

# WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

## AMERICA AND THE DYNAMICS OF IMMIGRATION

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Michael Barone

*A Nation of Immigrants.* That was the title of a book written in 1958 by John F. Kennedy, when he was about to launch his campaign to become the first Catholic president of the United States, and published posthumously in 1964. Political opponents might see its origin as opportunistic, an attempt to help Kennedy's efforts to be elected, and its eventual publication as propagandistic, to make palatable the changes in immigration law he promoted, a version of which Congress would pass in 1965.

But all that said, the title and the thesis are self-evidently accurate. The historian Walter McDougall has described how one transported back in time four hundred years would find most concentrations of population very similar to today's: great masses in China and India, a Muslim world of many varieties and schisms, a Europe "aspiring to unity but vexed by its dense congeries of nations and tongues," and a Russia expanding outward from its Muscovite base. Only

North America would look very different.<sup>1</sup> It was not vacant, as Charles C. Mann documents in his fascinating books *1491* and *1493*; Indian farming and hunting civilizations had developed in these lands over centuries. But they had only the slightest of connections to the more advanced societies of Europe and Asia, and their people were soon, on contact with Europeans, to suffer enormous depopulation owing to diseases for which they had no immunity.

Today the United States has less than 5 percent of the world's population but produces one-quarter of the world's economic product and deploys by reasonable measures more than half the world's military capability. Only 1 or 2 percent of the combined genetic ancestry of American citizens and residents today can be traced back to people who lived within the nation's current boundaries in 1600. Of only a few other nations—Canada, Australia, perhaps some small former British or European colonies—can anything like this be said. We are, like it or not, a nation

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of immigrants, even if John F. Kennedy was self-serving in saying so.

In the twenty-first century, Americans are being told that this country is, for the first time, a multicultural society. The supposed contrast is with an America populated entirely with English-speaking people from the British Isles and parts of western Europe—a caricature of the pride taken by Daughters of the American Revolution in their pure and elevated ancestry. But at least the more knowledgeable of the Daughters realize what the Founding Fathers certainly knew, that the nation whose independence they asserted, at the risk of their lives, their liberty, and their sacred honor, was anything but a homogeneous polity, in ethnic origin, in religion, and of course in race: the one-fifth of colonial Americans who were slaves were already creating their own institutional churches and self-help associations. American English had become distinctive enough to provoke sneers in Britain, and there were different kinds of American English—New England and southern variants—with some of the Scots-Irish barely intelligible, and the German of the Pennsylvania Dutch even less so.

But to follow the immigration debate today, one would think we have reached a unique juncture in American history. In fact, in previous centuries America experienced surges of immigration vastly larger than anything that has occurred in recent memory. And it is nothing new to hear fears that immigrant groups threaten the American character or the safety and security of the American people. The problems we face are ones earlier generations of Americans confronted. The key question is how we choose to address those issues, and not simply from a policy standpoint.

For three-quarters of their history, running well into the twentieth century, the British colonies that declared their independence in 1776 as the United States of America welcomed immigrants for the very good reason that their communities, rich in land, were short of labor. That is the reason as well for the unfortunate fact that the colonies and the nation they formed imported slaves from Africa. Those descended from slaves account for one in eight of the nation's people today, but many of them also have ancestry that can be traced to Britain and Europe, as do the vast majority of the other seven-eighths.

It is also a fact, one perhaps not widely recognized but apparent to increasingly numerous historians, that immigration was not a slow, steady process. Rather, colonial and republican times saw occasional vast surges of immigration, with large numbers of people coming overwhelmingly from a relatively few locales to particular parts of America. As the historian Bernard Bailyn writes in his essay "Peopling the Peripheries," "In each of two short peak periods of population movements from Britain to America, 1630–60 and 1760–76, the flow totaled close to a quarter of a million people."<sup>2</sup> That was a huge increase for colonies whose non-Indian residents totaled in the low tens of thousands in the early seventeenth century and not much more than two million in the middle of the eighteenth. As a percentage of preexisting population, this influx dwarfs the rate of immigration into the United States during the lifetime of any American now living.

