THE PROBLEM THAT REFUSES TO LEAVE

BY JAMES W. THOMSON

"...The mood of the American public has darkened and become much less accepting of mass immigration."

PARTISAN CONTROVERSIES concerning immigration policies quickly emerged as hot-button issues during the 2008 political season, but the historical back story also is quite compelling. In 1965, Congress passed an extraordinary law with scarcely any public debate—the Immigration and Naturalization Act—which eventually created sweeping demographic changes that have transformed the U.S. However, mounting public concerns about immigration have evolved into sensitive political issues. Additionally, for many Americans, the 1965 Immigration Act represents an as yet dimly understood turning point in the country’s history that can be characterized as a rejection of our past national “Western” identity in favor of a very uncertain “multicultural” future. Census Bureau statistics provide the details: racial and ethnic minorities now constitute about 43% of all Americans younger than 20 years of age and these groups—combined, or taken as an aggregate—will attain majority status of all Americans by 2042, which is sooner than the original projected date of 2050 forecast by demographers.

In November 2007, the Center for Immigration Studies released a comprehensive report detailing the impact of immigration on the U.S. To no one’s surprise, immigration since 2000 was the highest of any seven-year period in American history—10,300,000, with more than half settling in heartland states such as Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and Utah, venues that had not accepted more than a few newcomers since the 19th century. Moreover, census data indicates that racial and ethnic minorities now account for at least 40% of the population in more than one in six of the nation’s 3,141 counties, principally along the U.S.-Mexican border. About 12-20,000,000 of these immigrants are illegal, and a large portion of these are low-skilled and poorly educated. They are working at a higher rate than native-born Americans, but are concentrated in low-pay, entry-level jobs. Although the public is con-
cerned about the high level of immigration, much of the current debate on immigration has been focused narrowly on illegal immigrants.

The partisan divide concerning this issue is clear enough. Republicans mostly are united in demanding tougher border controls and stiffer penalties against companies that employ undocumented workers—Sen. John McCain of Arizona being a notable exception. Additionally, many in the GOP want stiffer law and order enforcement at all levels, including building fences along the Mexican border; some seek national identity cards as well as a national computer network that would allow the Federal government to validate the identities of job seekers. However, the Republicans have no simple fix for what to do with millions of undocumented immigrants already living and working in the U.S. They oppose amnesty for the illegals, but are quite aware that the deportation of millions of illegal immigrants would be unworkable, and that it severely would damage an already reeling economy.

The Democrats have been much less strident than their opponents, yet oddly reluctant to be specific in dealing with many immigrant issues. However, the Democratic Party is on record in favor of immigration reform legislation, such as the failed Senate bill that was defeated by the Republicans over the amnesty issue in June 2007. This bill favored assimilation and eventual citizenship (and was endorsed by Pres. George W. Bush), but it ruled out building high fences along the border and it did acknowledge the need to resolve the issues of the illegal workers who live and work in the U.S. yet have no legal rights as citizens. Clearly, the Democratic Party is following a strategy of self-interest since their party stands to gain the most politically by endorsing immigration policies.

Over the last two decades, both parties increasingly have become racially polarized—the Republican Party base predominantly is white while the Democrats have gained the support of more than three-quarters of the non-white population, as well as a sizable minority of white voters, especially white Catholics in the Northeast.

According to some reports, by 2100, the U.S. may have twice as many people as today—some 600,000,000—although one Census Bureau projection pegs the total closer to 1,000,000,000. Immigration will continue to drive population growth, but fewer immigrants will arrive from Latin America and more will come from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. A small percentage will come from Europe, and the portion of the population that can trace its ethnic origins exclusively to Europe is expected to diminish rapidly. Note also that whites...
have a fertility growth rate of about 1.5% per year, far below the replacement rate of 2.1%.

An interesting sidebar to all of these demographic shifts is the troubled relationship between white voters and the Democratic Party. White voters have been conspicuously lukewarm in their support of the Democrats ever since the end of the Great Depression and passing of Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt. Heading into 2008, only since 1945 had the Democrats been able to carry a majority of white voters for their candidate in a presidential election—during the 1964 landslide victory of Lyndon B. Johnson, when LBJ was able to convince an unwary electorate that the Republicans wanted war in Vietnam while the Democrats were the party of peace. For many liberals, this loss of political power and influence by whites might even be welcomed. For instance, Pres. Bill Clinton once told a crowd of cheering college students in California in the 1990s that he looked forward to the day when whites would become another minority.

Not surprisingly, many other Americans would beg to differ, as Patrick Buchanan has in a number of books suggesting that the U.S. is quite likely to fragment along racial and ethnic lines, much as the former Soviet Union did once its traditional ethno-cultural core of ethnic Russians lost dominance. Although most liberals regard Buchanan as a mere “nativist,” his fears have received some support from an unlikely source—a liberal Asian-American Yale University economist. Attorney Amy Chua cautions in her Day of Empire that immigration, although often beneficial, could result in the breakup or fragmentation of American society. After all, she points out, it has happened many times before. Examples beyond the former Soviet Union include the Roman, Mongol, and British empires. Still, most population specialists contend that the most likely long term result will be the “browning of America,” with the different races meeting and mingling joyfully as such groups always have done—but perhaps not without some lingering acrimony before complete acceptance is achieved.

