

The Case for *Patriotic Assimilation*

By Matthew Spalding



The American theory of citizenship necessitates that the words *immigration* and *assimilation* be linked in our political lexicon and closely connected in terms of public policy: Where there is one, there must be the other.

A policy of *homogeneity*—the complete breaking down of cultural differences to create sameness—demands too much and requires a uniformity that is impracticable, going beyond what is necessary and conducive to free government. Such an unrealistic ideal makes immigration, in both theory and practice, virtually impossible. *Multiculturalism*, at the other extreme, is unacceptable for the opposite reason: It claims that all cultures (as with all values) are equally valid; there can be nothing substantially in common between Americans because the only thing that unites them is their diversity. By this argument, any idea of citizenship that goes beyond its narrowest technical meaning to imply the existence or formation of a common creed is objectionable because it imposes our values on others. In the end, the very idea of allegiance, especially national or

patriotic, is problematic. At best, we are all transnational citizens of the world.

Each of these views—what amounts to cultural determinism, on the one hand, and cultural relativism, on the other—is incompatible with self-government and the rule of law. Both deny the possibility of a people holding common principles despite their cultural differences.

It is *assimilation*—the idea of acquiring certain habits and attitudes while respecting other differences, of becoming similar in crucial but not all respects—that is consistent with the American understanding of both human equality and popular consent, and thus civil and religious liberty. Assimilation has nothing to do with forcing a stifling uniformity of opinions and passions upon immigrants. Nor is it about destroying the ethnic heritages and cultural identities of the various groups and diverse subcultures that have always been part of the American experience. What it does do is appeal to the common principles and mutual understandings that transcend these differences and that bind us together as one people.



Indeed, it is the maintenance of what we hold in common that allows for the flourishing of our differences and prevents the American “melting pot” from becoming a boiling cauldron of multiculturalism.

This compatibility in principle, though, portends a certain degree of uncertainty in practice; hence the challenge of immigrant education. This is because the progression from alien to citizen is more a change of mind and heart than a mere activity or replicable skill set. As a result, assimilation, while it is to be encouraged and promoted, and while certain meaningful elements can and should be required in the naturalization process, ultimately can’t be compelled. It, too, is a matter of consent; in the end, immigrants must choose to become Americans. This point is further strengthened by the fact that while government has certain key responsibilities, many of the more important activities associated with assimilation occur on their own, beyond the reach of the state, as if by some “invisible hand” of American civil society.

It is the responsibility of lawmakers to set the legal parameters and create the best possible conditions for successful immigrant assimilation. The basic components that are necessary for such a policy should be apparent from this analysis of the early understanding of the theory and practice of citizenship and naturalization.

A MEANINGFUL NATURALIZATION PROCESS

Individuals who are not citizens do not have a *right* to American residency or citizenship without the consent of the American people as expressed through the laws of the

United States. Through its laws, the people of the United States consent for those who are aliens to join them, under certain conditions, as residents and in many cases as fellow citizens. Congress has the constitutional responsibility both “to establish an uniform rule of naturalization” that sets the terms and conditions of immigration and citizenship and

to ensure the fairness and integrity of the legal process by which immigrants enter the country, establish residency, and gain citizenship. Especially for the sake of those who obey the law and follow the rules to enter the country, naturalization laws must be equitably and consistently enforced.

At the same time, this authority should also be seen as an opportunity

to make the naturalization process more meaningful, emphasizing the laws’ and the process’s intended role in forming citizens “of good moral character, attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States, and well disposed to the good order and happiness of the United States,” as it says in the Immigration and Nationality Act. This can be done by emphasizing the educational, ceremonial, and symbolic aspects of naturalization over and above the mere technical efficiencies of the bureaucratic process. A renewed emphasis on the terms of citizenship also demands rethinking and clarifying, both in our political rhetoric and within the law, the limits of citizenship, and that includes addressing the growing problem of “dual allegiance” citizenship and the conditions under which naturalized citizens (and native-born citizens, for that matter) violate those terms and might be expatriated.

