

# Reflections on Ethnic Diversity in America

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There is probably no greater issue before the American people today than the question of race. And this issue is not at all restricted to matters concerning blacks and whites, or the descendants of slaves and the descendants of slave owners. Rather, the issue of race is an issue of identity, of cultural and linguistic groupings and ethnic populations, of increasing racial diversity and unprecedented numbers of immigrants. To be sure, who we Americans are, as a people, was an issue from our earliest existence. What we become, as a society and a nation, remains a fascinating challenge. This issue, this question of race is what I want to discuss with you today, largely because in my view the evolution of the United States is intimately connected to the matter of race, and to the manner in which American society deals with its racial diversity.

The first European settlers in America encountered indigenous peoples whom Columbus erroneously called “Indians.” Relations with Native Americans ranged from good to terrible as various efforts by white Europeans were made to cohabit the land with the American Indians, to convert them to Christianity, and quite frankly, to kill them—the last goal being one at which historians agree the Spanish were most adept. Added to the mix of natives—and they varied greatly from North to South—were Africans, brought over by Europeans as slaves and indentured servants. Long before the United States became an independent nation, it contained from Florida to Maine a multi-racial society, which vexed the Founding Fathers by its complexity, and led to unique and unsatisfactory compromises between slave and non-slave colonies even in the 1788 drafting of the U.S. Constitution. In order to apportion taxes according to the size of the population, Article I of the Constitution stated that the tax census would include free persons but exclude “Indians not taxed, and 3/5s of all other persons”—meaning that only 2/5s of the African population could be numbered, thus reducing tax obligations for slave states. Article IV of the Constitution stated that slaves could not escape their status by fleeing to non-slave lands—a section of the Constitution reaffirmed in the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and by the 1857 Supreme Court decision in the Scott versus Sanford case. These provisions of Articles I and IV were to be sure later amended—cancelled.

Curiously, the first ten amendments to the Constitution—without which the document that shapes America’s destiny would not have been adopted in 1789—make no mention of race. Nevertheless, it was the Bill of Rights, these very amendments together with the Declaration of Independence that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others successfully employed during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s.

Sorting out racial questions for census and tax purposes not was the only concern of the framers of the Constitution. Indeed, George Washington was acutely aware that the large numbers of African Americans in the United States would present dangerous political problems to future generations. Washington freed his own slaves at his death in 1799, an act known as manumission and not uncommon. Thus the southern slaves states held both

free and slave African populations, not to mention several Indian tribes. And another Founding Father, Thomas Jefferson, who drafted the Declaration of Independence celebrating the equality of mankind, comments in his *Notes on Virginia* (1781) that Indians are mentally and physically inferior human beings. So much for real equality among all men. Indeed, the racial tensions and problems already well established in America by the early 1800s led Alexis de Toqueville to write in his 1836 study, *Democracy in America*, that a failure to embrace both blacks and Native Americans “could bring the great American experiment to an end.”

This “great American experiment,” as de Toqueville so aptly describes it, was to become even more difficult to manage as immigration—both legal and illegal—significantly altered the American racial landscape over the years. But let me turn to the struggle for freedom which engulfed blacks and Native Americans during the last two centuries, an ultimately successful campaign upon which new Americans, the new immigrants especially continue to base their own quest for both *de facto* and *de jure* recognition.

The American Civil War was the turning point for Africans in America. It was a war fought in large measure over the issue of slavery, although more over the economic and political aspects of slavery than over a sense of moral objection to the practice. Further, most Confederate soldiers did not own slaves, and were a reporter to have inquired of southern combatants at Manassas why they were rebelling against the Union, the answers would have clustered around concepts of states’ rights and a general resentment of Yankee power and intrusion. Slavery would hardly have been mentioned. Still, Harriett Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1855), dramatized and popularized the ugliest consequences of slavery, however excessively portrayed in the book that President Lincoln held responsible for the War. And Lincoln added to the argument when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, freeing the slaves in all rebel territory. Thus did slavery claim center stage in the conflict, and thus did the politically sage president effectively keep England and Europe out of the fight. Backing the underdog South against the rapacious North was one thing; supporting the institution of slavery by aiding the South was quite another.