By 2050, according to the most probable Census Bureau forecast, the U.S. will have about 404,000,000 people: by 2100, 571,000-000. The number of individuals over 65 will be about equal to the amount younger than 18; more than 5,000,000 Americans will be 100 or older, but high group intermarriage rates, as noted above, eventually should blur many ethnic and racial distinctions, as evidenced already in such sunny minority-majority locales as California and Hawaii. By 2020, the non-Hispanic white portion of the U.S. population will be about 60%; before 2060 (or by 2040, according to Buchanan’s estimate in Day of Reckoning), the combined portion of today’s minority groups will comprise a majority of the total American population. The increasing portion of the population that is nonwhite already has had significant political implications—many liberal Democrats (who comprise one-fifth of all voters) cherish “diversity” groups (a politically correct term used as a euphemism for non-whites) for their bloc voting strength. Meanwhile, the other Democrats of the once potent New Deal coalition—including Roman Catholics, union members, blue-collar workers, and African-Americans—are more ambivalent about immigration. The business-oriented sector of the Republican Party still welcomes immigrants, while many moderate and conserva tive Republicans continue to hold some reservations about cultural and identity issues.

Multicultural mania

The tenets of multiculturalism provide the rationale for welcoming nonwhite immigration and for the acceptance of all non-Western cultures. The leaders of multiculturalism, such as Ben Wattenberg and Nathan Glazer, are enthusiastic about the U.S.’s destiny. In The First Universal Nation, Wattenberg, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, claims that these new immigrants from every race and region of the world eventually will prove to be a source of strength in determining the nation’s future. For Wattenberg, the U.S. will become a near utopian “First Universal Nation” because it will owe its allegiance to the values of all human societies. In We Are All Multiculturalists Now, Glazer, professor of sociology at Harvard University, is much more cautious in describing the complex, vengeful, and politically-driven ideological features of multiculturalism: “Multiculturalism is the price America is paying for its inability or unwillingness to incorporate into its society African-Americans in the same way and to the same degree it has incorporated so many groups. [Multiculturalism] reflects and is responsive to a variety of other developments: the remarkable rise of the women’s movement . . . the impact of the new immigration, the declining self-confidence or arrogance of the United States as the best as well as the richest and most powerful country.”

In this context, Glazer’s opinions can be viewed as an expression of the “left-liberal” multicultural canon, which emerged during the 1960s to become the dominant set of values shared, accepted, and promoted by the U.S.’s cultural elite, which includes most liberals, many academics, much of the media, and numerous Democratic Party leaders. For them, multicultural values have supplanted the left-wing political concepts of the 20th century—socialism and communism—that “engaged” many Western intellectuals for more than a century before the dismal failure of those beliefs, culminating in the collapse of the Marxist societies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

However, many other authorities have expressed more nuanced opinions of the immigration dilemma. Of the skeptics, perhaps the best known is Harvard political science professor Samuel Huntington, often reviled as a “nativist” by liberals. He contends that resolving the current immigration dilemma should prove to be the most challenging political task of this century. In The Clash of Civilizations, Huntington warns of the dangers of an ethnically divided society. Huntington followed up Clash with “Who Are We?”—a study in which he maintains that “Mexican immigration looms as a unique and disturbing challenge to our cultural integrity, our national identity, potentially to our future as a country.”

The most relevant issue here is not whether the U.S. will be “Hispanicized” by immigration, but whether America will become a divided society encompassing two distinct communities from separate civilizations. This situation already is evident, however. Millions of whites have fled California and other states, cities, and areas heavily impacted by immigrants; street violence between blacks and Latinos over the remaining urban spoils is commonplace; and the leaders of militant Hispanic organizations such as La Raza can claim confidently that the Reconquista (Reconquest of the Southwest) deservedly is underway in the southern tier of states stretching some 3,000 miles from California to Florida. Although the U.S. long has been termed a nation of immigrants, that is a very misleading notion because the immigrants always were predominantly white and European until the late 1970s. Times have changed, though. In the four decades following the Immigration Act, the polling data indicates that public opinion has shifted decisively against immigration; about 60% of the public are opposed to mass immigration and many Americans view it as a critical issue. Additionally, polls show that more than 80% of citizens fear that the country is heading in the wrong direction and that our national future is in serious doubt. There has been a resounding loss of confidence in our major political institutions, from the White House to the halls of Congress.

The economic data, even before the sub-prime crisis triggered the current recession and massive bank and investment house failures, similarly is disheartening: real per capita income (taking inflation into account) hardly has increased since 1975; economic inequality has widened significantly; with the rich taking a much larger share of national income; and American citizens without college degrees (roughly three-quarters of the workforce) must compete with immigrants for many jobs at low wages. So, it comes as no surprise that the mood of the American public has darkened and become much less accepting of mass immigration. Of course, it could be that many understand immigration better than our politicians because they must deal with its effects every day. As for the fraternity of economists, they should be aware that their arcane Factor Price Equilibrium Theory does predict rather well what is happening in the real world—falling real wages and growing pressure on many of the measures of economic well-being that constitute the material nature of the diminishing American Dream. ★

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