

What's New About the New Immigration? A Historian's Perspective over Two Centuries¹

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For a historian of immigration observing current debates, less disturbing than what people don't know about immigration history, are the things they "know" that simply aren't true. Recent immigrants are often held up to an impossible standard of the melting pot that was a much slower and more messy process than it appears in the romanticized hindsight of public memory. This paper offers an overview of the process of negotiation and mutual accommodation that has always figured prominently in the integration of immigrants into our society over the past two centuries. Except for the origins of immigrants and the color of their skin, little has changed over the last two centuries. English is alive and well, even on the Mexican border and the West Coast. In Amy Tan's autobiographical novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, an immigrant mother laments that her daughter's Chinese vocabulary hardly extends beyond "pee-pee" and "choo-choo train," asking plaintively, "How can she be her own person? When did I give her up?" Immigrant parents have been asking that question for a long time. Some things never change.

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Back around the turn of the century when my daughter was young, she introduced me to the "American Girl" doll and book series, a brilliant idea I wish I had thought of myself: girls/dolls of various ethnic backgrounds in different historical settings from the Revolutionary War down to the present, with the appropriate if rather pricy costumes, and linked to a series of books with inspiring but not always sugar-coated

¹ This essay is an updated version of a Fallon-Marshall Lecture in the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University in 2008. Unfortunately, the topic has lost none its relevance over the course of the last decade. <https://liberalartsarchive.cla.tamu.edu/fallon-marshall-lecture-series/>.

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story lines. A bit like "Little House on the Prairie," but with more bite. However, a new doll in the series introduced in 2005, a fictional Latina named Marisol Luna, raised some controversy in the real world. Initially set in a contemporary Chicago barrio, by the end of the story Marisol's parents have moved to the suburbs, leaving behind their old neighborhood: "Mom said this was no place for me to grow up," Marisol says. "It was dangerous and there was no place for me to play." But local Latino activists from Congressman Luis Gutierrez on down protested against the originators for defaming and insulting their community.³

For me as an ethnic historian the incident takes on an amusing and ironic twist from the name of Marisol's old neighborhood: Pilsen. It's named after the Czech town where pilsner brewing was invented. The Illinois Pilsen was once a Bohemian ethnic ghetto, and had it not been for an earlier generation of immigrants moving up and moving out, it would never have become a Mexican barrio in the first place. A Czech doctoral student working with me on a Fulbright Fellowship a few years ago actually visited Pilsen, and passed along some photo of the Pilsen Sokol, a club that combined athletic, social, and nationalistic functions. It is still quite an imposing four-story structure, but all the signage on the businesses around it are in Spanish. The Marisol story line has a strong basis in fact, past and present.⁴ It is a perfect illustration of what my fellow Missourian Mark Twain once said: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme."

More often these days, especially with the current American president, Mexican immigrants are the targets of protest rather than the protesters. For me as a historian of immigration, less disturbing than what people don't know about immigration history, are the things they "know" that simply aren't true. Recent immigrants are often held up to an impossible standard of the melting pot that was a much slower and messier process in real life than it appears in the romanticized hindsight of public memory. In fact, I've proposed an addendum to Ravenstein's Laws of Migration: "The good immigrants are always the old immigrants and the bad immigrants are always the new ones, even though the same groups and even the same individuals move from one group to the other."⁵

The "old" immigrants did not look nearly as promising, either, when they first arrived in the United States. Except for some slightly antiquated language, the following quote might well have been taken from Fox News or a Trump Administration spokesperson: "Formerly, the better class came... They came with their substance, not only to adopt a country, but to help to build it up. But they that come now

³ Brendan McCarthy, "American Girl doll's book riles Pilsen," *Chicago Tribune*, February 2, 2005. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2005-02-02/news/0502020292_1_marisol-luna-american-girl-american-doll.

⁴ Irving Cutler, *Chicago, Metropolis of the Mid-Continent*, 4th ed., (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 97–103, 178–82.

⁵ These "laws" were actually statistical regularities observed by the German-British geographer Ernest George Ravenstein, "The Laws of Migration," *Journal of the Statistical Society* 48/2 (1885), 167–227.

come to live upon the country. It needs no comment... Pauperism and crime are the inevitable results of foreign immigration." However, one telltale line was omitted: "The old Scotch merchant and Dutch farmer were clever." This diatribe was written in 1856.⁶ Even then, the good immigrants were the old immigrants.

Nativist ire was most intense against the Catholic Irish, but that does not mean that Germans were welcomed with open arms. The *Commercial Advertiser* wrote in 1857 that Buffalo, New York, could no longer be considered an American city; "the Irish and the Germans are ... to be our rulers." It went on to say that the four German wards on the east side of the city were "as little American as the duchy of Hesse Cassel; their population speaks a foreign language, reads foreign newspapers, isolates itself from the American element, and steeped in ignorance of American politics, it clings to the bald name of Democracy, and claims the right to subject the sons of the soil to the despotism of the force of brute numbers."⁷ Then as now, the fact that immigrants were flexing their political muscles only added to the hostility.

By the 1890s, however, the Germans had moved up to the category of "good, old" immigrants. They were not doubt the ones the *Philadelphia Enquirer* had in mind when it editorialized in 1891: "More immigrants will be landed this year than ever before in history. What kind of people are these new citizens? Some are honest men seeking a home. They will go West, take up land."⁸ The new immigrants, especially urban ones, were a different story in the eyes of the *Enquirer*, as it continued:

Others will get no farther than New York, where they will get on the police force, take out naturalization papers, sell themselves to Tammany and the corrupt politicians who feed upon the stealings from the city, and in time share the plunder themselves. Others will join the hordes of Huns and Poles in the coal regions, hive together in hovels, live on refuse, save 90 percent of their wages, and work for wages upon which no respectable laborer could exist. Others will come from the scum of Italy and Sicily, will become day laborers on the railroads, will live in shanties like the Huns, and after saving up a few thousand dollars will take their money back to their old homes. Most of these will seek citizenship only for the profit there may be in the sale of their votes...

These prejudices fed into the 1911 Report of the U.S. Immigration Commission headed by Senator William Dillingham. It found exactly what it had set out to find, that the New Immigration was inferior to the Old and needed to be restricted. That its conclusions largely contradicted the data it had accumulated went largely unnoticed at the time.⁹ One rare exception was the refutation published in 1912 by Isaac Hourwich, himself a Jewish political refugee: "every complaint against the immigrants

⁶ Samuel C. Busey, *Immigration: Its Evils and Consequences* (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1856), 126.

⁷ Buffalo, NY, *Commercial Advertiser*, June 12, 1857.

⁸ Original undated, reprinted in *Public Opinion* 10: 26 (April 4, 1891), 218.