Subsequent amendments to the Constitution abolished slavery throughout the United States and are commonly known as the Civil War amendments. Still, the battle for equal rights for African Americans was hardly won. Tactics labeled “Jim Crow” kept Negroes on a second-class status. Voting restrictions further disenfranchised blacks in the South, and the Supreme Court raised its imposing head yet again when it found in the Plessy versus Ferguson decision of 1897 that separate but equal facilities—be they waiting rooms in train stations or neighborhood schools—was a constitutional state of affairs. It was not until 1954 when a young black attorney, Thurgood Marshall, argued on the winning side that a “separate but equal” status was un-Constitutional, unrealistic and unfair. Thus came the landmark Brown versus Board of Education ruling of the Supreme Court, whose bench Marshall himself would later join as an Associate Justice.

Nevertheless, unjust practices continued which led to the Kennedy-Johnson legislation of the 1960s, primarily to the great Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlaws racial and other

forms of discrimination in virtually all behavior that the Federal Government can influence. And thus have African-Americans gained *de jure* protection after a long battle in many courtrooms throughout the country, mainly by employing Constitutional guarantees, by using the very documents that created the United States to vouchsafe their freedom and their rights. Sadly, the struggle included mob lynchings and church burnings, and the sacrifice of many lives. But the war was won in the courtrooms, which I suggest will be the case for future racial disagreements.

The story of Native Americans is more disturbing—and not nearly as concluded. It is a history of abuse and neglect for which many people, including the Natives themselves, share responsibility. The absence of advocacy within the Native American community—at least in comparison to African-American engagement—can I think be attributed to the fact that the Africans were by the nature of their servitude always more intimately connected to Europeans than were the American Indians. The Africans learned to read and write, learned the “white man’s ways,” as movie dialogue would have it. They learned as well that the way to stay out of jail in America is to get a good lawyer, a lesson clearly exemplified by the O.J. Simpson murder trial. Africans also were involved in the evolution of the country. Indeed, Crispus Atticus, a free black man, became one of the first martyrs in the American Revolution when he was shot by British soldiers during the so-called Boston Massacre of 1770. The Civil War, this wrenching bloody war that continues to affect the country was a war fought over blacks and at times by blacks—such as the famous 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts regiment.

The “Indian” experience is wholly different since the Natives were never an integral part of society or government. They were either friendly or hostile, and if hostile, they faced virtual extinction through warfare. They became pawns in the French and English wars to gain dominion over North America. The Natives of the New England colonies also had such a long history of tribal rivalry and warfare among themselves that they were incapable of uniting to show any substantial resistance to the Europeans and their ineluctable conquest of the land.

The Plains Indian Wars witnessed the only major coalition of tribes briefly under Sitting Bull, a coalition that destroyed George Custer’s ill-guided command in June of 1876. The Indian Wars saw terrible atrocities on both sides as they led to the inevitable defeat of the Natives, the murder of Sitting Bull, the surrender of Geronimo, and the consignment of the survivors to prisons and to reservations. Only the Seminoles in Florida avoided complete military defeat by taking refuge in the swamps and miasmas of the Everglades.

(Jamestown Massacre, 1622: 350 settlers murdered)

The Native Americans were, for the most part, always the enemy of the white man. Gen. Philip Sheridan went west to fight Indians after the Civil War, and on one occasion Sheridan had an unpleasant discussion with a Native, who remarked at one point, “Me good Indian,” to which the diminutive general replied, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” This was the attitude that many whites shared in nineteenth-century America, an

attitude that has mercifully been abandoned over time as more attention has been paid to the plight of Native Americans. The sense of “enemy” has been properly replaced by a sense of reconciliation, a sense even of shame for the humiliation suffered by Native Americans.

