



Staten Island's **Ronel Cabellero Gonzales** (left), originally from the Philippines, was sworn in with other members of the armed forces as an American citizen at a special ceremony held on Sept. 24, 2008, in the Great Hall at Ellis Island to announce the plans for the new Peopling of America® Center. (Photo copyright Tina Fineberg 2008. Photo courtesy of The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.)

The American Melting Pot Is a Rich Stew

Immigrants Become Attached to Their New Country, Despite Fears to the Contrary. **By Nancy Foner**

Once again, the United States is truly a nation of immigrants. In the wake of the huge influx since the late 1960s, the number of immigrants in the United States has risen to an all-time high. According to the U.S. Census, in 2007 more than 38 million of the nation's residents were foreign-born, 12.6 percent of the population of 302 million.

Even at the peak of the last great wave of immigration in the early 20th century, the number of immigrants living in the United States then (13.5 million in 1910) was much less than half of what it is today — although immigrants' proportion of the total population back then (14.7 percent in 1910) was higher because the country had far fewer people (92 million).

Some express concerns about immigrant loyalty to the U.S.

As the new arrivals, most from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean, settle throughout the country, some Americans worry that today's immigrants will be less attached to the United States than the millions of Eastern and Southern

Europeans who came in the last great wave 100 years ago. Whereas earlier European immigrants are often remembered as being committed to this country and becoming patriotic Americans, a common fear today is that the new immigrants will resist fitting in and fail to develop an allegiance to America and its traditions.

A particular concern is that the spread of dual nationality is weakening the meaning of American citizenship and the integrity of American patriotism. For instance, political scientist Peter Salins worries that we may be losing our way in assimilating immigrants; one reason, in his view, is that the significance of becoming a citizen has been severely undermined because many new citizens don't need to give up citizenship in the country they left behind.¹

Immigrants often become citizens

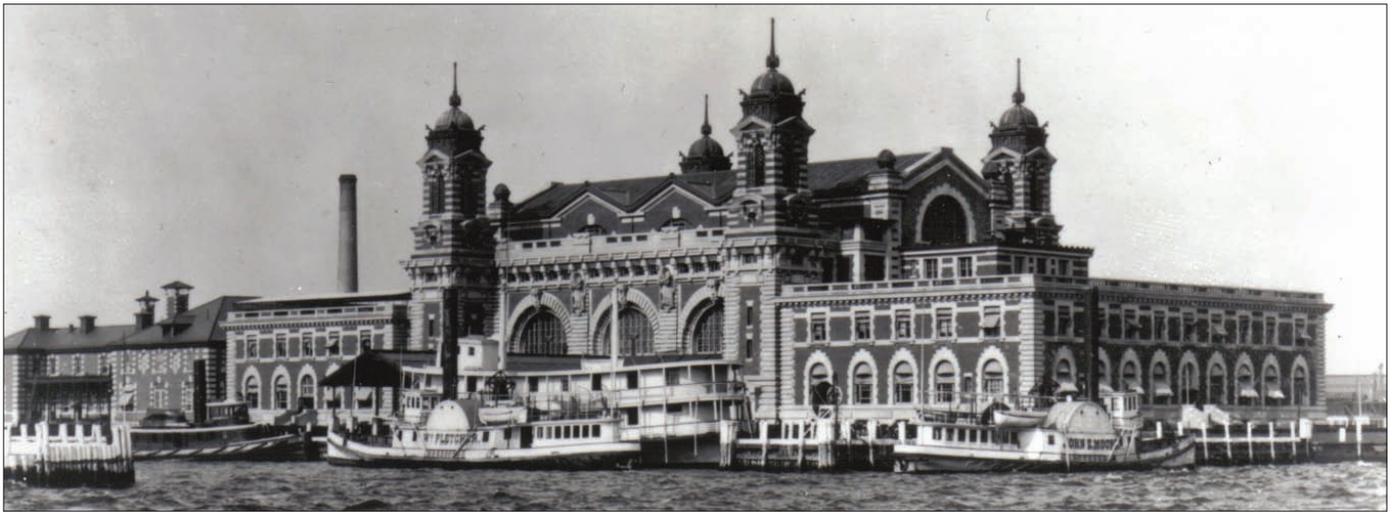
Such dire predictions are unwarranted. They are based on misleading assumptions about immigrants in the present — and views of the past that fail to appreciate that worries about immigrant assimilation have

a long history. Nowhere is this truer than when it comes to citizenship.

Lost in a haze of history, we often forget that at the beginning of the 20th century there were fears that the Southern and Eastern European arrivals were not making a serious effort to become citizens — that large numbers simply came to plunder America and not adopt it as their homeland.

