many Third World, non-English-speaking immigrants destroying our national identity?

For some Americans, even asking such questions is racist. At the other end of the spectrum, conservative talk-show host Bill O'Reilly fulminates against floods of immigrants who threaten to change America's "complexion" and replace what he calls the "white Christian male power structure."

But for the large majority in between, Democrats and Republicans alike, these questions are painful, and there are no easy answers. At some level, most of us cherish our legacy as a nation of immigrants. But are all immigrants really equally likely to make good Americans? Are we, as Samuel Huntington warns, in danger of losing our core values and devolving "into a loose confederation of ethnic, racial, cultural and political groups, with little or nothing in common apart from their location in

the territory of what had been the United States of America"?

My parents arrived in the United States in 1961, so poor that they couldn't afford heat their first winter. I grew up speaking only Chinese at home (for every English word accidentally uttered, my sister and I got one whack of the chopsticks). Today, my father is a professor at Berkeley, and I'm a professor at Yale Law School. As the daughter of immigrants, a grateful beneficiary of America's tolerance and opportunity, I could not be more pro-immigrant.

Nevertheless, I think Huntington has a point.

Around the world today, nations face violence and instability as a result of their increasing pluralism and diversity. Across Europe, immigration has resulted in unassimilated, largely Muslim enclaves that are hotbeds of unrest and even terrorism. The riots in France

late last year were just the latest manifestation. With Muslims poised to become a majority in Amsterdam and elsewhere within a decade, major West European cities could undergo a profound transformation. Not surprisingly, virulent antiimmigration parties are on the rise.

Not long ago, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union disintegrated when their national identities proved too weak to bind together diverse peoples. Iraq is the latest example of how crucial national identity is. So far, it has found no overarching identity strong enough to unite its Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis.

The United States is in no danger of imminent disintegration. But this is because it has been so successful, at least since the Civil War, in forging a national identity strong enough to hold

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together its widely divergent communities. We should not take this unifying identity for granted.

The greatest empire in history, ancient Rome, collapsed when its cultural and political glue dissolved, and peoples who had long thought of themselves as Romans turned against the empire. In part, this fragmentation occurred because of a massive influx of immigrants from a very different culture. The “barbarians” who sacked Rome were Germanic immigrants who never fully assimilated.

Does this mean that it’s time for the United States to shut its borders and reassert its “white, Christian” identity and what Huntington calls its Anglo-Saxon, Protestant “core values”?

### Anti-immigrant mistakes

No. The anti-immigration camp makes at least two critical mistakes.

First, it neglects the indispensable role that immigrants have played in building American wealth and power. In the 19th century, the United States would never have become an industrial and agricultural powerhouse without the millions of poor Irish, Polish, Italian and other newcomers who mined coal, laid rail and milled steel. European immigrants led to the United States’ winning the race for the atomic bomb.

Today, American leadership in the Digital Revolution — so central to our military and economic preeminence — owes an enormous debt to immigrant contributions. Andrew Grove (co-founder of Intel), Vinod Khosla (Sun Microsystems) and Sergey Brin (Google) are immigrants. Between 1995 and 2005, 52.4 percent of Silicon Valley startups had one key immigrant founder. And Vikram S. Pundit’s recent appointment to the helm of Citigroup means that 14 CEOs of Fortune 100 companies are foreign-born.

The United States is in a fierce global competition to attract the world’s best high-tech scientists and engineers — most of whom are not white Christians. Just this past summer, Microsoft opened a large new software-

development center in Canada, in part because of the difficulty of obtaining U.S. visas for foreign engineers.

Second, anti-immigration talking heads forget that their own scapegoating vitriol will, if anything, drive immigrants further from the U.S. mainstream. One reason we don’t have Europe’s enclaves is our unique success in forging an ethnically and religiously neutral national identity, uniting individuals of all backgrounds. This is America’s glue, and people like Huntington and O’Reilly unwittingly imperil it.

Nevertheless, immigration naysayers also have a point.