In his endlessly fascinating book *Albion's Seed*, the historian David Hackett Fischer recounts how the bulk of migrants into four different parts of colonial America came disproportionately from four different parts of the British Isles, each with distinctive folkways.<sup>3</sup> The New England colonies were

largely settled by Calvinist Protestants—Puritans, in common parlance—from the east of England. The Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland were settled in large part by Anglican squires and gentry younger sons, and by much ruder folk coming often as indentured laborers, from the west of England. Politics and religion, then very much tied together, drove both these movements: the Puritans were coming to get away from the government of King Charles I and the church of Archbishop William Laud; the Anglicans were coming to get away from the republican government of the Puritan Oliver Cromwell.

Fischer identifies two other sources of heavy migration. One was from the North Midlands of England to the Delaware River valley and the Pennsylvania colony founded by the Quaker William Penn in 1682; their numbers were augmented by Dutch and German pietists recruited by Penn's agent in the Netherlands and the Rhineland. The other, in the eighteenth-century period Bailyn highlighted, was a sudden surge of the Scots-Irish—Presbyterians from Ulster (Northern Ireland), the Scottish Lowlands, and the northernmost shires of England. They landed and quickly lighted out along the Appalachian chain from western Pennsylvania, down the Shenandoah Valley, and into the Upcountry of the Carolinas and what would become Kentucky and Tennessee.

Immigrants, in smaller numbers, came from other places as well. In his most recent books Bailyn recounts the grim story of immigrants from Sweden in the Delaware Valley, of the Dutch in New York City and across the Hudson in New Jersey, and of British and French adventurers attempting to set up communities in the swamps of Florida. New York from its Dutch beginnings was always polyglot, with a significant

Jewish population, just as there were colonial Jewish communities in the smaller ports of Charleston and Newport.

The Founders recognized all this diversity and, after some missteps, designed a federal republic that could accommodate local differences and guarantee individual rights. Aware that Europe and Britain had been torn by religious wars during most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they took special care to accommodate diversity of religion. There would be, the Constitution declared, no religious test for office, in vivid contrast to British law, which barred Catholic office holding until 1829 and Jewish office holding even later. The First Amendment of the Constitution recognized, even before free speech, the freedom of religion and the free exercise thereof, and provided that Congress would "make no law regarding an establishment of religion." This did not bar states from maintaining established churches: Virginia disestablished its Anglican church in 1786 under the urging of George Mason, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison; Connecticut and Massachusetts continued their established Calvinist churches until 1818 and 1833, respectively.

The Constitution in 1787 gingerly avoided the words *slave* and *slavery*. But the Confederation had already that year banned slavery in the Northwest Territory, which would become the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and other northern states abolished slavery in the two decades after ratification. The Constitution prohibited Congress from banning the slave trade until January 1, 1808, but Congress duly and uncontroversially outlawed the importation of slaves as soon as it was constitutionally permitted to do so. The framers' formula was clear: a federal government that could protect the nation but otherwise lightly govern, leaving room

for states to pursue their own policies and for voluntary associations to thrive in thousands of communities.

What would the young republic do about immigration? The Constitution granted Congress the power to set rules for naturalization of citizens and to regulate foreign commerce, but the need to set immigration policy was not an issue in the quarter century after George Washington's inauguration. The world war between royal and commercial Britain and revolutionary and Napoleonic France that raged with a single year's pause from 1793 to 1815 effectively barred migrants from coming to the new republic. In the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, the Federalist-majority Congress did extend the length of residency required for citizenship from five to fifteen years, but the Republican-majority Congress repealed that measure in 1801. The federal government did not start keeping track of the number of immigrants until 1820, and for the next quarter century only a trickle came over: slightly more than one million during that entire period, an average of just 42,000 per year.

That changed in the middle 1840s, after the potato famine struck Ireland and political upheaval rose in Germany. In the single decade between 1846 and 1855, 1,288,000 Irish, mostly Catholics, and 976,000 Germans immigrated to the United States. Total immigration during this period averaged 300,000 a year. As a percentage of preexisting population, immigration reached a level three times that of the quarter century from 1882 to 2007 and is matched only by the Ellis Island immigration of the years from 1892 to 1914.

These immigrants, moreover, seemed profoundly alien to most Americans of the time. The Germans spoke another language and had a distinctly different culture, though

some of their mores—singing societies, Christmas trees—became part of the larger American culture. At first they settled largely in the farmlands of the Midwest, but many clustered in rapidly growing cities, giving the inland metropolises of Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Milwaukee a strong German flavor and establishing heavily German neighborhoods in New York and Chicago.