The high rates of return migration among immigrant groups like Italians — between the 1880s and World War I, of every 10 Italians who came to the United States, 5 returned — inflamed public opinion. To leave, the historian Walter Nugent has written, "implied that the migrant ... was too crass to appreciate America as a noble experiment in democracy; and spurned American good will and helping hands."²

We now know that these anxieties were greatly overstated. Despite the continued ties many European immigrants maintained to their home countries, those who remained in the United States generally developed an allegiance to American society, became involved in a variety of U.S. institutions and worked to



Ellis Island operated as a federal immigration station from 1892 to 1954. Located in the New York Harbor, it processed more than 12 million immigrant steamship passengers; more than 40 percent of Americans can trace their ancestry through Ellis Island, according to the National Park Service. The above photo of the main building dates to 1905. (Photo credit: National Park Service.)

build lives for themselves and their children in this country.

This is much like what happens today. Now, as in the past, the longer immigrants are in the United States, the more likely they are to become citizens. If we look at naturalization rates among those living in the United States for a decade or two (naturalization is the legal process by which a person becomes a citizen of a country), the rates are slightly higher for immigrants today than at the beginning of the 20th century.

In 1920, 44 percent of foreign-born men residing in the United States for 15 to 19 years had become citizens; in 2000, the figure for the foreign-born here for 15 to 20 years who were citizens was 54 percent.³ The Pew Hispanic Center reported in 2007 that in the last decade legal immigrants not only have become citizens at a higher rate than in the recent past, but also have been naturalizing more quickly.

“Today’s legal immigrants,” as the report puts it, “are signing on to a closer relationship with the United States than was the case a decade or two ago.” By 2005, the proportion of all legal foreign-born residents eligible for citizenship who had, in fact, become naturalized had risen to 59 percent, up from 48 percent in 1995.⁴ (These figures are for legal immigrants because the undocumented are not eligible for citizenship. To become a citizen today, a legal permanent resident in most cases must be at least 18 years old and have lived in the United States continuously for five years, among other requirements.)

Altogether, a little more than half of the legal immigrants now living in the United States are naturalized citizens.

Many immigrants defend their new country

If joining the Armed Forces is a test of patriotism, then today’s immigrants

get high marks. According to a report published by the Migration Policy Institute, in February 2008, more than 65,000 immigrants — including naturalized citizens as well as non-U.S. citizens — were serving on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, roughly 5 percent of all active duty personnel.

Between 2001 and 2008, about 37,000 foreign-born members of the Armed Forces became U.S. citizens; posthumous citizenship was granted to 111 service members.⁵

A complex mix of factors explains why immigrants sign up for the military, including the possibility of gaining skills that will stand them in good stead when they return to civilian life. A sense of belonging to America — and a desire to show their patriotism — may also be involved.

“Latinos,” said Jorge Mariscal, a professor of Chicano studies at the University of California at San Diego, “are very patriotic and see military service as a way to show their appreciation to America and to prove they can be ‘real Americans.’”⁶

Whatever the reasons for enlisting, the experience of being in the Armed Forces can strengthen immigrants’ attachment to this country. Krystof Misiura, who came from Poland as a student in 1996 and joined the Army in 2006, said that it was time in the military that pushed him to seek naturalization in 2008. The first lieutenant in the Army Reserves said, “When you’re a soldier, you’re more strongly connected with this nation by being a U.S. citizen.”⁷

The opportunity for dual citizenship helps, rather than hurts, naturalization

What about dual citizenship? This is something that wasn’t possible for



The restored Main Building at Ellis Island reopened as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in 1990; it has welcomed more than 35 million visitors to date. (Photo credit: The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.)

European immigrants 100 years ago. Today, a growing number of countries allow their nationals to maintain citizenship in the home country even after becoming U.S. citizens. Dual citizenship is like bigamy, say commentators such as journalist Georgie Ann Geyer.⁸ Others argue that it blurs loyalties, undermines commitment to the United States and retards the Americanization process.

Political scientist Stanley Renshon warns that multiple citizenship in an era of cultural pluralism is likely to encourage the maintenance of “former cultural/country attachments . . . that [put at] risk development and consolidation of newer cultural/country identifications.”⁹ The late Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington called people with dual nationality “ampersands” and saw them as having dubious loyalty to the United States.

The evidence shows, however, that dual citizenship may actually encourage immigrants to naturalize. A 2001 study of Latin-American immigrants by Cornell University political scientist Michael Jones-Correa reveals that those from countries that recognize dual nationality are more likely to seek U.S. citizenship than those from countries that do not recognize it. Becoming a U.S. citizen is easier when it doesn’t mean losing privileges in, or renouncing allegiance to, your native land or being seen by friends and relatives back home as a defector, Jones-Correa explains.¹⁰

In discussing why he became a citizen, Martin (last name not given), a Portuguese immigrant in Boston, said that one factor making him decide “with no hesitation” was “the fact that becoming a U.S. citizen, I can still be Portuguese. . . . I don’t lose anything.”¹¹

Moreover, American citizenship is likely to encourage or reinforce immigrants’



▲ A 46-star American flag indicates that this photograph of the Great Hall at Ellis Island was taken sometime between 1907 and 1912. Wooden benches later replaced the iron rail passageways where immigrants awaited processing. (Photo credit: National Park Service.)

