

TOM TEEPEN

Mexiphobia

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For all the elaborate rationales worked up to make this big fuss about illegal immigration sound more respectable than it is, let's face it: The real propellant in the issue is a sense that there are getting to be just too damn many Mexicans here.

Some of the concern is decent and legitimate. Our Southern border is too porous to contain the flow from the economic mismatch that drives the migration, and we can't absorb essentially unchecked numbers forever. Some of the consequences are unwelcome, especially the drag on wages. Impacted state and local governments are being unfairly stuck with outsized social-service tabs for what ought to be a federal responsibility.

But at bottom there's a fear, one on the order of childhood's monster-under-the-bed terror, that a linguistic, racial and cultural Mexification of America looms. And in that, alas, we march in the ignoble footsteps of our ancestors. Our proud boasts that we are a nation of immigrants typically come only after we've absorbed waves of immigrants whose numbers or nature in their time had rattled or even panicked us.

It is largely forgotten now, but German was once so prevalent that there was a serious move to make it officially our second language. Swelled by the wave of East European immigration in the late 1800s and early 1900s, there were 1,323 foreign-language papers here in 1914. (Crudely reduced shortly thereafter when the German-language press was suppressed in the anti-German hysteria of World War I.)

For most of its long history, temperance had been mainly a local nuisance but it was

turned into national Prohibition in part by the anti-Catholicism kicked up by rushes of Italian and Irish immigration. Popular imagination equated those populations' Catholicism with cartoonish caricatures of their drinking. Prohibition was supposed to send 'em a message.

The appalling Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 — our first law significantly limiting immigration — ran until 1947, and the ugly laws enforcing racial quotas, kicked off by a 1924 act favoring "Nordics," weren't repealed until the 1960s.

I'm afraid that the Statue of Liberty's "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" is rather a gloss, a pretty bas-relief raised from a history washed in the acids of bigotry and nativism.

Yet, here we are, all this immigration later, still overwhelmingly English-speaking and not exactly borne down under the terrible burden of having to "Press 1 for English." Though some now profess to be deeply offended by the sight of signage in Spanish, few of us are any more harried by that than we are by the Japanese, Korean and Chinese signs to which we take scant objection.

If we improve border security, set up a controlled temporary-work system and offer, not amnesty, but reasonable requirements for eventual citizenship for the illegal immigrants who are already a part of us, we'll again be following in our ancestor's footsteps. This time, the ones they made when they were wearing sensible shoes.

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