⁹ See, however, the devastating retrospective by Oscar Handlin, "Old Immigrants and New," in his *Race and Nationality in American Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1957), 74–110.

from Eastern and Southern Europe is but an echo of the complaints which were made in an earlier day against the then new immigration from Ireland, Germany, and even from England."¹⁰

Hourwich's admonitions went unheeded, and in the wave of xenophobia that World War I unleashed, the United States adopted discriminatory nationality quotas that reduced immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe to a trickle. (Mexican labor was too valuable to restrict; agricultural interests had even gotten Mexicans exempted from entry tax and the 1917 literacy test until 1921.) But half a century later, these former pariah nationalities that were considered hopeless cases for Americanization had moved up to the category of "good, old" immigrants, and had come to dominate New York politics. The Polish element was rather small in New York City, but Buffalo elected its first Polish mayor already in 1949, and two others since. From 1949 to the present, one of the two U.S. Senators from New York has always been either Jewish or Italian. Since 1983, three of the four men elected Governor of New York were Italian, and the other was Jewish. Of the six men who served as New York City mayors since 1974, three were Jewish and two were Italian.¹¹

In recent years, Asian-Americans, too, have advanced "from Yellow Peril to Model Minority," to cite a popular title for a number of studies in this genre, as positive stereotypes replaced negative ones.¹² As was the case with earlier groups, some Asian-Americans have engaged in "throwing down the ladder by which they rose."¹³ Viet Thanh Nguyen, whose family fled Vietnam when he was 4 years old, recently took to task fellow Vietnamese such as the mayor of Westminster, California, for claiming that "We were the good refugees... These new ones are the bad refugees."¹⁴

The recent wave of xenophobia in Republican circles has given rise to a genre of "resistance genealogy" that confronts contemporary critics of immigration with their less-than-illustrious ancestors, hence Nguyen's reference to John Kelly, Trump's

¹⁰ Isaac A. Hourwich, *Immigration and Labor* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), 2.

¹¹ African American David Paterson moved up to the governorship when his predecessor resigned, but he was not elected to the office. One of the six mayors, David Dinkins, was the child of Afro-Caribbean immigrants. The father of current mayor Bill DeBlasio was of German heritage, but abandoned his family early, so that his son adopted his Italian American mother's name.

¹² Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril became the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), one of a number of books and articles with a version of this title, which is sometimes applied to Japanese and other Asian-Americans as well as Chinese.

¹³ This term goes back to a cartoon by Thomas Nast in *Harper's Weekly*, 23 July 1870, taking Irish and fellow German immigrants to task for their support of Chinese exclusion.

¹⁴ Viet Thanh Nguyen, "John Kelly's Ancestors Wouldn't Have Fit in Either," *New York Times*, Opinion section, May 19, 2018. Nguyen remarks, "Having grown up in the Vietnamese refugee community in San Jose, Calif., in the 1970s and 1980s, I can testify that there were plenty of bad refugees among us. Welfare cheating. Insurance scams. Cash under the table. Gang violence, with home invasions being a Vietnamese specialty." In Westminster, CA, home to the largest number of Vietnamese outside Vietnam, mayor Tri Ta and councilman Tyler Diep, both immigrants, voted to join other Orange County cities in opposing California's sanctuary law which limits cooperation with federal immigration agents.

chief of staff. In a May 2018 interview, Kelly conceded that “the vast majority of the people that move illegally into United States are not bad people.” But he critically observed that they are “not people that would easily assimilate into the United States into our modern society” since they are “overwhelmingly rural people... They don’t speak English. They don’t integrate well, they don’t have skills.”¹⁵ They say people who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. One “resistance genealogist” researched Kelly’s familial background and found that the Italian half of his family tree looked a lot like the people he was criticizing. Both great-grandfathers were unskilled; one a wagon driver; the other a fruit peddler, who still didn’t speak English after more than a decade in the country, with a wife who lived in America for over thirty years without learning the language. Not until the third generation, Kelly’s parents, did anyone go beyond elementary school. Conservatives often make the distinction that their ancestors arrived legally; Fox News contributor Tomi Lahren commented, “We are indeed a nation of immigrants. We are also a nation of laws.” But a genealogical researcher confronted her with the fact that one of her immigrant ancestors had been indicted for forging his naturalization papers.¹⁶

While anecdotes such as these serve a useful function in combatting hypocrisy, a fair evaluation requires that we examine the broader patterns. When one compares immigration past and present, first looking briefly at the numbers and composition of the immigrants, then at such controversial issues as school policies, bilingual education, and language policy in general, one finds that in many respects, the post-1965 immigration and the pre-World War I waves have much in common. The period between the World Wars, which is often regarded as the norm, was in fact the anomaly.

This is certainly the case with respect to numbers. Alarmists claim that there are more immigrants coming to the United States now than ever before in our history. That is true, but only in absolute figures. More relevant to the process of acculturation is the percentage of immigrants in the population (Table 1). In 2010, 12.9 percent of the population was foreign born, higher than it has been since 1920. But it was even higher than that for over a half century running in the era before World War I. From 1860 on, the foreign born share of the population never fell below 13 percent and twice approached 15 percent. Relative to the resident population, the influx today is smaller than in the previous era of mass immigration, but its impact is somewhat

¹⁵ “Transcript: White House Chief of Staff John Kelly’s Interview With NPR,” May 11, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/05/11/610116389/transcript-white-house-chief-of-staff-john-kellys-interview-with-npr>.

¹⁶ Lisa Belkin, “Trump aide Stephen Miller, meet your great-grandfather, who flunked his naturalization test,” *Yahoo News*, June 20, 2018. Alan Sloan, “Jared Kushner’s immigrant grandmother complained of America’s ‘closed doors,’” *Washington Post*, June 23, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/06/23/jared-kushners-grandparents-crossed-a-border-illegally/?utm_term=.d8177ebc24f7. David S. Glosner, “Stephen Miller Is an Immigration Hypocrite. I Know Because I’m His Uncle,” *Politico Magazine*, August 13, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/08/13/stephen-miller-is-an-immigration-hypocrite-i-know-because-im-his-uncle-219351>.

Table 1

Foreign Born and Foreign Stock Proportion of U.S. Population

Year	Foreign Born %	Foreign Stock %
1860	13.2	
1870	14.4	
1880	13.3	
1890	14.8	33.2
1900	13.6	34.3
1910	14.7	35.3
1920	13.2	34.7
1930	11.6	32.8
1940	8.8	
1950	6.9	
1960	5.4	19.0
1970	4.7	16.5
1980	6.2	
1990	7.9	
2000	11.1	20.4
2010	12.9	22.5
2015	13.4	26.1

greater because the native birthrate is below the replacement rate. Still, the cumulative effects of immigration, measured by including the second generation, is smaller today than back then. In the year 2000, immigrants and their American-born children barely surpassed 20 percent. The census no longer provides this data, but a 2015 estimate puts the foreign stock at just over a quarter, 26 percent of the population. From 1890 to 1930 it hovered right around one-third.¹⁷ So just what is it that critics of immigration are worried about? Perhaps who is coming, and from where?