Irish Catholics were more difficult to assimilate. Many in the initial surge of migration did not speak English (though most Irish immigrants did later in the century, as Gaelic nearly died out in Ireland). With only a few exceptions (including President Kennedy's ancestors), they had low levels of skills and knowledge and settled for jobs involving heavy labor. If they could find jobs, that is. "No Irish need apply" read many signs and help-wanted advertisements. Landlords often refused to rent apartments or houses to Irish, which led to residential segregation. Some neighborhoods—including almost all of Boston—became heavily Irish, while others became almost entirely non-Irish. At a time when people are often described as "white Europeans," as if that were a homogeneous group, it is easy to forget that in the nineteenth century the Irish were widely considered members of a separate and inferior race (as were Italians and others).

The Irish vastly increased the number of Roman Catholics in the nation at a time when many, perhaps most, American Protestants considered Catholicism a religion hostile to democracy and controlled by an unfriendly foreign power. In the 1850s Pope Pius IX donated a block of marble for the construction of the Washington Monument, sparking widespread criticism and protest about this "sinister" gift. Members of the Know-Nothing Party stole and destroyed the pope's stone. Know-Nothings soon took control of the Washington National Monu-

ment Society, causing contributions to dry up and suspending construction for years.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the massive influx of foreign-born people, the federal government did not seek to control immigration from the 1840s through the 1880s. Immigrants—Irish Catholics, British Protestants, German Protestants and Catholics, Scandinavians—settled almost entirely in the fast-growing northern states, many in the big cities, even more in the farmlands opening up to the west; almost none settled in the antebellum slave-bound or postbellum economically ailing South. State governments, led by New York and Massachusetts, screened immigrants and excluded those with health problems or who seemed unable to support themselves.

The federal government took over this function late in the century, symbolized by the building of the immigration screening facility on Ellis Island in 1892.

Perhaps coincidentally, 1892 turned out to be an inflection point in the source of immigrants. For the preceding half century, they had come mostly from northwestern Europe, from cultures that were to varying degrees (least so in the case of Irish Catholics) compatible with the cultures of the northern United States.

Starting in the middle 1890s, as the economy recovered and large-scale industrial development burgeoned, immigrants came increasingly from eastern and southern Europe. They were, for the most part, from ethnic groups that were regarded as second-class citizens in multiethnic polities—southern Italians from an Italy run by culturally very different northern Italians; Jews and Poles and Lithuanians from Russia's czarist empire; Czechs, Slovaks, Croatians, Serbs, Romanians, and Galician Poles and Jews from the Hapsburg empire of Austria-Hungary. These people were looking for eco-

nomic opportunity, just as the industrialists investing huge amounts of capital in factories were looking for low- and middle-skill workers. The Ellis Island immigration peaked in 1907, when 1,285,000 immigrants arrived in a nation of 87 million, and subsided after the financial panic in October of that year. But economic conditions were not all that mattered. These immigrants were also looking for an escape from ethnic subservience to full-fledged citizenship in a land of at least reputed civic equality.

This yearning helped to explain the success of the assimilation program of American elites alarmed by, or reacting to widespread alarm at, the prospect that these newcomers from very different and seemingly undemocratic societies would introduce an alien and hostile element into American society. President Theodore Roosevelt, who had become acquainted with the immigrant masses as a candidate for mayor and a police commissioner in his native New York City, pressed hard for "Americanization" and denounced hyphenated Americans. The public schools of New York and the settlement movement pioneered in Chicago devised programs for acculturating immigrants into their new homes. Henry Ford set up English language and Americanization classes for the thousands of workers in his giant auto factories.

Fears that immigrants could not be assimilated led to attempts to limit immigration, but Presidents William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson vetoed restrictive immigration laws. The outbreak of World War I in August 1914, however, stopped the flow of immigration almost entirely. America's entry into that war, in April 1917, led to a far more active and intrusive federal government, one that seized railroads and shipyards, imposed wage and price controls, jailed war opponents and critics, and enforced other restrictive measures. Once the war ended,

restricting immigration seemed within the government's competence.

