



AT HOME IN A NATION FREE, DIVERSE & CONFLICTED

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This is not an unimportant subject. Religion is important at any time and place in history and, at times is quite volatile. Religion and politics both are powerful but they have different kinds of power, and it always has behooved politics to handle religion with care.

There is a saying that if you can look all around you and feel that everything is okay, you don't know what's going on. Arizona is a state in turmoil, as is Phoenix as a city—a turmoil understandable due to change. We're not the only such city and state, nor the first. Truth be told, it is an old story.

Ours however is a border state and borders are the first line of defense and of reaction. Borders need not be national. Missouri, my home, was a border state in the Civil War. There were neighboring states, but things changed, and neighbors became enemies. The enemy became, finally, Missourians themselves and I learned early that the War was one of “father against son and brother against brother,” though surely it was the same for mothers, daughters and sisters. Horrendous stories were told of sons leaving home to fight for one side and returned only to shot by a parent or sibling because family loyalties changed in their absence. Such is diversity of a pernicious sort.

As children we learn how America is, proudly, the “melting pot” from great migrations and how it built the country; then we learn there was an ugly face to that. Somehow we came out of it all and the children of those early generations work and play together, marry and worship, as if nothing had happened. Out of all the pain and change, *we grew*. We would think lessons were learned, but another generation comes, and the stranger is new and different, whether in appearance, language or in our imaginations, and it creates change again, and change creates pain and we feel threatened. At last, and again, we seek laws and excuses to protect ourselves from *The Stranger*.

WORLDWIDE MIGRATIONS

Migration has caused the greatest changes both in people and history the world over. Everyone in the U.S., except for Native Americans, is an immigrant. The first reasons for settled peoples to migrate have been the same ever since. It began with peasants, as you can imagine, who lived marginal but stable and tolerable existences around Europe. They did so for centuries and endured until things finally imploded and the pain of desperation drove them from everything they knew—not just people but from places, customs and habits. The changes usually are economic, and so it was then as there was need for wealthier and more powerful people to consolidate holdings and force others out for pennies on the dollar.

The peasant migration from their hamlets and off their small farms, to cities of their own countries and then to other cities of Europe, which overcrowded those centers and dislocated more people, is a heart-wrenching tale. Ireland at one time was the most densely populated country in Europe. *That we think* that people move so easily, is a benighted statement. Their social structure disappears, they are easily taken advantage of, and death and disease await so many. Chronicles merely of ocean passage to America are horrific and more gripping than novels.

WHY PEOPLE MIGRATE

And reasons largely are the same for leaving one's place and going elsewhere, and for others being threatened by their arrival. We are enamored of early "Pilgrims" and "Puritans" here but they were not numerous. The greater migration came later. In my study last summer I checked census figures for 1790, which was the first real one in America, with close attention to *surnames* as well as to personal and professional status. Our population then was under 4 million and all but 700,000 were white and predominantly English, that is, 83% of them. The word "English" was confusing, however: it could mean one's designated blood; or "persons speaking English;" or could mean just "American"—it was, after all, the time of George Washington.

But Pennsylvania and New York had a lot of Germans and Dutch, smatterings of French (meaning Huguenots) and Ulster Irish. Scots names came in time to fill rolls of the newly famous and they felt they deserved no small recognition. Generously, Ben Franklin looked out on it all, and unlike those less tolerant, called it "a medley of nations..."—a term that preceded "melting pot."

But why had they come here? Speaking for the larger population who were English, things were not fair to them in England. Charles I liked to ignore Parliament when he wanted to, and at one such time he created a tax called a "Forced Loan," as well as a "ship tax"—ways to hit up people for the royal treasury. And they were serious measures; to oppose them meant many were imprisoned, and taking passage to the Colonies became an alternative. So they came here *to avoid government oppression, unfair taxation and a better life*. Since many, as required, refused to take "oaths of allegiance and supremacy" to England, they were "*undocumented*." So in the eyes of the king, they were criminal, though we don't call them that; we call them *brave people seeking freedom*. In all, *some* were eminent persons and sometimes of wealth, but largely not, yet they contributed mightily, without knowing it, to what would become the Colonies and, subsequently, the USA.

Then there were Africans. Their migration was not all about enforced slavery, for ancient Africans themselves were slave traders, especially of war prisoners. But the children never could be sold and often were given their freedom. The slave trade as we know it began in mid-15th century, but the first shipload to arrive on our shores were *indentured*, that is, hired, and worked side by side with white laborers and in time could earn their freedom; *most of that first generation worked out their terms and were freed*.

Again, the economics changed. Things got bad here and landowners saw forced slavery as the solution. Africans were strong, inexpensive and in unlimited supply. Their skin color lessened the possibility of successful escape. The cotton gin made slavery indispensable, and for 200 years between 1650 and the Civil War, 10-12 *million* more slaves were imported. In the middle of that was our Revolutionary War and its irony was that, while denying those blacks the most basic human rights, the colonists sought religious, economic and political freedom for themselves. And it is painful for us to remember that the Declaration of Independence was heavy on freedom but did not address the issue of slavery in *certain* terms.