The post-1965 changes in composition were if anything more dramatic than the change in volume. In 1960, 85 percent of the foreign born was of European or Canadian origin, but by 2010, over 85 percent was from other parts of the world, more than half with roots in Latin America and more than a quarter from Asia.¹⁸ But anyone worried about the “quality” of these visible minorities should be reassured to know that as late as 2000, the best educated immigrants in the United States

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *Profile of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2000*, P23-206 (December 2001), Figure 8.1, p. 23.

¹⁸ <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2013/comm/foreign-born.pdf>.

had their roots--not in Asia as one might guess--but in what the president called the “shithole” countries of Africa.¹⁹ Almost half of adult African immigrants had college degrees; barely 5 percent lacked a high school education. Asians were a close second and have since surpassed Africans, but both groups have a higher percentage with college educations than the native population.²⁰

For all the demagoguery about immigration on the part of the Trump Administration, there are a number of recent trends that by any objective measure should be reassuring.²¹ The Mexican birthrate has dropped so precipitously in the last half century that there is no longer the demographic pressure driving migration that there once was; in 2017 for the first time in history, it actually fell below the replacement rate.²² In fact, in the last few years, there have been more new arrivals from Asia than from Hispanic America, and more Chinese than Mexicans.²³ More importantly, to judge by the number of apprehensions, illegal immigration was the lowest it has been in decades in 2016, and was up only slightly in 2017.²⁴ The 2008 recession induced about one million of the estimated twelve million undocumented to return home voluntarily. Of the unauthorized immigrants legalized under the Reagan era IRCA amnesty, about 70 percent were Mexican, but they now make up barely half of the undocumented (52 percent in 2014). During the last two years, Canadians outnumbered Mexicans among those who illegally overstayed their visas.²⁵ Then there is the “No way Jose!” trend (Table 2). In the state of Texas, Jose had a run of fourteen years in first place among baby boys’ names, from 1996 through 2009, but has since fallen steadily to where it is barely in the top ten. Juan was never as popular, albeit as high as number

¹⁹ Ali Vitali, Kasie Hunt and Frank Thorp V., “Trump referred to Haiti and African nations as ‘shithole’ countries,” Jan. 11, 2018, nbcnews.com.

²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, Profile of the Foreign-Born Population: 2000, Figure 14.1, 14.2, pp. 26–7. In 2010, Africans were still slightly ahead of Asians in the percentage with at least some college education, and had the lowest proportion of any group besides Canadians lacking a high school diploma. U.S. Census Bureau, The Foreign Born Population in the United States: 2010, ACS-19 (May 2012), Figure 13, p. 16.

²¹ This is not a partisan issue; an initiative of the George W. Bush Presidential Library makes many of the same points: <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/resources-reports/resources/immigration-debunking-myths-infographic.html>.

²² <http://www3.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/temas/default.aspx?s=est&c=17484>. Kyle D. Navis, “Immigration from Mexico Could Soon Plummet – Even Without a Border Wall,” (March 7, 2017). <https://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/immigration-mexico-soon-plummet-even-without-border-wall>. “Mexico’s population; When the niños run out: A falling birth rate, and what it means,” *The Economist*, April 22, 2010.

²³ Pew Research Center, “The Rise of Asian Americans,” (June 19, 2012), p. 1. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2012/06/SDT-Rise-of-Asian-Americans.pdf>.

²⁴ Michelle Mark and Shayanne Gal, “Border-crossing arrests are at historic lows – but Trump is still bemoaning a ‘drastic surge’ in illegal immigration,” *Business Insider*, April 6, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/rampage/wp/2018/06/22/how-southwest-border-apprehensions-this-year-compare-with-those-in-earlier-years/?utm_term=.5f3ea6d7939f.

²⁵ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/02/what-we-know-about-illegal-immigration-from-mexico/>. Olivia P. Tallet, “Canadians top list of visitors who illegally overstay visas,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 13, 2018, p. A3–4; they outnumbered Mexicans almost 2:1.

Table 2

Rank Frequency of Common Hispanic Names among Boy Babies in Texas

Year	Jose Rank	Juan Rank
1995	3	12
1996	1	12
1997	1	11
1998	1	11
1999	1	8
2000	1	9
2001	1	10
2002	1	7
2003	1	8
2004	1	6
2005	1	8
2006	1	8
2007	1	9
2008	1	9
2009	1	12
2010	2	16
2011	4	18
2012	6	21
2013	6	29
2014	9	25
2015	10	34
2016	9	37
2017	10	44

six in 2004, but is no longer in the top forty at present.²⁶ This is probably a result of both lower immigration rates and greater acculturation on the part of Hispanics. Other indicators run in the same direction. Refuting images of primordial ethnicity, Latino endogamy and identity are both fading across time and generations.²⁷

²⁶ A website of the Social Security Administration allows one to search for the top 100 boy and girl baby names in a given state and year: <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/state/index.html>.

²⁷ Inter-marriage rates for Hispanics were higher than those of either whites or blacks. While only 15% of immigrant Latinos had spouses from outside their group, in part because many were married when they arrived, almost two-fifths (39%) of U.S. born Latinos had intermarried. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/12/20/hispanic-identity-fades-across-generations-as-immigrant-connections-fall-away/>. Mark Hugo Lopez, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, and Gustavo López, "Hispanic Identity Fades Across Generations as Immigrant Connections Fall Away," December 20, 2017.

Critics of U.S. immigration often point to the factor of chain migration as a negative consequence of postwar laws establishing preferences for family members and close relatives of U.S. citizens and permanent residents, which allegedly leads to a decreasing quality of immigrants. The anti-immigration lobby with the deceptive acronym FAIR, complains about chain migration on its website: “most migrants receive a green card simply because they are the relative of an earlier migrant, not because of what they can contribute to American society,” and the Trump administration has made this claim its own.²⁸ It is true that the majority of immigrants these days are admitted on family preference visas, slightly less than two-thirds of the total.²⁹ But what the fearmongers at FAIR overlook or deliberately ignore are the normal patterns that held in the era before World War I, when immigration of Europeans was virtually unrestricted. It doesn’t require family preference visas to trigger chain migration. When U.S. authorities began systematically questioning new arrivals starting in 1907, it turned out that nearly 80 percent were coming to join relatives, about 15 percent were coming to join friends, and only 6 percent had no personal contacts in the United States. In fact, my career was initially built on tracing and documenting this “chain migration” among Germans, and scholars who have looked at other nationalities have found very similar patterns.³⁰ Moreover, when the founders of a migration chain come on educational visas, those who follow tend to have similar qualifications and aspirations, as we see with the education levels of Africans and Asians.