Let me say a word here about reservations and casinos and current Native American life in the United States. Native Americans number around 2.8 million people, or roughly one percent of the total population. In language and culture they vary widely from Florida to New Mexico to Minnesota to Oregon. Most live on land ceded to them by the Federal Government, the land reserved for American Indian use. These “reservations” are not prisons, nor do Indians have to live on a reservation. The majority do so because they want to be among their own people, and because the reservations are managed by tribal councils, not by whites. Police forces and the administration of justice are also under tribal control, a fact that has led to considerable friction between state and federal police and the tribal councils, especially since some reservations—notably in New York state, are involved in smuggling—usually of cigarettes and alcohol. Moreover, some Natives wanted for capital crimes have escaped prosecution by hiding on reservations. This is an on-going problem for which there is no easy solution.

To compound difficulties is the American Indian Gaming Act of 1988, which permits gambling casinos on Indian lands. These casinos are not sources of entertainment. Siegfried and Roy and their tigers do not perform in these casinos. They are strictly for Gambling, for losing one’s money. Profits are intended to help the various tribes secure higher standards of living and afford university education. Whether this is in fact really happening is not entirely clear. I suspect the outcome is mixed. One thing is certain: Indian lands are not enhanced in their physical appearance by the presence of gambling houses.

Still, the general picture for Native Americans is far better now than it was in the past. One U.S. Senator—Ben Nighthorse Campbell—is a Native American. Southwest Indian tribes have established commercial and art centers that have achieved high degrees of success. A renewed interest in Native cultures has brought considerable attention to many tribes, and the process of restitution of stolen Native artifacts has also helped to heal old wounds. But much still needs to be done to address previous wrongs.

While integration and assimilation have been long-standing goals for millions of African Americans and of immigrants, a return to cultural origins and early practices seems more important to Native Americans. Becoming a part of the white man’s world has historically held little appeal to American Indians, and indeed many blacks and immigrants have also shown increasing desire to claim a racial heritage rather than focus on assimilation. In any event, the subject of integration and assimilation deserves more analysis here, since it touches on the present-day concerns and the matter of diversity and Americanness I mentioned at the beginning of my talk.

We Americans are, after all, a nation of nations, a nation of immigrants, and a nation of minorities. Demographers predict that within a few decades, there will be no ethnic or racial majority in the United States. The Hispanic or Latino population now equals the African-American population—each is approximately at 18 percent. The Asian-American population is about 3 percent and rapidly increasing. Furthermore, Americans are facing growing difficulty in describing their racial background, because miscegenation among racial groups is increasing at a rapid pace. And the racial indicators requested by the U.S. Census—which the Constitution requires the Government to hold every ten years—are increasingly confusing and unacceptable to Americans. White, Black, Native, Hispanic, or Asian—which am I, asks the respondent? Hispanics, for example, can be white or black, and all the above can in millions of instances claim a mixture of heritages. The Census asks for racial information in order to comply with the Equal Employment Opportunities Act, with Affirmation Action and related federal programs which offer help to underrepresented racial groups in the labor force. But critics observe that the categories are unrealistic and divisive, and certainly annoying to many Americans who do not wish to be catalogued in a delimited racial fashion.

Moreover, the unprecedented numbers of immigrants in recent years complicate the picture, in part because while African and Native Americans shared in the history of the country—through good and bad times—the influx of new immigrants has no historical connection to the watershed experiences of blacks and Indians. The new new immigrants arrive for economic and political benefit without having paid the price that blacks and Indians have paid. Is it any wonder that the black and Hispanic communities sometimes encounter friction, even deadly differences. Low economic and educational indicators further exacerbate the condition especially of Hispanic immigrants, and the exclusive speaking of Spanish and Korean, to cite two important examples, in several parts of the country adds to the friction, or to the likelihood of future trouble.

Almost 30 percent of all recent immigrants in the United States come from Mexico, and huge numbers have also been arriving in the last 5 years from Central America. The Cuban population in Florida has been considerable since Fidel Castro took power, and so it is no surprise that for both historical and current reasons, Spanish is the second language of the United States. We even have a president who speaks Spanish.

