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Frank Talk About “Mexifornia”

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The following is adapted from a lecture delivered aboard the Crystal Serenity during the second Hillsdale College cruise, which sailed from Athens to Venice on October 1-13, 2003.

There was a time, not so long ago, when we Americans understood that newcomers did not need to be taught in their own language in our schools. Even less did we believe that their children required special classes in ethnic pride or separate, race-based college graduation ceremonies. The very idea that a national lobbying group would call itself *La Raza* (The Race)—and have slogans such as: “For *La Raza* everything; for those outside *La Raza*, nothing”—would have seemed to us shocking, even chilling. We believed in American civic education for immigrants, which, combined with intermarriage, integration and popular culture, led to rapid parity for those immigrants’ children in terms of education, income and influence. Needless to say, in that earlier time, immigrants came to the U.S. from Mexico largely under legal auspices and in measured numbers that did not overwhelm our once formidable powers of assimilation.

What we see going on with Mexican immigration today is a tragedy, and it is not simply a result of the federal government abdicating its responsibility to control our borders (although



the federal government has certainly done precisely that). The citizens of my state of California and others are also complicit in this tragedy. For instance, millions of us who used to cut our own lawns and clean our own houses now consider such tasks beneath us, as if America's middle class has embraced as its birthright the culture and leisure once confined to an aristocratic elite. Suddenly our young people, our poor and our unskilled find jobs picking apples or laying tiles somehow demeaning. So-called dead-end jobs are no longer a rite of passage for our youth, but are deemed proper only for unskilled laborers from Mexico, whose toil, we are assured, keeps our produce, restaurants and hotels inexpensive.

The Economics and Morality of Illegal Immigration

Thus do we get in the habit of talking about illegal immigration in economic rather than in moral terms. But consider the situation from a moral perspective. Do we really expect hard-working youths from central Mexico to work 30 years in construction, hotels or the fields without marrying, having children, losing jobs or getting hurt? And how can such workers—without legal status, education or mastery of English—support a family on \$10 an hour when most native Americans can't do so on \$20? Will we continue to shrug and say, "At least the money is better than in Mexico," or, "None of our own people will do the work," or, "They are going to drive anyway, so let's give them driver's licenses"—all the easy platitudes that justify the current chaos?

Unemployment is high and rising in California, but we are told that even more illegal workers from Mexico are needed. Can it really be the case that the free market can no longer operate to attract American workers through rising wages—even assuming an absence of a pool of unskilled labor? Meanwhile, many who ought to know better champion the employer's right to hire whomever he chooses, and assure us that Mexican immigration poses no more of a problem for the U.S. than nineteenth century Italian immigration—as if they are unaware that multiculturalism did not exist in our schools in the nineteenth century, that we do not share an adjacent open border with Italy, and that Italian immigrants did not flood

our country unlawfully as part of the national strategy of the Italian government.

Those who offer up these arguments are either blind to, or shy away from, the hard facts about the tragic cycle that is being perpetuated. The tragedy unfolds like this: Kids in their teens, at great peril, sneak into America from Oaxaca. They work hard for 30 years at roofing, picking, mowing, cleaning or cooking, and then often turn to state agencies when their backs give out or their jobs dry up. Meanwhile, their children too often grow up in the barrios, not with the stern family ethic of Mexico, but instead resentful that their poorly paid and uneducated parents won no security during their decades of hard work. Often these children grow accustomed to think better even of Mexico—which they have never visited—than of the U.S. In reaction, employers express disappointment that this second generation (which has mastered neither Spanish nor English) does not toil as hard and as cheaply as its parents. So at the same time that four out of ten U.S. resident students of Mexican heritage are not graduating from California high schools, and less than one in ten are graduating from college, employers welcome a new cohort of illegal teenagers.

Related to this trafficking in human capital, a serious social and moral dilemma looms a mere decade away, when the Baby Boomers of California finally—and nearly all at once—reach retirement. Influential, affluent, informed—and not shy about self-interested self-promotion—these retirees will demand that Social Security and state retirement programs remain funded at promised levels. But these benefits will remain possible only with a complacent majority population of younger Hispanic immigrants with larger families, working for wages that are less, on average, than what is being paid out to these aging white retirees with no dependents.