There is no denying that illegal immigrants were quite rare before World War I, and almost all of them were Chinese. This was due not to any criminal propensities

²⁸ <https://www.fairus.org/issue/legal-immigration/chain-migration>. Cf. Linda Qui, “‘Chain Migration’ Has Become a Weaponized Phrase. Here Are the Facts Behind It,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/us/politics/the-facts-behind-the-weaponized-phrase-chain-migration.html>.

²⁹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/06/more-than-half-of-new-green-cards-go-to-people-already-living-in-the-u-s/>. Expanded 2016 Yearbook Tables 8–11 (Adjustments of Status and New Arrivals): <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/readingroom/LPR/request1>. Of those admitted on family provisions in Fiscal 2016, over 70 % were spouses, minor children, or parents of U.S. citizens not subject to quotas; rather than more distant relatives. About five-sixths of those permanently admitted on employment-based preferences were already in the country.

³⁰ Walter D. Kamphoefner, *The Westfalians: From Germany to Missouri* (Princeton University Press, 1987), 188 and passim. For a sampling of studies documenting chain migration for other nationalities, see Robert C. Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); June G. Alexander, *The Immigrant Church & Community: Pittsburgh’s Slovak Catholics & Lutherans, 1880–1915* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987); Robert P. Swierenga, *Faith and Family: Dutch Immigration and Settlement in the United States, 1820–1920* (Holmes & Meier, 2000); Yda Schreuder, *Dutch Catholic Immigrant Settlement in Wisconsin, 1850–1905* (New York, 1989); Anne Kelley Knowles, *Calvinists Incorporated: Welsh Immigrants on Ohio’s Industrial Frontier* (University of Chicago Press, 1997); Jose C. Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850–1939* (University of California Press, 1998); Marcelo Borges, *Chains of Gold: Portuguese Migration to Argentina in Transatlantic Perspective* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009); Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943: A Trans-Pacific Community* (Stanford University Press, 2000). This list is by no means exhaustive.

on their part, but rather to the fact that Chinese had been excluded by law in 1882 while the gates were wide open to everyone else. But with the Chinese as with the great majority of unauthorized immigrants today, their criminality consisted merely in their visa status.³¹ Back in the 19th century there were genuine foreign criminals coming into the country by the thousands, with the complicity or even encouragement of their own government. Britain and France had their own colonies as dumping grounds, but for Germany, it was tempting to slip deported criminals in amongst normal U.S. immigrants. My colleague Wolfgang Helbich and I have been investigating this issue, and we estimate that at least 10,000 German criminals were deported to the United States during the middle third of the 19th century, and several times that many who were considered undesirable—often welfare cases, drunkards, or both—were provided a free or subsidized one-way ticket to America.³² And it was perfectly legal until 1875.

Most of the undocumented today have little in common with such German deportees, and the ones who do are the ones that previous administrations of both parties concentrated their deportation efforts on, before the Trump administration introduced its draconian, undifferentiated policies. My students have heard me saying for years, or better said decades, that there are many structural similarities between Hispanic illegals now and Italian “birds of passage” before World War I. Finally someone must be listening; a book came out in 2005 with just that title: *Italians Then, Mexicans Now*.³³ As we saw with John Kelly's ancestors, the two groups had many commonalities: low education levels, largely unskilled occupations, high return and repeater rates, a heavy male surplus, slow language acquisition and low naturalization rates. In the eyes of many of the “best people” a century ago, Italians presented a hopeless case as candidates for Americanization. But don't tell that to Rudy Giuliani. In fact, once the restrictive quota laws of the 1920 clamped down, Italians quickly developed a tendency to illegal immigration. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but several prominent people have outed themselves as descendants of such illegals, including *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni, whose grandfather came in illegally via Canada, and former Republican Senator Pete Domenici of New Mexico, whose mother was briefly arrested as an illegal during World War II.³⁴ A recent book, *After They*

³¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/17/251833652/chinese-american-descendants-uncover-forged-family-history>. Hansi Lo Wang, “Chinese-American Descendants Uncover Forged Family Histories,” NPR Morning Edition, December 17, 2013.

³² Some preliminary results were published by Wolfgang Helbich and Walter D. Kamphoefner, “The Hour of Your Liberation is Getting Closer and Closer...,” *Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny* 35:3 (2009), 43–58.

³³ Joel Perlmann, *Italians Then, Mexicans Now: Immigrant Origins and Second-Generation Progress, 1890 to 2000* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005).

³⁴ Frank Bruni, “My Grandfather the Outlaw,” *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 2013. Russell Contreras, “Late GOP Sen. Domenici had close immigration link – his mom,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 15, 2017. Kathy Kiely, “Personal histories shape immigration views,” *USAToday.com*, June 4, 2007.

Closed the Gates, estimates the number of Jewish illegal immigrants between 1921 and 1965 as being “in the tens of thousands, possibly higher.” The American consul in Havana estimated in 1932 that over thirty thousand people had been smuggled in via Cuba alone in the last dozen years, about 18,000 of them Jewish. Smuggling alcohol and immigrants went hand in hand back then, a little like drugs and immigrants on the Mexican border now. Incidentally, per-capita murder rates were higher in Miami back in the 1920s than at the height of the cocaine crisis of the 1980s.³⁵

As was shown above, even the “old” immigrants from Ireland and Germany were not always welcomed with open arms when they first arrived, nor did they submerge themselves immediately in the Melting Pot. From our current perspective, we might think it helpful for assimilation that immigrants before the Civil War were overwhelmingly European and Christian. But for folks back then, not all Christians were equal. The main reasons for excluding religious content from public schools and forbidding public financing of religious schools, besides the constitutional ban on the establishment of religion, was not the demands of atheists or adherents of non-Christian religions; it was two groups of Christians feuding across the Anglo-ethnic and the Protestant-Catholic divide.³⁶

Where language issues are concerned, there are some striking parallels between Germans in the 19th century and Hispanics in contemporary America. They were by far the largest foreign language group at the time, they spoke a language of international importance, and they were quite successful in placing it in various areas of public life. You may think that bilingual public education is an innovation of the radical sixties, and in a way you’re right. However, it’s not the 1960s but the 1860s which saw the introduction of many bilingual programs in public schools, and a few go back even earlier.