Yet how does the Federal Government make sense of all this in its role as a unifying force, in its work to create political stability and economic growth? The Federal Government has, for example, resisted the lobbying of many to make English the “Official Language” of the United States, partly because we are a nation where hundreds of languages are spoken, partly to avoid making minorities angry, and partly because there is an inertia toward English that encourages everyone to learn this language. While older immigrants may never learn English, their children will. When the Rev. Jesse Jackson criticized the teaching of “Ebonics” or “Black English” in the public schools, he did so because he knew that standard English was the only language recognized by the corporate and educational communities in America, and he did not want to disadvantage

African Americans by encouraging a dialect that would not promote their economic advancement.

I am personally concerned, I must allow, by the Spanish communities in Florida and elsewhere, and even the Korean one in Northern Virginia that do not accommodate English speakers. This is more than a refusal to assimilate, for language is the most profoundly unifying factor in any culture, and the purposeful rejection of a common tongue can only lead to the kinds of problems that have plagued Canada and Belgium and other parts of the globe. Having two huge language groups that cannot or will not talk to one another can only bring us misfortune. Further, the staggering number of immigrants in the United States may indeed convince the Congress to legislate English as an official language. Whether this legislation would pass muster in the Supreme Court is another question. Whatever the legal outcome, I am persuaded that the United States needs English as its *lingua franca*, as an essential element of its identity and as an essential element of its unity as a nation—however much Spanish is spoken as a second language or spoken in the homes of millions of Americans.

But perhaps when Americans born as native Spanish speakers exceed the numbers born speaking English and other tongues, this question will be reconsidered. Still, the Federal Government will continue to study the results of the 2000 Census carefully, since the unexpected ethnic diversity brought by unexpected immigration and intermarriage raises the specter especially of an Hispanic under class. Immigrants from Asia, particularly from India, tend to be well educated and technically competent, while those from Mexico and Central America are generally not. This situation could prompt special programs to help the poorer immigrants obtain both educational opportunities and jobs.

Issues have also arisen concerning the new immigrants about their interest in assimilation, in becoming Americans or at least, for example, Mexican-Americans. The metaphor used in the past was “a melting pot,” which suggested that out of the many that came to America, one essential American emerged. This is, to be sure, the motto inscribed on our currency: *e pluribus, unum*. But some doubt that the melting pot was ever a truly accurate metaphor for describing the transformation of immigrants into newly-minted Americans.

Today, metaphors like “salad” and “pizza” are preferred, noting that the ingredients retain their own character and flavor, but still blend wonderfully together to make a perfect whole. The question—and this will take many years to answer—is whether the new immigrants can identify with the United States as their new homeland, or whether they are essentially, like many temporary workers in Germany, simply residing in the United States in order to make some money for a period of time. Some of the salad ingredients may not, in short, want to be in the salad at all.

Commitment to duty, to military service, to supporting America’s war against terrorism, must come from a majority of Americans in order to provide political support for any government’s undertakings, especially ones that include fighting and dying. Paying taxes, voting in elections, supporting one’s local community—all of these actions also

give evidence of citizenship, of partnership and belonging. And all of these actions are what any central government would want to see among its citizenry, including of course among its newest immigrants.

What the 2000 Census shows us, and more recent studies support, is that American society is more diverse than ever in its history. While this hugely important fact represents a challenge to individuals and governments alike, it is also my conviction that the legislation fashioned in the last decades for the protection of civil rights will provide the underpinning for the successful and indeed non-violent integration of various ethnic and racial types into a relatively homogenous American. Of course, the Declaration of Independence and other basic instruments of American democracy will also help in this effort. But the most important ingredient will be the use of American English as the essential solder of a cohesive society.

The great American experiment continues, at any rate, and will prove to be one of the world's most interesting attempts to bring so many different cultures, languages, and races together into one society, and to produce from this mix a recognizable American character, a character known for inquisitiveness, optimism, hospitality, a willingness to try new ways of doing things, and an impatience with indecision.

I see this outcome as a probability—and most certainly, as a fascinating process. And I foresee as well a challenge to western European countries to prepare themselves, legally, morally, socially—for the changes to their ethnic make-up that the coming years are so likely to bring.

Thank you for your attention. I would be happy to entertain your questions.