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Conspiracy Against Assimilation

By Robert J. Samuelson
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It's all about assimilation -- or it should be. One of America's glories is that it has assimilated many waves of immigrants. Outsiders have become insiders. But it hasn't been easy. Every new group has struggled: Germans, Irish, Jews and Italians. All have encountered economic hardship, prejudice and discrimination. The story of U.S. immigration is often ugly. If today's wave of immigration does not end in assimilation, it will be a failure. By this standard, I think the major contending sides in the present bitter debate are leading us astray. Their proposals, if adopted, would frustrate assimilation.

On the one hand, we have the "cop" school. It adamantly opposes amnesty and would make being here illegally a felony, as opposed to a lesser crime. It toughens a variety of penalties against illegal immigrants. Elevating the seriousness of the crime would supposedly deprive them of jobs, and then illegal immigrants would return to Mexico, El Salvador or wherever. This is a pipe dream; the numbers are simply too large.

But it is a pipe dream that, if pursued, would inflict enormous social damage. The mere threat of a crackdown stigmatizes much of the Hispanic population -- whether they're legal or illegal immigrants, or whether they've been here for generations. (In 2004 there were 40 million Hispanics, says the Pew Hispanic Center; about 55 percent were estimated to be native-born, 25 percent legal immigrants and 20 percent illegal immigrants.) People feel threatened and insulted. Who wouldn't?

On the other hand we have the "guest worker" advocates. They want 400,000 or more new foreign workers annually. This would supposedly curtail illegal immigration -- people who now sneak into the country could get work permits -- and also cure "shortages" of unskilled American workers. Everyone wins. Not really.

For starters, the term is a misnomer. Whatever the rules, most guest workers would not leave. The pull of U.S. wages (on average, almost five times what can be earned in Mexico) is too great. Moreover, there's no general shortage of unskilled workers. In March, the unemployment rate of high school dropouts 25 years and older was 7 percent; since 1996, it has been below 6 percent in only two months. By contrast, the unemployment rate of college graduates in March was 2.2 percent. Given the glut of unskilled workers relative to demand, their wages often lag inflation. From 2002 to 2004, consumer prices rose 5.5 percent. Median wages rose 4.8 percent for janitors, 4.3 percent for landscapers and not at all for waitresses.

Advocates of guest workers don't acknowledge that poor, unskilled immigrants -- whether legal or illegal -- create huge social costs. Every year the Census Bureau issues a report on "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States." Here's what the 2004 report shows:

- Since 1990 the number of Hispanics with incomes below the government's poverty line has risen 52 percent; that's almost all (92 percent) of the increase in poor people.
- Among children, disparities are greater. Over the same period, Hispanic children in poverty are up 43 percent; meanwhile, the numbers of black and non-Hispanic white children in poverty declined 16.9 percent and 18.5 percent, respectively.
- Hispanics account for most (61 percent) of the increase of Americans without health insurance since

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1990. The overall increase was 11.1 million; Hispanics, 6.7 million.

By most studies, poor immigrants pay less in taxes than they use in government services. As these social costs have risen, so has the backlash. Already, there's a coalition of Mayors and County Executives for Immigration Reform. It includes 63 cities, counties and towns, headed by Republicans and Democrats, ranging from Cook County, Illinois (population: 5.3 million) to Gilliam County, Oregon (population: 1,817). Coalition members want the federal government to reimburse their extra costs.

We have a conspiracy against assimilation. One side would offend and ostracize much of the Hispanic community. The other would encourage mounting social and economic costs. Either way we get a more polarized society.

On immigration, I am an optimist. We are basically a decent, open and tolerant nation. Americans respect hard work and achievement. That's why assimilation has ultimately triumphed. But I am not a foolish optimist. Assimilation requires time and the right conditions. It cannot succeed if we constantly flood the country with new, poor immigrants or embark on a vendetta against those already here.

I have argued that our policies should recognize these realities. Curb illegal immigration with true border barriers. Provide legal status (call it amnesty or whatever) -- first work permits, then citizenship -- for most illegal immigrants already here. Remove the job lure by imposing harsh fines against employers who hire *new* illegal immigrants. Reject big guest-worker programs.

It's sometimes said that today's Hispanics will resemble yesterday's Italians. Although they won't advance as rapidly as some other groups of more skilled immigrants, they'll still move into the mainstream. Many have -- and will. But the overall analogy is a stretch, according to a recent study, "Italians Then, Mexicans Now," by sociologist Joel Perlmann of Bard College. Since 1970 wages of Mexican immigrants compared with those of native whites have declined. By contrast, wages of Italians and Poles who arrived early in the last century rose over time. For the children of immigrants, gaps are also wide. Second-generation Italians and Poles typically earned 90 percent or more compared to native whites. For second-generation Mexican Americans, the similar figure is 75 percent.

One big difference between then and now: Immigration slowly halted during and after World War I. The Italians and Poles came mainly between 1890 and 1915. Older immigrants didn't always have to compete with newcomers who beat down their wages. There was time for outsiders and insiders to adapt to each other. We should heed history's lesson.

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