At least a dozen states required foreign language instruction in public grade schools wherever a certain number of parents or school board members requested it.³⁷ Judging from the research of a colleague on Texas and evidence from my home state of Missouri, the practice was even more liberal than the law.³⁸ Missouri made no provision for foreign language elementary instruction, yet in heavily German Gasconade County, around 1890 half of the public grade schools were taught partly in

³⁵ Libby Garland, *After They Closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 6, 89–147 passim. William Wilbanks, *Murder in Miami: An Analysis of Homicide Patterns and Trends in Dade County (Miami) Florida, 1917–1983* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

³⁶ Lloyd P. Jorgenson, *The State and the Non-Public School, 1825–1925* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 111–144. <http://www.pewforum.org/2008/07/24/the-blaine-game-controversy-over-the-blaine-amendments-and-public-funding-of-religion/>.

³⁷ For an overview of such programs, see Paul Fessler, “The Political and Pedagogical in Bilingual Education: Yesterday and Today,” in Wolfgang Helbich and Walter D. Kamphoefner, eds., *German-American Immigration and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective* (Madison, WI: Max Kade Institute, 2004), 273–91.

³⁸ Carlos Blanton, *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas. 1836–1981* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004).

German. Also in my home county, three communities continued to teach German in public grade schools right down till America's entry into World War I. The same was true in one Gasconade County town; in fact, among my collection of German books is the actual textbook that was used, with a 1915 copyright and the teacher's name penciled in the front. This book series has an interesting history only hinted at on the title page. First authored around 1880 by St. Louis public school teachers, it went into a revised edition that was used as far away as Texas as late as 1916.³⁹

Meanwhile back in the 19th century, nearly all the major cities of the Midwest, plus Baltimore and New York, offered German in their public elementary schools at least as a subject. Some such as Indianapolis, Baltimore, Cleveland and Cincinnati had two-way immersion bilingual programs, something very similar to what was introduced with Spanish about fifteen years ago in the town where I live. It proved to be such a huge success that it's now offered at a half dozen schools in the community from Kindergarten thru fifth or sixth grade. Then as now, both languages were used as a medium of instruction, with the school day divided more or less equally between English and the heritage language.⁴⁰

A 1901 survey found about half a million elementary students receiving German instruction, including nearly a quarter million in public schools.⁴¹ What were the motives for offering foreign-language instruction in grade schools or for participating in these programs? Ethnic politics played a considerable role; in Indianapolis, one of the leading promoters was novelist Kurt Vonnegut's grandfather. A commission looking into the question in Cleveland in 1906 concluded that "the reason for the teaching of German in the primary and grammar grades... is not educational, but chiefly national and sentimental." Ethnic pandering, in other words; well if so, it's as American as apple pie.⁴²

Just as today, not all languages were equal in the public support they received—German was clearly in a favored position. But there was also public instruction in Czech, Polish, Italian, Spanish, French, and Scandinavian languages in some locales. A 1913 Nebraska law led to the introduction of Czech in public elementary schools of Omaha and at least seven rural communities before World War I. Milwaukee public schools supplemented German with Polish and in 1907 and Italian shortly thereafter.

³⁹ *Witter's Deutsch-Englische Schreib- und Lese-Fibel und Neues Erstes Lesebuch für Amerikanische Freischulen*, rev. ed., (St. Louis: C. Witter, 1915).

⁴⁰ https://www.csisd.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=164498&type=d&pREC_ID=337465. <https://www.bryanisd.org/apps/news/article/660765>. The Houston Independent School District offers dual-language programs in 56 of its schools. Houston Chronicle, "Badge of biliteracy," July 21, 2018, A18.

⁴¹ Louis Viereck, "German Instruction in American Schools," *Report of the U.S. Commissioner of Education, 1900–1902* (Washington, DC, 1902), 659.

⁴² *Report of the Educational Commission ... of the Cleveland Public Schools* (Cleveland, 1906), 104. Nonetheless, 80 percent of the children from German-speaking homes could also read the language (the highest of any language besides Hebrew), according to Herbert Adolphus Miller, *The School and the Immigrant* (New York: Arno Press, [1916] 1970), 28–29.

The impact was rather limited with Italian, which was only taught in one school, but by 1913 the city had five grade schools teaching Polish to nearly 2,400 pupils, or at least one-fourth as many as were attending Polish Catholic schools according to Dorota Praszalowicz's research.⁴³

Spanish was often used in the areas conquered from Mexico, with or without English. Conrad Hilton, the founder of the worldwide Hilton Hotel empire, left a memoir telling of his youth in the small New Mexico town of San Antonio: "Since there were only about half a dozen 'Anglo' families in town, the school was conducted in Spanish and English and there was keen competition to see whether [my sister] and I could completely master Spanish before the others mastered English. I do not remember who won—but we children spoke Spanish as easily as English for many years." If he was harmed by his first four years of school, there is no sign of it in his subsequent career. Much informal bilingual education in rural areas like this took place below radar screen, seldom noted by local officials or by subsequent historians.⁴⁴

One reason authorities were willing to meet immigrants half way to attract them into public schools was that even a half day of English instruction was sometimes more than they were getting in parochial schools. The published lesson plans for German Evangelical in the 1890s provided for an hour of English per day at most. On the eve of World War I, Polish Catholic schools taught the majority of their subjects in English, but 35 to 40 percent of the school day was conducted in Polish.⁴⁵

Among the documents passed down to me from my grandmother was a booklet of German homework when she attended a Lutheran grade school in Missouri around 1900. Two things stand out: the neat handwriting in pen and ink despite the different script used for German, and the small number of errors. One gets the impression that German was her real mother tongue. When I started with German in high school sixty years later, she was still a great resource for homework. When the 1940 census manuscripts were indexed and released in 2012, it turned out she was one of the two people per page who were asked an extra question on mother tongue, and sure enough, it was German. And here's the kicker: She was not an immigrant, nor were her parents; her maternal grandparents had come from Germany, and her great grandparents on her father's side.

Compared to public grade schools, the range of languages was much broader and less dominated by German in parochial schools, especially Catholic ones, and other

⁴³ Heinz Kloss, *The American Bilingual Tradition*, 2nd ed., (Washington, DC, 1998), 117. Dorota Praszalowicz, "The Cultural Changes of Polish-American Parochial Schools in Milwaukee, 1866–1988," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 13 (1994), 23–45, here Table 2. Rose Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska* (Omaha, 1926), 412–18.

⁴⁴ Conrad Hilton, *Be My Guest* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1957), 33.

⁴⁵ *Protokolle der 11. Jahreskonferenzen der Distrikte der Deutschen Evangelischen Synode von Nordamerika* ([St. Louis] 1897), 1–28. James Aloysius Burns, *The Growth and Development of the Catholic School System in the United States* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1912), 324, citing a typical Chicago school. <https://archive.org/details/growthanddevelo00burngoog>.

groups appear to have held onto the heritage language longer, in part because their immigration continued longer. In Cleveland in 1915, almost three-fifths of Catholic schools were taught in foreign languages: the Poles had the largest number of pupils, followed by Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Yugoslavs, Hungarians, and Lithuanians, in that order. Similar patterns held true nationwide as late as 1935. In Catholic grade schools there were still nearly 300,000 pupils taking Polish, 100,000 taking French, and smaller numbers taking Slovak or Italian, though German was largely a thing of the past.⁴⁶ By this time, foreign languages usually were taught as a subject rather than being used as a medium of instruction, but this had not always been the case, as school law conflicts illustrate.

