

Byrd, R. (2001, July 23). Address to the United States Senate.

In his delightful work *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville begins his thoughts on the origins of Anglo-Americans with these words:

The emigrants who came at different periods to occupy the territory now covered by the American Union differed from each other in many respects; their aim was not the same, and they governed themselves on different principles. These men had, however, certain features in common, and they were all placed in an analogous situation. The tie of language is, perhaps, the strongest and the most durable that can unite mankind. All the emigrants spoke the same language; they were all children of the same people.

For generations, the United States has had the good fortune to be able to draw upon not only the talents of native-born Americans but also the talents of foreign-born citizens. Immigrants from many nations built our railroads, worked in our factories, mined our coal, made our steel, advanced our scientific and technological capabilities, and added literature, art, poetry, and music to the fabric of American life.

Of course, many of these new Americans struggled with our language and customs when they first arrived, but they learned our language, they absorbed our constitutional principles, they abided by our laws, and they contributed in a mighty way to our success as a nation.

Indeed, I believe that, particularly in the case of those who came to our shores fleeing tyranny, there has existed a unique appreciation for the freedom and opportunity available in this country, an appreciation which makes those special Americans among our most patriotic citizens.

In other words, do not go to Weirton, West Virginia, and burn the flag. No, not in Weirton. We have at least twenty-five or thirty different ethnic groups in that small steel town in the Northern Panhandle. . . .

Unprecedented Numbers

The United States today is in the midst of another immigration wave—the largest since the early 1900s. According to the latest numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau, immigrants now comprise about 10 percent of the total U.S. population. That is about 28.4 million immigrants living in the United States.

During the 1990s, an average of more than one million immigrants—legal and illegal—settled in the United States each year. Over the next 50 years, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that the U.S. population will increase from its present 284 million to more than 400 million. Immigration is projected to contribute to two-thirds of that growth.

These are unprecedented numbers. When I was born in 1917, there were about 102 million people in this country. When I graduated from high school in 1934, there were about 130 million people in this country. And today, there are 284 million people in America. This nation has never attempted to incorporate more than 28 million newcomers at one time into its society, let alone to prepare for an additional 116 million citizens over the span of the next fifty years.

Although many of the immigrants who have entered our country over the last ten years are skilled and are adjusting quickly, others have had problems. In the year 2000, according to the Center for Immigration Studies, 41.4 percent of established immigrants lived in or near poverty, compared to 28.8 percent of natives. The situation had completely reversed itself from thirty years before, when, in 1970, established immigrants were actually less likely than natives to have low incomes, with about 25.7 percent living in or near poverty compared with 35.1 percent of the native population.

The deterioration in the position of immigrants can be explained, in part, by a significant decline in the education of immigrants relative to natives and by the needs of the U.S. economy. In 1970, 7.1 percentage points separated the high school completion rate of established immigrants versus natives. By 2000, established immigrants were more than three times as likely as natives not to have completed high school, with 34.4 percent of established immigrants and 9.6 percent of natives lacking a high school diploma.

The less skilled the immigrants, the worse their employment prospects, the bigger the burden on schools, and the greater the demand for social services. The National Research Council recently estimated, in December 1999, that the net fiscal cost of immigration ranges from \$11 billion to \$20.2 billion per year. That is enough money to fund the operations of the State of West Virginia for about 3 to 6 to 8 years.

Population Growth and Overcrowding

As chairman of the Appropriations Committee and as a member of the Budget Committee, I well know of the extreme shortage of money to meet the needs of our own population today. Because of the 10-year tax cut that was enacted earlier in 2001, I am wrestling mightily with trying to provide enough money to educate our children, meet our health care needs, provide transportation to our population, and battle crime in our streets.

And, so, ... I grow increasingly concerned when I read media reports about discussions within the administration to grant amnesty to three million Mexican immigrants who illegally reside in the United States.

I am very concerned that an open immigration policy only makes it more difficult to adequately meet the needs of our nation. I have found the attempt to fund critical needs for America to be among the most frustrating challenges that I have ever undertaken. I have implored this administration to take into account these critical needs.

In many school districts, overcrowding is already a major problem. As our classrooms fill to the brim, they are becoming breeding grounds for violence. Economic growth in some regions of the country, and the resulting influx of workers, has created a surge in the number of school-aged children. A less stringent immigration policy will only make this problem worse.

This country's personal and commercial highway travel continues to increase at a faster rate than highway capacity, and our highways cannot sufficiently support our current or projected travel needs. Between 1970 and 1995, passenger travel nearly doubled in the United States, and road use is expected to climb by nearly two-thirds in the next 20 years. This congestion will grow even worse as immigration traffic increases.

America Cannot Afford More People

And how will we provide for the health-care costs of these new citizens? Whether they arrive here legally or illegally, immigrants can receive federally funded emergency health-care service. As the immigrant population continues to increase, so will health-care expenditures to the federal government.