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AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PRINCIPLES OF FREE GOVERNMENT

“Every species of government has its specific principles,” Jefferson noted. “Ours perhaps are more peculiar than those of any other in the universe.” Citizenship education occurs primarily at home and through childhood schooling. Without the natural advantage of having been born and raised in this country, immigrants as a matter of public policy must be given a specific education in the history, political ideas, and institutions of the United States. They must know who we are and what we believe as a people and a nation. They must know that legitimate government is grounded in the protection of equal natural rights and the consent of the governed—the principles of the Declaration of Independence—and must understand and appreciate how the Constitution and our institutions of limited government work to protect liberty and the rule of law.

That is why, by law, citizen candidates must demonstrate “a knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of the history, and the principles and form of government, of the United States.” This knowledge is demonstrated by a history test for new citizens, a test which should be reevaluated and strengthened with this goal in mind; at the same time, immigrants should be prepared for the test with educational materials and classes. The objective, as the great educator Noah Webster put it, is to implant in the mind “the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government and with an inviolable attachment to their own country.” History fosters attachment, and attachment—a necessary precondition to sustained

civic engagement—fosters patriotism. But as constitutional signer James Wilson reminds us, “Law and liberty cannot rationally become the objects of our *love*, unless they first become the objects of our *knowledge*.”

A COMMON LANGUAGE

“The bond of language,” Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “is perhaps the strongest and most lasting that can unite men.” Republican government and ordered liberty—not to mention the articulation of common political principles—require clear communication, mutual deliberation and civic education, and that demands that citizens share one common language. English is that language in the United States. This doesn’t necessarily require that English be the official or exclusive language of the nation, but it does mean that English needs to be the primary and authoritative language, particularly in public and political discourse as well as the laws, records and proceedings of government.

To comprehend the naturalization process, to assimilate into American society, and to become involved in our democracy, immigrants must learn, understand, and be able to communicate in English. Thus, candidates for citizenship must demonstrate “an understanding of the English language, including an ability to read, write and speak words in ordinary usage in the English language.” Rather than encouraging the retention of native languages with programs like bilingual education, there should be incentives and programs to assist immigrants in learning English. The objective should be to build a nation of English speak-

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ers: “[T]o preserve a sameness of language throughout our own wide spreading country,” John Marshall noted, “that alone would be an object worthy of public attention.”

ENGAGED CHARACTER-FORMING INSTITUTIONS

America’s principles are the defining characteristic of its national identity, but that identity is sustained by a thriving civil society. From the very beginning, America’s creed and culture have developed together, nourishing each other for their common good. It is not surprising, then, that candidates for citizenship must show that “they have been and still are of good moral character.”

In the law, this condition is defined by that which would preclude a finding of good moral character: as being a habitual drunkard; a gambler or polygamist; convicted of or admitting to a crime of moral turpitude; involved in prostitution, smuggling, or drug trafficking; giving false testimony or failing to support dependents. A healthy and supportive social infrastructure is necessary to maintain and strengthen good character. Thus, one of the best ways to assist immigrants is to strengthen and involve faith-based and private civil society institutions, both directly and indirectly, in the cause of assimilation.

It should be a concern when large numbers of immigrants from the same country, speaking the same foreign language, and with many of the same habits live in enclaves isolated from American society. After all, it is the diffusion of immigrant groups among the population—not the mixing per se but their day-to-day interactions with native American citizens—that makes their political effect

less discordant and their assimilation more likely. It is through their neighbors, friends, and fellow countrymen—in local communities, churches, schools, and private organizations, not to mention in the workplace and through simple economic exchanges—that immigrants acquire the habits, practices, and spirit of Americans, strengthening their virtues,

their work ethic, and social responsibilities. Civic education in particular is strengthened as immigrants observe and then participate in American political life, seeing equality before the law and consent being translated into local, state, and national policies. In this way, as Washington predicted, immigrants “get assimilated to our customs, measures and

laws: in a word, soon become one people.”

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

While it will come as no surprise that most individuals and families that immigrate to the United States come seeking economic opportunity (“inspired with an assurance of encouragement and employment,” just as Hamilton forecasted), it should not be overlooked that economic opportunity—stable employment, better household income, job flexibility, property ownership, upward mobility—is also an important factor in the success of immigrant assimilation. The fruits of hard work and entrepreneurship for the sake of improving the conditions of self and family, combined with the opportunities that have long been associated with the pursuit of the American Dream, all good in and of themselves, have the added virtue of harnessing self-interest to bind immigrants to their new home—the proximate cause of their economic liberty—and help to equalize

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the social differences between immigrants and native citizens.