The states of Wisconsin and Illinois passed identical laws in 1889, stiffening school attendance requirements and in effect requiring parochial as well as public schools to teach reading, writing, arithmetic, and history in English. The Republican governor of Wisconsin had learned that there were 129 Lutheran schools in his state with no English instruction whatsoever. These laws united German Lutherans and Catholics against a common enemy and mobilized their Slavic ethnic allies, sweeping Republicans from power in both states. Pamphlets attacking the Bennett Law were published in German, Polish, and Bohemian. Needless to say, both school laws were repealed.⁴⁷

Schools were not the only area in which heritage languages were supported by public funds in the 19th century. New constitutions up for ratification in at least five different states were translated and published in foreign languages including German, Swedish, Norwegian, French, Dutch, Spanish, Czech, and even Welsh. In fact, the 1864 Wisconsin governor's message was translated and published in seven other languages, but this was a little too early for Polish to be included. One tends to think of the Confederacy as being quintessential White Bread America, but when Texas seceded from the Union, it ordered that the Confederate Secession Declaration be published also German and in Spanish; not that it convinced many people. By the time the 1875 Texas Constitution was up for ratification, Czech had been added to the language mix as well.⁴⁸

The immigrant press offers additional evidence of a multilingual America in the past. The German-language press peaked in 1892, with almost 800 publications nationwide, including 97 dailies. Despite the inroads made by World War I, in 1920 there were still 29 German-language dailies nationwide, along with 15 Polish dailies in second place, Yiddish third with 12, Italian with 11 followed by Czech with 9. Papers

⁴⁶ Miller, *The School and the Immigrant*, 33. Kloss, *American Bilingual Tradition*, 94–5.

⁴⁷ Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest. Social and Political Conflict, 1888–96* (University of Chicago Press, 1971), 122–148, 219–21.

⁴⁸ Kloss, *American Bilingual Tradition*, 100–105. *Chicago Tribune*, January 27, 1864, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers. The languages were German, Norwegian, Irish, Welsh, Dutch, French, and Bohemian.

in languages other than German peaked out at 812 in 1918 as immigrants eagerly followed the war's impact on their homelands, but fell off immediately once peace arrived and new arrivals dwindled in the wake of the war and restrictive laws.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, most critics of contemporary immigration have little historical perspective beyond their own lifetime, and mistake the interwar period for the norm. Although conditions for immigration are less stringent now than during the era of quota legislation from the 1920s to 1965, compared to the 19th century, America has been demanding more, not less, of its immigrants over the course of time. Bilingual ballots and voter qualifications are a prime example.

A writer to our local newspaper complained about bilingual poll workers and ballots, claiming that his grandfather who came from Germany in 1892 had to learn English to survive.⁵⁰ That may have been true of his grandfather, but it was not always necessary, even to become naturalized or vote. Not until 1906 was any knowledge of the English language or American government necessary for citizenship. All that was required was to swear off the Czar of Russia or the Emperor of Austria or Germany or whoever, swear loyalty to the U.S. Constitution, and that was sufficient. Lenient as such requirements were, in the 1880s eighteen states and territories went further, allowing immigrants to vote once they had obtained their "first papers," a declaration of intent to become a citizen, available after only two years. Texas was one of the last states to abolish these alien suffrage provisions, keeping them in effect right down to 1921.⁵¹

Perhaps there were no BI-lingual ballots in the 19th century, but the English-only crowd would be surprised to see that there were actual ballots printed and cast in the German language. One has survived from the 1872 city elections of Newport, Kentucky, just across the river from Cincinnati.⁵² Kentucky is one of the few states that preserved cast ballots, allowing historians to do exit polling a century after the fact. But similar tickets were published in nearly every German-American newspaper. Before the advent of secret ballots, they were distributed by the parties and were often simply cut out of newspapers. However, in the case of the Kentucky ballot, it is apparent that foreign-language ballots did not necessarily mean uninformed voters. Regardless of the voter's English skills, he was not satisfied to let an ethnic editor lead him around by the nose; he "scratched" several party candidates and wrote in his own choices. This presents evidence of immigrants participating intelligently and independently in the political process without necessarily having much command of English.

⁴⁹ Robert E. Park, *The Immigrant Press and its Control* (New York, 1922), 309–20.

⁵⁰ *The Eagle* (Bryan, TX), March 6, 2008, Opinions page.

⁵¹ L. Aylsworth, "The Passing of Alien Suffrage," *American Political Science Review*, 25 (1931), 114–116.

⁵² Donald A. DeBats, "German and Irish Political Engagement: The Politics of Cultural Diversity in an Industrial Age," in Wolfgang Helbig and Walter D. Kamphoefner, eds., *German-American Immigration and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective* (Madison, WI: Max Kade Institute, 2004), 211.

Moreover, one should beware of equating language preference or ability, with political loyalty or patriotism. The *St. Charles Demokrat*, a German weekly in my home county, published a full translation of the Declaration of Independence to celebrate July 4, 1862: transmitting American values in an immigrant language at a time when Missouri Germans were the most decisive Unionist in a border slave state. The Welsh-American *Y Drich* (The Mirror), then in its twelfth year as a weekly with subscribers in every state of the Union, published an article celebrating Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in Welsh. A 2001 article celebrating its 150th anniversary called it "a passionate supporter of the Northern cause," which urged its compatriots to form Welsh companies and regiments for the Union army. It celebrated victory by publishing a 600-page history of the Civil War. A New York publisher specializing in patriotic broadsides published a full-color sheet titled "Das Star Spangled Banner," a German translation of the national anthem, flanked by a German in a Zouave uniform on one side and a slave breaking his chains on the other. The translation itself has Texas origins, originating from the pen of immigrant Hermann Seele, future mayor of New Braunfels. It's a lively translation, true to the spirit of the original but not slavishly literal. While this one was the first, the National Anthem has been translated in several other languages as well, including Polish.⁵³

It is not surprising that such a broadside was published appealing specifically to Germans. Immigrants made up one quarter of the Union army, Germans alone one tenth. Many of them served in ethnic regiments where German was sometimes used as the language of command as late as 1863.⁵⁴ But even if (or perhaps because) they were singing the "Star Spangled Banner" *auf Deutsch*, they understood the core principles of the United States better than many Anglophones of American birth who were whistling "Dixie."