Data alone cannot decide for us whether California is saved or ruined by illegal immigration. Liberal economists, for example, offer models that demonstrate that illegal immigrants bring in \$25 billion to America in net revenue per annum. Other statisticians employ quite different models showing that these same immigrants cost the United States over \$40 billion a year—indeed, that the average California household must contribute at least \$1,200 each year to subsidize the deficit between what illegal immigrants cost in services and what they pay in taxes. Who can sort out all the wildcard effects of cash income, fraudulent Social Security numbers and politi-

cized research? Nor do these models customarily account for the insidious costs of the illegal hiring practices of contractors, farmers and factory owners—costs for medical care for uninsured illegals, increased law enforcement, growing entitlements and the need for dual documentation in business and government.

Tragically, political correctness makes it nearly impossible to discuss illegal immigration in any kind of rational way without being labeled racist or nativist. Indeed, even the legal term “illegal alien” is now politically incorrect, and is being replaced by “undocumented worker.” But most know that not all illegal immigrants are workers, and that the problem of illegal immigration involves more than a lack of proper documentation.

We are told that blanket amnesty and a grant of legal status will ensure assimilation and prosperity. But statistics suggest that after 20 years, even legal Mexican immigrants have double the welfare rates of American citizens. And in one study, students surveyed at 13 years of age and then again at 17 were 50 percent *more* likely at 17 to identify themselves as “Mexicans” as opposed to “Mexican-Americans”—this despite, or perhaps even because of, having spent four years in American high schools. In moral terms, it is true that we can hardly hunt out residents of California who have not seen Oaxaca in 40 years and deport them as illegal aliens. On the other hand, every time the issue of amnesty is broached, advocates of open borders offer up no concessions and thereby perhaps reveal their real agenda: a series of rolling amnesties every ten years or so that sends the message far and wide that illegal immigration is now an American institution.

Surreality

We try all sorts of bromides, including an alternate legal universe that is sometimes tougher on citizens than illegal immigrants. Unbelievably, California extends in-state tuition discounts to resident illegal immigrants, even as it charges nearly triple the in-state amount for American citizens from Arizona, Nevada and other states. California’s governor, pandering in the recent recall election conundrum, okayed the policy of granting driver’s licenses for illegal immigrants—and then discovered that the state’s age-old rite of passage whereby citizens produce their birth certificates as proof of age at the Department of Motor Vehicles would be rendered

absurd. We now ponder honoring identification documents from Mexico (alone of foreign countries) as legal American identification, even as we read of endemic corruption among police and bureaucrats across the border. In response, aliens from myriad other countries now demand that their own foreign IDs be honored, and the other 49 states of the Union are not so sure they should accept California driver’s licenses, given how promiscuously they are granted, at intrastate security check points. Thousands of immigrants from the Punjab, Korea and the Philippines wait patiently for five years or more to become naturalized citizens in the proper and legal fashion, only to watch hundreds of thousands cross illegally from Mexico in the expectation of a periodic and privileged amnesty designed only for them.

Since roughly 1970, the evolving concept of multiculturalism—which holds that Western civilization merits no special consideration, inasmuch as all cultures are of equal merit—has proved to be the force-multiplier of illegal immigration from Mexico. By denying or deprecating the singularity of democracy, capitalism, the rule of law, civic audit and religious freedom, multiculturalism confuses both native Americans and immigrants about why people are leaving Mexico in droves in the first place, and in the second, why they are heading northward rather than southward into Central or South America. Rather than explaining reality, this new ideology emphasizes racial prejudice and economic exploitation in America’s past—a topic of increasing interest to comfortable elites, but apparently not seen as an obstacle by the millions of poor and impoverished Mexicans who risk their lives daily to reach the American promised land.

Almost every well-intended and enlightened gesture designed to help immigrants over the last three decades—bilingual education, ever expanding and new state welfare programs, the affirmation of a hyphenated identity and the radical historical revisionism of southwestern American history—has been detrimental to the processes of assimilation and economic improvement. Almost everything stern and uncompromising that for two centuries has helped other immigrants to the United States—entry under legal auspices, language immersion, autonomy from government assistance, rapid assumption of an American identity and eager acceptance of mainstream American culture—has either been dismissed as *passé* or carried on halfheartedly.