We also have an obligation to ensure the safety of the residents living in the United States—both native citizens and immigrants. Yet the Attorney General must soon release from jail and into our streets 3,400 immigrants who have been convicted of such crimes as rape, murder, and assault because their own countries will not take them back. We cannot protect our residents if our country is used as the dumping ground for the criminals of other nations.

We are struggling with ways to preserve and protect our environment. But population growth only exacerbates the increasing demands on our aging water and sewer systems, and further threatens the safety of our drinking water. Our "green spaces" are diminishing as more and more homes are being built to house our growing population. We lament the loss of and the damage to our natural resources, yet we seem unable to see the connection to our loose immigration policy.

We have a weakening economy, an increasing unemployment rate, a problem with adequately educating our people, a congested transportation infrastructure, a lack of adequate health care, and an administration that certainly is not totally unsympathetic to these needs. We cannot afford to take on more. I understand the desire to help the millions of people around the world who crave the blessings of freedom that we, as Americans, enjoy. At this time in our history, I do not know how we can possibly afford to provide for additional people who may need assistance with education, health problems, and job skills.

If we invite new masses to citizenship, we have an obligation to adequately provide for them. Yet we are presently frustrated with an inability even to provide for those who have come before and those who have been born in this country....

Sending the Wrong Message

An interdepartmental group formed by the White House to suggest reforms of immigration policy is expected to include the option of granting legal residency to undocumented Mexican immigrants who have been working in the United States. The report raises the possibility of these illegal immigrants ultimately becoming citizens. Such a proposal would take this nation's immigration laws in the wrong direction.

The Immigration and Nationality Act, our primary law for regulating immigration into this country, sets out a very specific process by which immigrants may live and work in this country. *To* capriciously grant amnesty to three million immigrants who circumvented these processes, who have resided and worked in this country illegally, sends exactly the wrong message.

Such an amnesty suggests that it is possible to gain permanent residency in the United States regardless of whether you arrived here legally or illegally.

That is the message that was sent in 1986 when President Ronald Reagan proposed a blanket amnesty to 2.7 million illegal immigrants based largely on the mere fact that they had lived in this country at least since 1982. I supported that amnesty, after accepting the arguments of the Reagan administration that such an amnesty would reduce illegal immigration when combined with tougher sanctions on employers who hire illegal aliens.

What happened instead was that the United States sent a message to the world that illegal immigrants could gain legal status in the United States without having to go through the normal processes. Consequently, illegal immigration jumped from an estimated five million illegals in 1986 to somewhere between seven million and thirteen million illegals today; and these estimates do not even include the 2.7 million illegals who were granted amnesty in 1986.

So, ... we should not repeat our earlier mistakes.

If amnesty is given to a class on the basis of their having broken the law, then we are rewarding breaking the law, we are rewarding a criminal act.

This is not the message that we should send to those who would consider illegally entering this country. What is worse, such an amnesty undermines our present immigration laws and suggests that these laws mean nothing if, to those who break them, the federal government simply grants amnesty with a wink and a nod.

Citizenship Should Mean Something

Millions of potential immigrants are waiting patiently for a chance to come to the United States legally. Why should illegal aliens have preference over these aliens who are waiting patiently? Amnesty sends the message that it is far easier and faster to become a U.S. citizen by immigrating illegally than it is to wait for legal approval.

Now,... American citizenship should mean something. It should not be something merely handed out as a means of political expediency. It should not be something that one can achieve as some kind of squatter's right, particularly when access to the soil they claim was gained illegally.

Being an American is something to be cherished, something to be revered. Citizenship in the United States brings with it certain inalienable rights. Those who would come to our country to try to establish citizenship are often enticed by the promise of those rights.

The notion that each citizen is guaranteed certain protections is powerfully alluring. But what many fail to understand is that those rights are protected only so long as Americans are willing and able to defend them. Our populace must be constantly vigilant for those things that threaten to endanger our rights, our Constitution, and our form of government. Such threats go well beyond military invasion. They include the preservation of ideals such as liberty and equality and justice, which can be so easily chipped away.

Rights and Responsibilities

In order to become citizens, most aliens are required to devote time to a study of our country and its history. They receive, at least, elementary guidance to help them appreciate the precious title of "citizen" and all that it entails. What goes all too often unspoken in this debate is that U.S. citizenship entails much more than rights. It entails responsibilities.

Our citizenry should be instilled with at least a basic understanding of the precepts that formed the foundation for this country. Lacking that, they are ill-prepared to be guardians of our future.

We Americans are justifiably proud of our history as a melting pot. If we go back far enough, we are all products of that melting pot, at least most of us. But the melting must be done in a way that ensures that these new citizens are ready to be productive, functioning Americans. We owe it not only to today's citizens but also to future citizens, including those who come to our shores expecting the opportunity for which America is so renowned. . . .

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