In this way, commerce provides the initial glue of attachment, even if it remains “the defect of better motives,” to use Madison’s formulation in *Federalist* No. 51. For their sake, and for our own, the best thing we can do for new citizens is to offer them a hand up rather than a handout and make sure that immigrants (especially poor and low-skilled immigrants) are not drawn into the ranks of the underclass by the perverse incentives of the modern welfare state and its policies that discourage self-reliance, family cohesiveness, and financial independence.

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NATIONAL ALLEGIANCE

“Citizens by birth or choice, of a common country,” Washington reminds us, “that country has the right to concentrate your affections.” The very word citizen, stemming from the Latin *civis* and the Greek *polis*, is associated with membership and participation in one particular political association, as city-state, polity, or, today, nation. American citizenship is by definition bound to the United States; thus, becoming a citizen of the United States necessarily means primary allegiance to the American political order or regime. Allegiance is the duty that citizens owe to that country which protects and secures their individual freedoms and fundamental rights. In the United States, the allegiance of citizenship stems in particular from a profound attachment and deference not to political leaders or some abstract state, but to the Constitution and the rule of law.

This is seen in the solemn oath of new citizens to “absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a

subject or a citizen,” to “support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies foreign and domestic” and “bear true faith and allegiance to the same.” As the culmination of the naturalization process (the taking of the oath is the moment that the foreigner becomes a citizen), the importance and substantive meaning of these historic words cannot be overestimated. Not only should the oath be promulgated, its meaning taught in the naturalization process, and new citizens held to its pledges, but the concept of allegiance should be promoted as a central part of the public rhetoric of citizenship.

“All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship,” to quote Washington again. Yet the United States “requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.”

MAKING PATRIOTS

By these conditions, an effective naturalization process would aim to create new citizens who would understand the principles of free government, speak a common language, reflect good character and civic virtue, and have a real stake in America’s economic success. As a result, immigrants would become more than mere inhabitants living in isolated communities. They would be *Americans*, drawing their primary national identity from the United States, even as they retained their ancestors’ language and culture. They would become citizens in the fullest sense of the term, owing their allegiance to their new homeland, sharing in the political rights of its people, deserving its protection, entitled to—and celebrating—the privileges and opportunities of free government.



Assimilation is necessarily patriotic in the sense that it fosters not only “that temperate love of liberty, so essential to real republicanism,” to use Hamilton’s phrase, but also a genuine attachment to *this* country and to *these* people. The objective is not “my country, right or wrong,” but “my country.” That is, for the immigrant to come to regard this nation as *my* country. The goal is an enlightened patriotism based on an understanding of and commitment to America, what it stands for, and who we are as a people.

As well, assimilation is patriotic in that it reflects *our* national self-confidence and is a measure of *our* commitment to America. How can we expect the immigrant to love America if we do not love it ourselves—if we do not strive to make it worthy of affection? Reviving and deepening our understanding of citizenship and strengthening the conditions for civic formation is a way to remind all, native and immigrant alike, why this regime—its principles and laws, its history and statesmen, its meaning and promise—is good and worth defending. It is in this sense that a policy of assimilation demands as much or more from Americans as it does from those who want to become American.

In the end, a confident policy to assimilate immigrants must be understood as part of a larger renewal of our principles, a reaffirmation of what *we* hold to be self-evident. After all, it is not the technical requirement to affirm a peculiar set of historical claims that ties immigrants to America as much as it is our common recognition of transcendent truths that bind us all together and across time to the patriots of 1776.

In 1858, less than three years before the outbreak of civil war and the gravest crisis in our history, Abraham Lincoln contemplated

the meaning of citizenship and the natural attachment of a people to the land of their forefathers. But what of those others “whose ancestors have come hither and settled here”? Why should they become attached to some distant past to which they have no native connections?

What Lincoln said then of all those who were not blood descendants of the Founders, which is to say virtually everyone today, speaks to all of us:

The concept of allegiance should be promoted as a central part of the public rhetoric of citizenship.... The goal is an enlightened patriotism based on an understanding of and commitment to America, what it stands for, and who we are as a people.

If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are

part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.

Matthew Spalding, Ph.D., is Director of the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