▼ The restored Great Hall, the centerpiece of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, attracts many visitors and historians. (Photo credit: The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation Inc.)



In this undated archival photo, immigrants, upon arrival at Ellis Island, waited in lines for entrance into the main registry building to commence their processing. (Photo credit: National Park Service.)

sense of belonging to the United States and their attachment to American values and institutions, whether or not it's their only citizenship or is held in conjunction with the citizenship of the home country. Once they are American citizens, it is an easy step — which many take — to register, vote and become involved in American politics.

The children of immigrants assimilate even more than their elders

For immigrants of every era, coming to a new land is a difficult journey. They miss relatives, friends and traditions back home. The streets, they find, are not paved with gold. Economic downturns, like the one we're now experiencing, add to their troubles. Too often, they face prejudice and discrimination owing to their national background, religion or color. Yet despite these difficulties, as the years go by, immigrants today, like those who came before them, become more comfortable in and are more likely to feel a part of this country.

Immigrants rarely give up ties to or identification with their homelands. We wouldn't expect this of Americans who move abroad, either. But to a remarkable degree,

immigrants and, even more, their children who were born here, become Americans who cherish long-held values.

The children, after all, have been raised here and are citizens from birth. They remain proud of their parents' culture, as a study of the New York second generation shows. But these immigrant children are true Americans, something, paradoxically, they experience most profoundly when they make visits to their parents' homelands and realize that the United States is indisputably home.

As a 20-year-old daughter of Chinese immigrants said after visiting relatives in China: "I was there for a few days and I was so homesick. ... I'm an American." The young woman, whose name was not given, continued, "You grow up in America, you have this thing where you know, you can do anything you want to. ... I grew up in America. I'm just like the opposite of them (her relatives in China)."¹²

Immigrants believe in the American dream

"The United States is a place where your dreams can come true," said Martin Cuadra (a pseudonym), a young man in Miami

who came from Nicaragua as a five-year-old child. "A lot of people in the world, I guess, are envious of that. ... I value the opportunity to live in a free country and, yes, make money, but money is not more important than freedom."

After graduating from high school, Martin juggled a series of jobs and got technical training in sound engineering, but his true love is popular music. He has worked as a disc jockey in clubs in Miami Beach, where he is well-known in the music scene, but has been waiting for his big break. If this doesn't come, he'll revert to his Plan B — to build a career in sound engineering.¹³

For many immigrants and their children, the election of Barack Obama, himself the child of an immigrant father, as president of the United States, has further strengthened their attachment to and identification with America.

As Nora Chaves, a mother of two and a Colombian-born New Yorker who works at an organization that helps Latino immigrants, put it in speaking of the election, immigrants now have more of a chance "to build dignifying lives in this country and really build America."¹⁴ ■



Contemporary immigrants are being sworn in as new American citizens in Ellis Island's historic Great Hall in this undated photo (Photo credit: National Park Service.)

Footnotes:

- ¹ Peter Salins, "The Assimilation Contract: Endangered But Still Holding" in Tamar Jacoby (ed.), *Reinventing the Melting Pot* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), p. 107.
- ² Walter Nugent, *Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migration, 1870-1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 159.
- ³ Irene Bloemraad, "Citizenship Lessons from the Past: The Contours of Immigrant Naturalization in the Early Twentieth Century," *Social Science Quarterly* (2006);
- ⁴ Jeffrey Passel, "Growing Share of Immigrants Choosing Naturalization," *Pew Hispanic Center Report*, March 2007.
- ⁵ Jeanne Batalova, "Immigrants in the US Armed Forces," *Migration Information Source*, May 2008.
- ⁶ David McLemore, "Serving a Nation Not Yet Their Own," *The Dallas Morning News*, Nov. 28, 2006.
- ⁷ Madelaine Burket, "Fighting to Belong: Some Immigrants Choose Military Service Before Citizenship," *Chicago Reporter*, Nov. 1, 2008.
- ⁸ Georgie Ann Geyer, *Americans No More: The Death of American Citizenship* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996).
- ⁹ Stanley Renshon, "Dual Citizens in America: An Issue of Vast Proportions and Broad Significance," *Center for Immigration Studies Background*, July 2000, p. 7.
- ¹⁰ Michael Jones-Correa, "Under Two Flags: Dual Nationality in Latin America and Its Consequences for the United States," *International Migration Review* 2001, pp. 1010-1011.
- ¹¹ Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 53.
- ¹² Philip Kasinitz et al., *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 262-263.
- ¹³ Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, *Immigrant America A Portrait of America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 9-10.
- ¹⁴ Caroline Weaver, "Young New York City Immigrants Greet Obama Presidency Warmly," *Voice of America News* (www.voanews.com), Jan. 6, 2009.



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