However, the lessons of the Civil War were slow to sink in, even for a president otherwise well versed in history. In his July 4, 1917 address, Theodore Roosevelt fulminated against what he called hyphenated Americans, again conflating language and loyalty: "We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language ... and we have room for but one sole loyalty and that is a loyalty to the American people." There are refutations of his claim written in stone in a half-dozen languages in cemeteries all across the nation. This first to catch my attention was a chance discovery at New Ulm, Texas: an American soldier who paid the ultimate sacrifice in France, commemorated with a bilingual tombstone in Czech and English, and this for someone of the third generation. Searching the records and tombstone images on the genealogical website

⁵³ Robert Strybel, "The 4th of July – Polish-American style," *The Summit Times*, Vol. 9, Issue No. 27/ 2002. http://users.rcn.com/salski/No27Folder/4th_of_July.htm.

⁵⁴ Walter D. Kamphoefner and Wolfgang Helbich, eds., *Germans in the Civil War: The Letters They Wrote Home* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2006), 7–10, 20–22. Wolfgang Helbich, "German-Born Union Soldiers: Motivation, Ethnicity, and 'Americanization,'" in Helbich and Kamphoefner, eds., *German-American Immigration and Ethnicity*, 302.

findagrave.com brought to light other gravestones of men who died in U.S. service in 1918 commemorated in other heritage languages: Polish, Spanish, Hebrew, Italian, and even German, sometimes without any English on the monument. Like the Czech soldier, many were of the third generation. My recent, preliminary investigations have turned up something even more surprising: letters written home from France by U.S. soldiers in the field in the German language and published in ethnic newspapers in Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, and Texas. A majority of these writers, too, were of the third generation. Fast forward to February 27, 2005: The *Austin American-Statesman* reported that Hispanic Texans were dying in Iraq at a rate more than 60 percent higher than the rate for the nation's military-age population as a whole. Why am I not surprised?

If you got all your information from Fox News and talk radio, you might think that the English language was under siege from Spanish. But upon closer examination, it's Spanish that's under siege. The 2000 Census shows that over 82 percent of Americans still speak English exclusively, and more than 91 percent of the population speaks it exclusively or "very well." In 2010 the percentage of immigrants who could not speak English was only 10 percent, less than half the proportion a century earlier in 1910 (22.8 percent), despite the fact that over one-fourth of the immigrants back then had their roots in English-speaking countries. Contradicting the prejudices against the urban "huddled masses" apparent in the Dillingham Commission Report, inability to speak English was highest in rural areas, and lowest in medium-sized cities.⁵⁵

But for those who do not trust government statistics, private enterprise also gives some perspective, namely the Nielsen Media Research TV Viewership Ratings. According to their 2004 survey, there were only a handful of major U.S. cities where a majority of all **Hispanic** TV households are also Spanish-language dominant. Miami was a worst-case scenario with 63 percent of the Hispanics preferring Spanish; New York and Dallas also came in a just over 50 percent. But these are the only metropolitan areas among the nineteen surveyed by Nielsen where the majority of Hispanics are Spanish-language dominant in their TV habits. Percentaged according to the whole population instead, the Spanish preferences look even less ominous. Harlingen, Texas, down on the Mexican border, was the only city where more than a third of all TV households were Spanish-language dominant; another border town, El Paso came in at 31 percent, Miami at one quarter. But in a dozen of the nineteen cities where Nielsen sampled Hispanics, the share of total households where Spanish TV was dominant fell below 10 percent. Nielsen surveys from 2011 confirm these tendencies. Less than half, only 47 percent, of the TV viewing in Hispanic TV Households surveyed was devoted to Spanish-language programming, up only one point from the overall

⁵⁵ This was the low point in English speaking ability; 15.6% of the foreign-born in 1890 and just 12.2% in 1900 could not speak English. In 1920 the figure again fell below 12%. Recency of arrival was the main factor. When the volume of immigration slackened with the depression of the 1890s and from World War I, English ability improved markedly in the next census. Irish, English, and British-Canadians were still three of the top four foreign-born nationalities in 1890.

figure in 2004 despite the expansion of Spanish broadcasting. Among the thirteen cities surveyed in both 2004 and 2011, eight saw a drop in the Spanish-language preference among Hispanic households, among them the big cities of San Francisco, Houston, Phoenix, Chicago, and Dallas as well as the Texas border towns of El Paso and Harlingen. Only five cities, none more populous than Denver, Colorado, and Austin, Texas, saw increases in Hispanic reliance on Spanish-language TV.⁵⁶

For many Americans, visions of a Hispanic takeover were nowhere more vivid than in Miami, which in the 1960s sported bumper stickers with messages like, "Will the last American to leave please turn out the lights." There were shop windows displaying signs advertising "English spoken"; it was taken for granted that Spanish was spoken. Fortunately, one of the broadest and most careful investigations of language change was conducted in the greater Miami area. This 1992 study found that less than one percent of American-born children of immigrants reported speaking English "not well" or "not at all"; by contrast, more than one-third reported such poor competence in Spanish. The authors conclude that "English is alive and well in Miami; contrary to nativist fears, what is at risk is the preservation of some competence" in Spanish.⁵⁷ Another 1991 study found that "even in southern California, ... language shift... among Latinos, is proceeding along the same lines as in the past. The intergenerational pattern is slower ... than that of Asian languages, but it is incontrovertible" i.e. unquestionable. By the third generation, over 90 percent of Asian and more than half of all Hispanics speak only English.⁵⁸

Those studies are now a quarter century old, so one might think they are outdated. For an update, let's examine a worst case scenario, Zavala County Texas, less than 50 km from the Mexican border. (Even the name probably sounds un-American to Trump voters, but it commemorates a signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence and the Republic's first Vice President.) In the year 2000, no less than 85 percent of the county residents could speak Spanish. Somewhere down in hell, General Santa Anna is laughing.⁵⁹ Or maybe not--of these Spanish speakers, all but 21 percent spoke English "well" or "very well." Only among those of retirement age did a majority (58 percent) have a poor command of English; in the youngest group below age eighteen it was a mere 7 percent who were deficient in English. Moreover,

⁵⁶ Office of Strategic Planning and Policy Analysis, "Hispanic Television Study" (April 2016): https://transition.fcc.gov/mb/docs/peer_review/prhispanictv_study.pdf. Additional confirmation is provided by the Pew Research Center's Hispanic News Media Fact Sheet. <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/06/30143308/state-of-the-news-media-report-2016-final.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Alejandro Portes and Richard Schauffler, "Language Acquisition and Loss Among Children of Immigrants," in Silvia Pedraza and Ruben G. Rumbaut, eds., *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America* (Wadsworth Press, 1995), 432–43, quote 442.

