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THE ENDURING POWER OF THE IMMIGRANT JOURNEY

No matter where you live in the world, there is always America. It is not just an abstraction or a place you want to visit one day. For millions of people throughout its history, America has been a land of opportunity—a New World where you can belong, stake a claim, become a citizen, start a business, and raise a family.

President Ronald Reagan once shared a letter he'd received from a constituent that had special resonance. Reagan said, "He wrote that you can go to live in France, but you can't become a Frenchman. You can go to live in Germany or Italy, but you can't become a German, an Italian. He went through Turkey, Greece, Japan, and other countries. But he said anyone, from any corner of the world, can come to live in the United States and become an American."

This is true because, from its origins, America was created as an immigrant nation. Its vast, empty vistas cried out for an infusion of human labor and spirit. Actually, in the early periods, people didn't refer

to themselves as immigrants. They were travelers, pilgrims, settlers. They came to make something that didn't yet exist. Often they were fleeing religious persecution and despotic political systems. But they found much more than security; they found an unspoiled landscape upon which they could realize their dreams.

By the time the Statue of Liberty, with its promise of a "Golden Door," was installed in 1886, immigrants had already been flocking to America for centuries, seeking not just opportunity but also equality. The egalitarian character of America was in sharp contrast to the aristocratic nature of the Old World. As Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur wrote so eloquently in *Letters from an American Farmer*, published in 1782:

Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe. Some few towns excepted, we are all tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida. We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory, communicating with each other by means of good roads and navigable rivers, united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are equitable. We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself.

Before the eighteenth century, the migration was primarily English, so a comfortable familiarity was built between the new and old traditions. With the birth of the United States of America in 1776, an expansionist era

emerged. There was a drive west, and the faces of immigrants were more diverse—Germans, Irish, Italians, and other “foreigners.”

Among the Founding Fathers, this diversity was actually seen as an advantage. James Madison believed that pluralism was a key to the freedom promised in the Constitution. “This freedom,” he said, “arises from that multiplicity of sects which pervades America. For where there is such a variety of sects, there cannot be a majority of any one sect to oppress and persecute the rest.” Thomas Jefferson agreed; he was openly pro-immigration, stating, “The present desire of America is to produce rapid population by as great importations of foreigners as possible.” There was a near consensus on the idea that the great immigrant influx was a benefit to the emerging land.

However, with new cultural influx and diversity came turbulence. Part of the reason was economic. It stands to reason that immigrants who had gained a foothold in one generation might feel threatened by new waves. But there was also ethnic strife. There was always a question of what it meant to be a “real” American, and there was a bias toward Anglo-Western people who looked, behaved, and worshipped like the majority.

Early America had already expressed a racist bent, with both the treatment of Native Americans and the acceptance of slavery. There were even slaveholders among the Founding Fathers—Thomas Jefferson being the most notable example. How would this fledgling nation treat non-Western immigrants? I was particularly interested in the story of my Asian forefathers.

The California Gold Rush brought the first waves of Chinese to America in 1849. In the coming decades, their numbers reached more than 300,000. They succeeded in large part because of their tremendous work ethic. A poem by Xu from Xiangshan survived the era. He encouraged Chinese migrants, speaking of joy and opportunity:

Just talk about going to the land of the Flowery Flag and
my countenance fills with happiness . . .

Do not forget this day when you land ashore. Push
yourself ahead and do not be lazy or idle.

It is well known today that the early Chinese immigrants were significantly responsible for building the first transcontinental railroad. They were initially recruited because of a shortage of European workers but soon proved themselves to be remarkably industrious. Charles Crocker, the railroad's contractor said, "Wherever we put them, we found them good, and they worked themselves into our favor to such an extent that if we found we were in a hurry for a job of work, it was better to put Chinese on at once."

So, in many ways, the Chinese were successful, but they were also held in suspicion. The combination of their economic ambitions and their cultural and ethnic "foreignness" led to a backlash. Increasingly, the Chinese were viewed as aliens. Their loyalty was held in question, partly because of their unfamiliar ways and partly because they sent so much of their earnings back to China. The anti-Chinese movement gathered momentum, and the question of whether to exclude Chinese immigrants was hotly debated in Congress.

The most fervent anti-Chinese official was Maine Senator James G. Blaine. His passionate oratory against the Chinese hit a national chord and elevated the issue beyond a regional dustup. "The question lies in my mind thus: either the Anglo-Saxon race will possess the Pacific slope or the Mongolians will possess it," he cried out on the Senate floor. "We have this day to choose . . . whether our legislation shall be in the interest of the American free laborer or for the servile laborer from China . . . You cannot work a man who must have beef and bread, and would prefer beer, alongside of a man who can live on rice. It cannot be done."