Most Californians of all backgrounds understand the growing social and cultural costs that flow from this situation. Yet the Orwellian alliance of many libertarian-leaning conservatives—who embrace the idea of a perpetual supply of hard-working, unskilled and inexpensive workers—with the race industry of the Left—which envisions an endless influx of unassimilated potential voters who can be appealed to on the basis of group rather than individual identity—tends to demonize any discussion of the issue. Opposition to massive illegal immigration is customarily and cleverly equated with disdain for immigration per se, hence characterized as un-American. Given the demagoguery of our elected state representatives and the general hostility to frank talk about illegal immigration, ballot propositions led by unelected partisans and enacted through popular vote, rather than through legislative debate, have become the chief mechanisms of addressing this issue. Embittered Californians give tacit approval to therapeutic bromides in their schools and state agencies—and then flock to the polls to vent their rage by voting to end what they see as special consideration for those who broke the law in coming here. In the last decade, California majorities have voted against state aid to illegal immigrants, affirmative action and bilingual education, but far fewer than a majority will admit to taking part. It is not a healthy thing to have a voting population of millions thinking privately what they won't express publicly.

In the recent California recall election, a first-generation immigrant from Austria—a candidate who arrived here penniless and has a heavy accent that seems right out of a bad World War II movie, but who became an up-by-his-bootstraps business success—was caricatured as a nativist and near-racist for supporting legal and measured immigration. Meanwhile, a third-generation Hispanic candidate—a man who grew up as Mike, not Cruz, Bustamante, speaking English in a California suburb—reinvented himself as the emblem of the Mexican Diaspora. Only in the poisonous atmosphere of today's identity politics could the immigrant be slandered as the nativist and the native deified as the immigrant.

Meanwhile Mexico, a richly endowed but nearly failed state, continues to refuse to do the political, cultural and economic restructuring that is needed to turn itself around. Indeed, why should it bother making these reforms when it

can export potential dissidents from its hinterland to the U.S., gaining in the process \$12 billion in remittances from expatriates? (These remittances constitute the second largest source of foreign exchange to the Mexican economy.) Not only that, but as noted previously, Mexico finds that the longer its expatriates stay away from Mexico and in the U.S., the more they come to love *Mexico*.

Unintended Consequences

Illustrating the law of unintended consequences, today's illegal immigration crisis was not quite what any of the stakeholders in this immigration had anticipated. In addition to its cheap labor, tax-conscious business interests are responsible for masses of unassimilated residents who eventually plugged into the state's near-bankrupt entitlement industry. In addition to a larger bloc vote, the pro-labor Left discovered that the wages of its own impoverished domestic constituencies were eroded by the influx of less expensive and more industrious alien workers. A full 50 percent of real wage labor losses was recently attributed by the Labor Department to the influx of cheap immigrant labor. While we continue to import this labor, millions of second-generation Hispanic and other legal laborers are making not much more than the minimum wage. Of course, few of the professors and politicians who support illegal immigration—whether for continuance of cheap labor or for the sake of the entitlement industries—live in California's new apartheid communities like Orange Cove, Mendota or Parlier, communities where Mexican immigrants make up the vast majority of the population and struggle with dismal schools, high crime, little revenue and other social problems akin to those in Mexico.

In a time of war, under the threat of domestic terrorism and with their state budget tens of billions of dollars in the red, Californians are predictably restive and looking for answers. They cannot quite figure out how a state with Hollywood, the Silicon Valley, vast industrial and manufacturing sectors, great ports, timber, oil, tourism, a vast agricultural industry, an ideal climate—not to mention some of the nation's highest sales and income taxes—is broken and paralyzed with billions of dollars in annual



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deficit. They are considering what kind of future they want. In more placid times, this could be an academic exercise. Under current circumstances, it is an urgent necessity.

In the end, the immigration crisis is simple to understand, but it can also seem to involve an unsolvable calculus. Californians want a lot of their work done cheaply by illegal immigrants who, they wrongly assume, will transform themselves quickly into Americans. In turn, too many downtrodden Mexicans and their elite American advocates romanticize Mexico, a nation that has brought them misery and driven them to flight, and deprecate the U.S., which gave them sanctuary.

In a country where there may be anywhere from eight to fifteen million illegal immigrants,

is there any hope for avoiding the nightmare of Balkanization? Perhaps. After all, we got into our present mess only during the last 30 years, and then only by doing almost everything wrong. Thus we need not do everything right, but simply return to what we used to do so well: insist that immigration be measured and legal, do more of our own unpleasant work, enforce all of our laws equally, emphasize assimilation and return to thinking and speaking of Americans as individuals rather than in terms of their racial or group identities.



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