Restrictive immigration laws passed by Congress were signed by President Warren Harding in 1921 and President Calvin Coolidge in 1924. The targets of this legislation were quite different from the ones most commonly discussed today. Notably, the acts did not set any restrictions on immigration from Latin America (or anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere). Instead, the legislation completely banned immigration from Asia, expanding on the aptly named Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. It also imposed quotas on immigrants from other Eastern Hemisphere countries. The quotas were determined by the percentage of Americans from those countries in the census of 1890; the aim was to halt immigration from southern and eastern Europe. The main exception was a provision allowing for family unification, entry of relatives of current citizens—an obvious sop to those congressmen, Republican and Democratic, who represented many Ellis Islanders.

It is often said that the “pause” in immigration allowed a breathing period during which Ellis Islander immigrants could be assimilated. But assimilation had already begun. And the extent to which the law imposed a “pause” is questionable. Annual immigration for the years 1925–30 averaged 352,000; the average for 1920–24 had been 554,000. Immigration fell dramatically only with the onset of the Great Depression: as the U.S. unemployment rate shot up toward 25 percent, annual immigration plummeted to 97,000 in 1931 and remained well below 100,000 during the rest of the 1930s and through World War II. Estimates of post-World War II immigration absent the restrictions of the 1924 act are inherently speculative, but the rapidly increasing prosperity of western Europe and the near-

complete restriction of emigration from the Soviet bloc suggest that it would have been far below the levels of the early 1920s. The framers of the 1924 act wanted to restrict eastern and southern European immigration for many years to come; for reasons they did not anticipate, it would have been much lower than they expected had their legislation remained stalled in committee.

With the foreign-born percentage of the American population at its lowest since 1850, it did not seem venturesome for politicians like John F. Kennedy to advocate repeal or revision of the 1924 law. And with public opinion supporting major changes in civil rights for blacks, it seemed only fair to eliminate what appeared to be discrimination against particular ethnic groups. In addition, reversal of the 1924 act was a long-term goal of leading House Judiciary Committee Democrats like Brooklyn's Emanuel Celler (who had voted against the 1924 bill) and Newark's Peter Rodino, whose Jewish and Italian-American constituents saw themselves as victims of unwarranted prejudice.

It was in this climate that in 1965, the year after the posthumous publication of Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants*, Congress passed the law that, with amendments, governs immigration today. It was floor-managed in the Senate by Edward Kennedy, then serving his first full term. His brother Robert Kennedy, when asked whether the act would result in massive immigration from Latin America and Asia, argued that it would not, since as everyone knew immigrants came from Europe. He might have added that the act, for the first time, imposed quotas on immigrants from nations in Latin America. But Celler and Rodino insisted on retaining the family unification provisions that seemed to benefit their constituents—but that instead resulted in massively greater



immigration from Mexico and other Latin American nations than envisioned in the act's quotas.

The 1965 law has been in effect for a half century, and its multiple unintended consequences are now apparent. Contrary to predictions, immigration from Europe has been light, even since the Berlin Wall came down. Contrary to predictions, a huge surge of immigration came from Mexico and Latin America in the quarter century from 1982 to 2007, augmented by an increasing flow from Asia. Unlike the Ellis Island era, recent decades have seen massive illegal immigration: it is more difficult to cross the Atlantic and land at a major harbor undetected than it is to cross a line in the desert or the not-very-formidable Rio Grande, or to overstay a legal visa.

Congress's attempt to address the problem of illegal immigration in its 1986 legislation proved unavailing. It provided a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, one that several million such people (but only about half those eligible) took advantage of in the 1990s. But, at a time when large majorities of Americans on the left and right opposed any sort of national identity card, it failed to create a fraud-proof means of identification by which employers could verify—and could be prosecuted for failing to verify—whether a job applicant had legal status.

That omission could now be rectified, thanks to changing attitudes and technological advances. Most Americans carry electronic devices on which their purchases, entertainment choices, and whereabouts can readily be tracked, and difficult-to-forge biometric identification measures are available.

Immigration occurs partly because people seek economic opportunity, but there is more to it than that. Great surges of immigration—including those of 1630–60,

1760–76, 1846–55, 1892–1914, and 1982–2007, and like surges of internal migration such as the movement of one-third of black Americans from the rural South to the urban North between 1940 and 1965—occur when large numbers of people of similar background decide to uproot themselves to pursue dreams or escape nightmares. Such surges are responsive, at the margins, to economic cues and can stop suddenly because of economic collapse or the outbreak of world war. What is fascinating when one looks back on their history is that almost no one, expert or onlooker, predicted the beginning of the surges and, after they began and proceeded far enough along to be generally recognized, almost no one predicted when they would end.