MIGRATING AMERICANS

Thus Africans already were here—*immigration under duress*. In time, why weren't they freed? Only 8% were free by the first census in 1790. But as their numbers grew, whites feared revolt and created white militias, repressive laws, and in time those fun folks called the Ku Klux Klan—and remember the KKK was first an anti-immigrant terrorist group. And be not fooled: during the Civil War, Emancipation had been *a military necessity, not a human rights issue*.

If plantation slavery was terrible, sharecropping was a horrible system that extended slavery without owning slaves, but even that came to an end with the mechanical cotton picker. Then for the first time, Africans in America became *voluntary* migrants—from South to North, “the largest and most rapid mass internal movement of people in history,” in sheer numbers more than any other ethnic group that came to the U.S., whether Italians, Irish, Jews or Poles. If you can, run, don’t walk, to see Jacob Lawrence’s great artistic series on the black American migration. Why did they do so? The South’s economy no longer could sustain them, they were not truly free, and racists wanted to kill them so, again, immigration occurred because of an oppressive system, bad economics and taxation, and for a better life—just like the English immigrants to the Colonies.

FROM ENEMIES TO FRIENDS

All around this, before, during and after the slave saga, was the continuing migration of Europeans, first on their own continent and then to ours. After trying every other place in Europe, which finally was flooded with people on the move, they came to America. It was terrible, as we know: crowded into tight neighborhoods with unsanitary conditions, poor wages, enormous changes in lifestyles—why would they do it? Those at home got the word but, in time, came here too. It was because things were *so bad* that this was better. But look who they are now: they are our friends and neighbors, owning businesses or working for other owners; and many are professional. Whatever happened to our fear and hatred of them? Oh, it sprang up in war time and, though we imprisoned so many Germans, Italians and Japanese, thinking surely they would turn against us in war as an internal enemy, we now know there was no substantiation of that, *thank you, Mr. Roosevelt.*

THE NEW MIGRATION

Now there are Mexicans and other Latin Americans. We’ve loved going to their countries and buying stuff cheaply and return to brag how we drove a hard bargain with the weaver of *ponchos* and *serapes*, and the potter and basket maker, into a pathetic price for their skilled talent. They knew that, but it was the way things were; it was better than nothing. Then it wasn’t better than nothing, because nothing was what they came to have. Once again, oppressive laws or nonenforcement of laws (did you know that when you buy something from people on the street holding babies in Mexico City, not long after you leave, police come and take that money?); economics and taxation (if there’s no money for necessities, what’s there to pay taxes with?); and, well, a better way of life—just like the English and Europeans who came here, and like black migration from South to North.

On one occasion while I was in Mexico, the price of tortillas went up. It made little difference to me but it was painful for the poor, and I recall my cousin saying with a voice full of pathos, *somehow, some way, they will survive.* And always one sees the beggar children; ask natives if much of what the children get was from tourists, and you will be told in no uncertain terms that many tourists are suspicious of the children and it is Mexicans who give them the most money or buy the cheap chicle and toys *because they know the children’s poverty is real.*

Since the Colonies, we’ve always thought immigration is about us. It’s not. Who stops to think how many people in South America migrate northward, thinking to come to the U.S., then they get to Mexico and, bad as things are, it’s better than where they came from, and there is no need to learn a new language, so they stay. Mexico suffers enormous immigrant pressure; one who leaves there for here is often replaced in Mexico by someone from South America.

HOW AMERICAN TREATS ITS NEIGHBORS

So why, as someone recently said to me, don't they take care of their people and become like the U.S.? I remember when we had a silver crisis here, and there was Mexico, with more silver than you can shake a stick at and not enough market for it, so it was undervalued, but did we buy silver from Mexico? No, we went into our reserves. But after defeating Japan, we poured millions of dollars into rebuilding and we know the reason—look at a map: they sat right off the Soviet border. Now there's some bang for our buck. But not for Mexico; they're smack up against us but we can keep them poor and they can't do anything about it. As one Mexican president said, "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States." With friends like us they need no enemies—aside from poverty and starvation.

But there are other reasons. What later became Texas were *immigrants* from other parts of the U.S. They wanted land and Mexico sold it to them cheaply and got little thanks for it: in time those settlers wanted more local autonomy (which they called "freedom"); *they worried that Mexico might outlaw slavery* (so you can see what nice people they were); and they didn't want to be taxed by Mexico, the rate of which was a pittance anyway.

UNDOCUMENTED TEXANS

A recent documentary on History Channel admitted that many of the key leaders defending the Alamo were in Texas illegally, that is, they were *undocumented*. Now, the rest is history, as they say, and an ugly sight it is. Texans still say they "stole the land fair and square," and in time Mexico was forced to give up *half* its territory; that's why when I first moved here I noticed the climate was a lot like my father's home in Mexico--then realized, hey, this *used to be* Mexico.

For years, few Mexicans, in what was left of their country, where the economy went into freefall, came here or even wanted to, even during the Gold Rush. But things got even worse, then the U.S. began big irrigation projects that created more farm acreage and we needed workers, so we encouraged migration. The Mexican Revolution caused more to flee and become workers here, which suited us just fine till we thought there were too many and then we created, for the first time, the Border Patrol, in 1924. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.