America’s glue can be subverted by too much tolerance. Immigration advocates are too often guilty of an uncritical political correctness that avoids hard questions about national identity and imposes no obligations on immigrants. For these well-meaning idealists, there is no such thing as too much diversity.

### Maintaining our heritage

The right thing for the United States to do — and the best way to keep Americans in favor of immigration — is to take national identity seriously while maintaining our heritage as a land of opportunity. U.S. immigration policy should be tolerant but also tough. Here are five suggestions:

#### • **Overhaul admission priorities.**

Since 1965, the chief admission criterion has been family reunification. This was a welcome replacement for the ethnically discriminatory quota system that preceded it. But once the brothers and sisters of a current U.S. resident get in, they can sponsor their own extended families. In 2006, more than 800,000 immigrants were admitted on this basis. By contrast, only about 70,000 immigrants were admitted on the basis of employment skills, with an additional 65,000 temporary visas granted to highly skilled workers.

This is backward. Apart from nuclear families (spouse, minor children, possibly

parents), the special preference for family members should be drastically reduced. As soon as my father got citizenship, his relatives in the Philippines asked him to sponsor them. Soon, his mother, brother, sister and sister-in-law were also U.S. citizens or permanent residents. This was nice for my family, but frankly there is nothing especially fair about it.

Instead, the immigration system should reward ability and be keyed to the country's labor needs, skilled or unskilled, technological or agricultural. In particular, we should significantly increase the number of visas for highly skilled workers, putting them on a fast track for citizenship.

- **Make English the official national language.**

A common language is critical to cohesion and national identity in an ethnically diverse society. Americans of all backgrounds should be encouraged to speak more languages — I've forced my own daughters to learn Mandarin (minus the threat of chopsticks) — but offering Spanish-language public education to Spanish-speaking children is the wrong kind of indulgence. Native language education should be overhauled, and more stringent English proficiency requirements for citizenship should be set up.

- **Immigrants must embrace the nation's civic virtues.**

It took my parents years to see the importance of participating in the larger community. When I was in third grade, my mother signed me up for Girl Scouts. I think she liked the uniforms and merit badges, but when I told her that I was picking up trash and visiting soup kitchens, she was horrified.

For many immigrants, only family matters. Even when immigrants get involved in politics, they often focus on protecting their own and protesting discrimination. That they can do so is one of the great virtues of U.S. democracy. But a mind-set based solely on taking care of your own factionalizes our society.

Like all Americans, immigrants have a responsibility to contribute to the social fabric. It's up to each immigrant community to fight off an "enclave" mentality and give back to their new country. It's not healthy for Chinese to hire only Chinese, or Koreans only Koreans. By contrast, the free health clinic set up by Muslim Americans in Los Angeles — serving the entire poor community — is a model to emulate. Immigrants are integrated at the moment they realize that their success is intertwined with everyone else's.

- **Enforce the law.**

Illegal immigration, along with terrorism, is the chief cause of today's anti-immigration backlash. It is also inconsistent with the rule of law, which, as any immigrant from a developing country will tell you, is a critical aspect of U.S. identity. But if we're serious about this problem, we need to enforce the law against not only illegal aliens, but also against those who hire them.

It's the worst of all worlds to allow U.S. employers who hire illegal aliens — thus keeping the flow of illegal workers coming — to break the law while demonizing the aliens as lawbreakers. An Arizona law that took effect Jan. 1 tightens the screws on employers who hire undocumented workers, but this issue can't be left up to a single state.

- **Make the United States an equal-opportunity immigration magnet.**

That the 11 million to 20 million illegal immigrants are 80 percent Mexican and Central American is itself a problem. This is emphatically not for the reason Huntington gives — that Hispanics supposedly don't share America's core values. But if the U.S. immigration system is to reflect and further our ethnically neutral identity, it must itself be ethnically neutral, offering equal opportunity to Sudanese, Estonians, Burmese and so on. The starkly disproportionate ratio of Latinos — reflecting geographical fortuity and a large measure of lawbreaking — is inconsistent with this principle.

Immigrants who turn their backs on American values don't deserve to be here. But those of us who turn our backs on immigrants misunderstand the secret of America's success and what it means to be American.

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