The unexpected immigration of 1982–2007 is no exception to this rule. But there are at least two differences that have made it more problematic than earlier surges into the nation. The first is that American elites are no longer dedicated to assimilation as they were a century ago. A distorted form of multiculturalism, propagated by left-wing academics and by media and corporate elites, holds that all cultures are morally equal, except ours, which somehow is worse. Americanization, in this view, has a sinister sound, and the result is that there is less pressure for and encouragement of assimilation than in the first half of the twentieth century. Thus we see foreign-language ballots—even though immigrants who wish to become citizens are required to show that they have learned English—and bilingual education, which too often prevents children from mastering the English language, the first rung on the ladder of upward mobility. The people this hostility to Americanization harms most are the immigrants themselves, and their children.

The second problem is that the flows of immigration have been misdirected by

the unexpected consequences of the 1965 legislation. The family unification provisions have brought in very large numbers of low-skill legal immigrants, mostly from Mexico, and the weakness of border and workplace enforcement has encouraged large-scale illegal immigration, again mostly from Mexico. The collapse of the housing market in 2006–8, the financial crisis of 2008, and the recession of 2007–9 have at least temporarily reduced net migration from Mexico to the United States to zero.<sup>5</sup> That looks like a response to economic cues, but there may be something more at work. Estimates are that one-third of housing foreclosures in the 2007–10 period involved Hispanics, primarily of Mexican origin.<sup>6</sup> These people were pursuing the dream of middle-class living standards and significant wealth accumulation through increase in home values, but instead found themselves living a nightmare—and some significant number have decided to leave the United States altogether.

As immigration law has encouraged low-skill immigration, it has also discouraged high-skill immigration. The H-1B visa program, the focus of much debate in the 2016 presidential campaign, tends to tie immigrants to particular employers; one might even call it a form of indentured servitude. The relatively low quotas on immigrants from India and China are a substantial barrier to newcomers from what are clearly the largest reservoirs of potential high-skill immigrants. Over the past four decades the United States has increased the flow of low-skill immigrants and constricted the flow of high-skill immigrants—exactly the opposite of what America’s Anglosphere cousins Canada and Australia have been doing.

Laws can be changed, and on immigration, where there have been so many unanticipated negative consequences, they obvi-

ously should be. It should be possible, using recently developed technology, to improve border enforcement, track visa overstayers, and give employers tools to determine whether job applicants are legally eligible. Enforcement of such measures would produce some significant “self-deportation,” as stricter legislation has produced outmigration of illegal immigrants from the state of Arizona. (According to a study by the Pew Research Center, some 200,000 illegal immigrants have left Arizona since 2007, a drop of 40 percent.)<sup>7</sup>

And it should be possible to make the United States more open and welcoming to high-skill immigrants, through points systems like those in Canada and Australia. Already our immigration flow seems to be moving in the direction that such legal changes would further encourage. In recent years more immigrants have been coming to the United States from India and from China than from Mexico. This is in line with the trend that the incomes of high-skill Americans and immigrants have been increasing more than those of low-skill Americans and immigrants. No nation can allow unlimited immigration, and the United States currently admits far more legal immigrants—around one million a year—than any other nation. But it would be suicidal to exclude high-skill immigration.

Those who draft immigration law, as history has shown, are poor prognosticators. So the goal should be to fashion laws that encourage the immigration of those who can provide the most value to their new country, to enable those with the most ambitious dreams to pursue them here to the benefit of this nation and ultimately the entire world.