Today the Stranger is different only in superficial ways: how different does one have to be, to be *real different*? All my career people have told me I *don't look like* a minister, and I ask, *what does a minister look like*? My attention to the subject of migration revealed that while land of origin and native tongue made for differences that occasioned conflict, they were the least hard to overcome. Skin color, on the other hand, evoked the most painful and durable of all intolerance and its social and legal sanctions.

ONE COLOR AND ANOTHER

I am dismayed that within differences of color, something I don't yet know accounts for favoritism of one over the other. I find this all too often among my liberal friends and cohorts. When I came to Arizona I heard much, stated with pride, about the strong liberal support for African Americans and defense of their rights, during the controversy over the King, Jr. national holiday and potential loss of a major Bowl game in this region. That was remarkable, in that but 1% of the population was, and is, African American. Some of the same liberals however have difficulty warming up to support for, and defense of, Latin Americans though they comprise roughly a quarter of those who reside in our state, whether as citizens or not. Using an unrelated example, I know it is said that the sight of one beggar or

homeless person on the street evokes sympathy, but the sight of many creates resentment and calls for removal. Perhaps that has something to do different persons of color, but I am not sure.

THE MEANING OF SOME PROPOSITIONS

When Proposition initiatives appear, such as the recent “200,” I feel it is understandable, at first blush, that it makes sense to some people. Once the public heard more, support fell, but a majority of voters still favored it on election day. Surely there are people who truly fear for their safety because of their perception of a porous border into Arizona from a foreign country. On the other hand, it seemed to me that Proposition 200 also was an opportunity for xenophobia and for those who have, from culture and family training, a bias against, and intolerance towards, Mexicans. And it is important to know the difference, for politics create strange bedfellows.

Let’s examine those who experience not resentment but fear. Fear is a real emotion but its reasons not always are correctly identified. Basically, many if not most Americans’ fear of terrorism is based on “9/11.” The terrorists who were part of the plot came not from mass migration but calculated entry of intelligent people--intelligent enough to have at least some skilled knowledge that could be enhanced by but a little more training in U.S. aeronautical schools. We hear next to nothing about how and whether we are now better protected against such entry. Based on our national experience, I would think there would be at least as much concern for that as for whether such persons would seek to cross a border from Mexico.

FEARS REAL AND IMAGINED

The other fear is loss of place, meaning of employment or economic well-being. We are told that too much money is sent back to Mexican families from workers in the U.S. I saw figures from previous eras of Mexican immigration that, percentage-wise, also was large but there was no outcry because at the time the U.S. economy was expanding—helped along in no part by cheaper Mexican labor. The supermarket I frequent has many Mexican shoppers; what they are spending is not going to Mexico. They have to eat, clothe and otherwise provide for their families. I have tried to find less crowded times to go there but there are none. Other markets of the same company that I go into, having no significant Mexican populations nearby, have many fewer shoppers.

The economic factor long has been important. During the days of Jim Crow in the southern U.S., the incidents of lynching rose and fell in inverse proportion to the rise and fall of the price of cotton. The same has been true of other great migrations in the world.

Voting for or against propositions that effect migrants, immigrants or what else we may call them, is not enough. It is a matter of ongoing education, and it is my hope that we will long to understand, come to understand, and be a force, in our own way, so the changes we face will be met with enlightened citizenship.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Here is what I wish for: First, that we live up to our religious heritage. I never tell others that we are *not* Jews and Christians; I say we are that—and more. One of the greatest teachings in that heritage is the story that asks the question, “Who is my neighbor?” and is answered with another, Who am I neighbor *to*? When I came to Arizona I became a neighbor to new people, many of whom live around me and know nothing about me. I am the son of an immigrant. I am one step away from those who tend our yards, pick the harvests that end on our table, and spend great sums of money in our stores. My father came here after the Mexican Revolution when U.S. borders were relaxed; no one knew if he would amount to much, but over his lifetime he worked his way up till he would have been the next president of the independent telephone company in southeast Missouri, but it was bought by Southwestern Bell. He had three children, all lifelong in their respective careers—entrepreneur, educator, clergyman.

Second, when it comes to Initiatives that pop up on our ballots, how about some that call for improved relationships with Mexico? Look too closely at NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and you’ll clearly see whose best interest is served by that, and Mexico knows it, but for them it’s a start. But when they are here, they are protected by laws of the state of Arizona regardless of their status. Indeed, some of them are “undocumented,” as were no few early Colonists who refused to take loyalty oaths to England; and as were white immigrants from the American north who went to fight against the Mexican nation that owned the land that became Texas.

Third, within liberalism, whether political or religious, there is enough do-gooder-ism to last us all a lifetime, and one that has no patience with people who are both fearful of migrations or feel threatened by change. We are called to love and understand them all—the immigrants who come here from sore desperation, and those who feel the pain of the change they bring.

Who is the neighbor? It works both ways, but the call of our religion and our humanity is that, first, we are to be neighbors to them.

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