⁵⁸ David E. Lopez, "Social and Linguistic Aspects of Assimilation Today," in Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, and Josh Dewind, eds., *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 212–22, quote 218.

⁵⁹ As all Texans know (but Poles may not), the defeat of Mexican General Santa Anna in 1836 secured the independence of the Texas Republic.

when one examines the change to 2010, it is apparent how much ground Spanish has lost; the portion speaking English only nearly doubled from 15 to 27 percent. So if English thriving even in the birthplace of La Raza Unida, why would the rest of us need to worry?⁶⁰ And yet some do.

The late Samuel Huntington and others have voiced concern about new media such as cable TV, DVDs, and the internet, which can bring the language and culture of origin into immigrant homes in a way that was not possible a century ago. Huntington was especially concerned about Spanish language retention among Mexican immigrants.⁶¹ Indeed, such new media may have improved the chances for the children of immigrants to remain truly bilingual and bicultural, at least among the better off, such as my own children. But these cultural transmitters run both ways—they can just as easily channel mainstream culture and the English language into immigrant homes, as the Nielsen data shows. After all, there’s a reason why you can’t read the *New York Times* online in China.

While some nationalists and cultural pessimists in the United States are concerned that immigrant newcomers will never adequately absorb the English language and American culture, nationalists and cultural pessimists in Old Europe are worried that their culture is becoming undermined and Americanized without anyone even leaving home. France in particular comes to mind, where the National Academy is hard at work in a futile effort to weed out snappy, practical English words like e-mail and airbag and replace them with cumbersome, multi-syllabic French ones. But also in Germany, one author launched a humorous protest against this development with his book *Modern Talking auf Deutsch*, devoting 250 pages to spoofing 1,000 “Denglish” terms, English words that have become fashionable in German—everything from access to zipper.⁶² It’s a very funny book, though in order to grasp the humor you need to know both German and English—not that that’s a problem for most Germans. Incidentally, my wife, who is German, speaks the world’s most popular language; I do not. I’m not referring to Chinese, which only has the most native speakers; I’m talking about--English with a foreign accent.⁶³

So if English is thriving even down on the Rio Grande and in Miami and Los Angeles, those of us in the rest of the country have all the less cause for concern.

⁶⁰ Data was obtained from the Modern Language Association’s 2000 and 2010 MLA Language Maps, which provide nationwide county-level information on the prevalence of fifteen different languages including Polish. La Raza Unida was a radical Hispanic-rights party formed in 1970 at Crystal City, the Zavala County seat.

⁶¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

⁶² Leslie Savan, *Slam Dunks and No-brainers: Language in your Life, the Media, Business, Politics, and, like, Whatever* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 33. Walter Krämer, *Modern Talking auf Deutsch: Ein populäres Lexicon* (Munich: Piper, 2000). Even in Krakow where I presented this essay as a lecture, I was surprised to see on the breakfast table an advertisement for “Firma Cateringowa.”

⁶³ David Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 68–71.

We often tend to underestimate the seductiveness of the American language and culture, then and now. This is perfectly illustrated by two observations more than a century apart, about the leading immigrant group in the 19th and the 21st century respectively. What is striking is how similar these patterns have remained over the centuries among two otherwise very different groups, each wanting to achieve the best of two worlds for the next generation, but in both cases falling short.

Immigrant statesman Carl Schurz visited my Missouri home town in 1867 and reported on it in a letter to his wife:

Morning brought us to Augusta, a little place some fifty miles above the mouth of the Missouri... [A] number of educated immigrants of the thirties had settled there, who were conserving in that neighborhood, in their own way, the best features of German life. Augusta is a small town of not more than 300 inhabitants...

After dinner ... quite naturally speeches had to be made... Of course all the speeches were in German, for in Augusta there are no Americans except the shoemaker's apprentice, who has recently arrived and who is learning German, and several Negro families, among whom the children can already speak German...

The little German colony in Augusta certainly gives the impression of prosperity. The old people have preserved the tradition of the German spirit and German training, but they are unable to bequeath this tradition to their children. It is an observation which I have made almost everywhere, that here in America ... the children of educated Germans contrast strikingly with their elders. The German spirit fades away... the waves of Americanization soon overwhelm the second and third generations... In a few years the old patriarchs in pleasant little Augusta will be dead and their successors must be carried away by the universal movement.⁶⁴

In her autobiographical 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan relates the lament of an immigrant Chinese mother over her inability to pass along her language and culture:

My daughter wanted to go to China for her second honeymoon, but now she is afraid. "What if I blend in so well they think I'm one of them?" Waverly asked me. "What if they don't let me come back to the United States?"

"When you go to China," I told her, "you don't even need to open your mouth. They already know you are an outsider."

"What are you talking about?" she asked. My daughter likes to speak back. She likes to question what I say... I said, "Even if you put on their clothes, even if you take off your makeup and hide your fancy jewelry, they know. They know just watching the way you walk, the way you carry your face. They know you do not belong."

My daughter did not look pleased when I told her this, that she didn't look Chinese. She had a sour American look on her face. Oh, maybe ten years ago, she would have

⁶⁴ Joseph Schafer, ed. and trans., *Intimate letters of Carl Schurz, 1841–1869* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1928), 379–83.

clapped her hands – hurray! – as if this were good news. But now she wants to be Chinese, it is so fashionable. And I know it is too late. All those years I tried to teach her! She followed my Chinese ways only until she learned how to walk out the door by herself and go to school. So now the only Chinese words she can say are... Pee pee, choo choo train, eat, close light sleep. How can she think she can blend in? Only her skin and her hair are Chinese. Inside – she is all American made.

It's my fault she is this way. I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix?

I taught her how American circumstances work. If you are born poor here, it's no lasting shame. You are first in line for a scholarship. If the roof crashes on your head, no need to cry over this bad luck. You can sue anybody, make the landlord fix it. You do not have to sit like a Buddha under a tree letting pigeons drop their dirty business on your head. You can buy an umbrella. Or go inside a Catholic church. In America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gives you.

She learned these things, but I couldn't teach her about Chinese character. How to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities. Why easy things are not worth pursuing. How to know your own worth and polish it, never flashing it around like a cheap ring. Why Chinese thinking is best.

No, this kind of thinking didn't stick to her. She was too busy chewing gum, blowing bubbles bigger than her cheeks. Only that kind of thinking stuck.

"Finish your coffee," I told her yesterday. "Don't throw your blessings away."

"Don't be so old fashioned, Ma," she told me, finishing her coffee down the sink. "I'm my own person."

And I think, How can she be her own person? When did I give her up?⁶⁵

A lot of immigrant parents have asked themselves that question over the last two centuries. I guess some things never change.

⁶⁵ Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: Putnam's, 1989), 253–4.