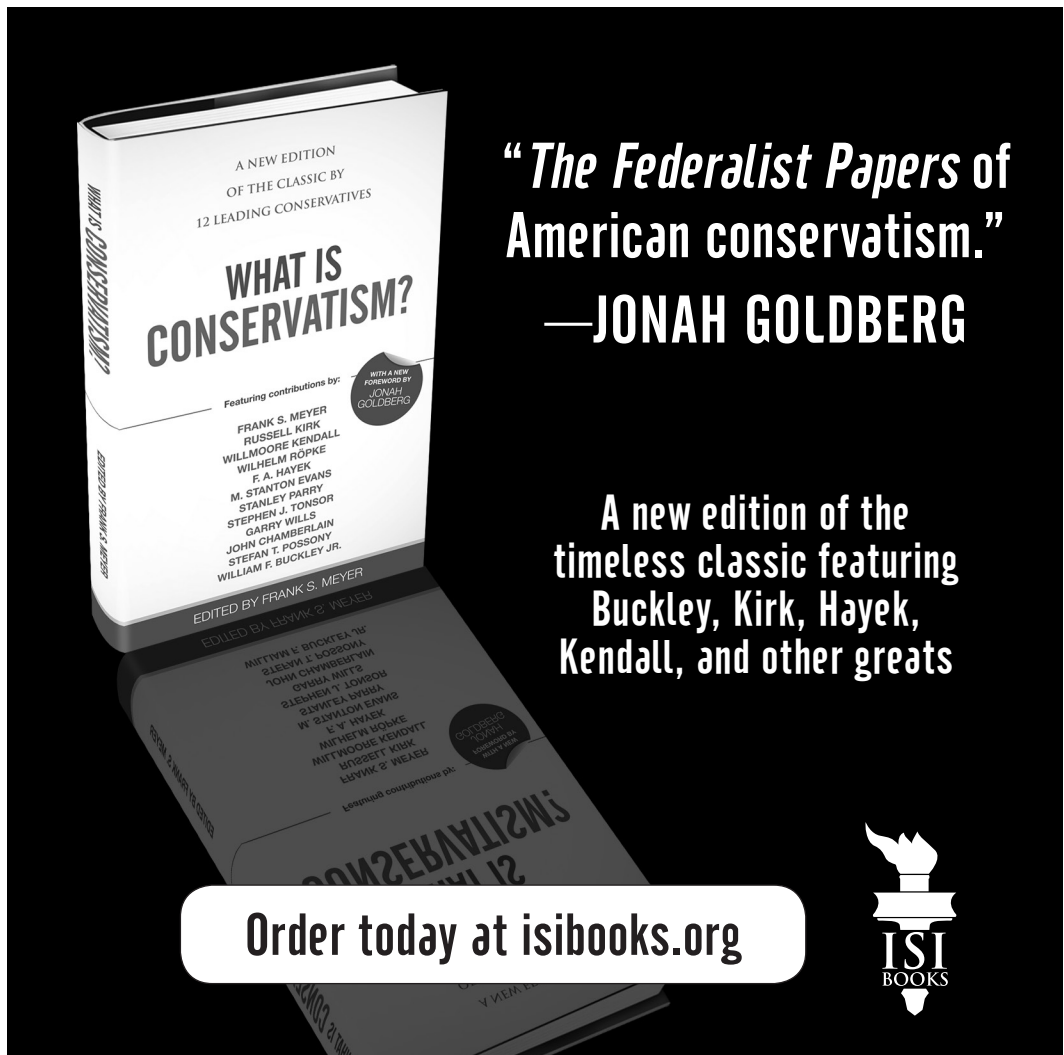
But policy alone will not settle the immigration debate in this country. Perhaps most important, we must discard the notion that



we have arrived at a unique place in American history. The immigrants of today, like the immigrants who so concerned elites of previous generations, can be interwoven into

the fabric of American life. That interweaving is part of the character of our country—provided, of course, that we remain committed to the idea of assimilation. †

- 1 Walter A. McDougall, *Freedom Just around the Corner: A New American History, 1585–1828* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), xiii.
- 2 Bernard Bailyn, “Peopling the Peripheries,” in *Sometimes an Art: Nine Essays on History* (New York: Knopf, 2015).
- 3 David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 4 John Steele Gordon, *Washington’s Monument: And the Fascinating History of the Obelisk* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016); Art Bromirski, “What Happened to the Pope’s Gift,” *Catholic Digest*, November 1948, 113–14.
- 5 Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, “More Mexicans Leaving Than Coming to the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, November 19, 2015, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/11/19/more-mexicans-leaving-than-coming-to-the-u-s/>; Lauren Carroll and Jon Greenberg, “Martin O’Malley: Net Migration from Mexico was Zero in 2014,” *PolitiFact*, November 14, 2015, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2015/nov/14/martin-omalley/martin-omalley-net-migration-mexico-was-0-2014/>.
- 6 Personal estimate of author based on data of foreclosures in [www.realtytrac.com](http://www.realtytrac.com).
- 7 Bob Davis, “The Thorny Economics of Illegal Immigration,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2016.



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