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When did immigrants become the enemy?

by Andrew Lam by New American Media

Immigration and the Church

Commentary

SAN FRANCISCO -- Recently, in front a packed crowd at Duke University, former Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice regretted the failure of passing the comprehensive immigration reform act and the shift in Americans' attitude toward immigrants.

Accepting and welcoming immigrants "has been at the core of our strength," she said. "I don't know when immigrants became the enemy."

These days it is refreshing, if rare, to hear someone of Rice's stature to speak on behalf of immigrants. Over the last few years the public discourse has been shrill and, if anything, media coverage seems to stoke anxiety to an unprecedented level.

Instead of a larger narrative on immigration -- from culture to economics, from identity to history -- what we have now is a public mindset of us versus them, and an overall anti immigrant climate that is both troubling and morally reprehensible.

America's difficult love story

Yet I often see the story of immigration in America as a kind of difficult love story.

Take the scandal involving Sheriff Paul Babeu of Pinal County, Ariz. Running for Congress, the sheriff is tough on undocumented immigration -- but he had a secret: a love affair with Jose Orozco, an immigrant whose legal status remains in question.

The romance went sour, alas, and the immigrant lover alleged that the sheriff threatened to deport him if he came out with their story. Babeu vehemently denied the deportation threat. Orozco promptly filed a lawsuit.

What struck me most about this story is the contradictory nature of the relationship and how emblematic it is to the larger American narrative. We want and benefit from immigrants' cheap labor, but we don't want to acknowledge our relationship with them. We need them; we don't want to be associated with them.

Meg Whitman, the billionaire who ran for governor in California in 2010, wanted to "hold employers accountable for hiring only documented workers." But she didn't include herself.

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The year before Whitman's campaign, she'd fired Nicky Diaz Santillan, who in a spectacular press conference revealed that she was undocumented. She had been taking care of the Whitman's household for nearly a decade.

When Santillan reportedly asked Whitman for help finding an immigration attorney after she was fired, Whitman allegedly told her, "You don't know me and I don't know you."

In the war on terrorism, the immigrant is often the scapegoat. He becomes a kind of insurance policy against the effects of recession. By blaming him, the pressure valve is regulated in time of crisis. The master narrative regarding immigration seems to require those it vilifies to obey the rule of silence. Their tongues are often kept in check through the threat of imprisonment and deportation.

God forbid if they become articulate, organize, participate in union politics and demand better wages and fair treatment. God forbid if they hold a press conference or get together to make an updated movie version of *The Help*.

Immigrants: canaries in the coal mine

Yet, in the context of a free and open society, the immigrant is often the canary in the coal mine. The horror stories from detention centers are just too many:

- Pregnant women shackled to a hospital bed while giving birth;
- Inmates shackled and paraded in pink underwear on the streets of Arizona, a scene reminiscent of Abu Ghraib;
- Rape incidents uninvestigated;
- Healthcare dangerously lacking in immigrant detention facilities where the suicide levels are alarming;
- Deportees forced to take psychotropic drugs so they act docile in their long journey back to their countries of origin.

Human-rights abuse by law enforcement in America's Southwest is so notorious that organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are ringing alarm bells for the lack of accountability. This terrible treatment reflects a legal system that's gone so badly wrong that America's very humanity is now put in question.

"You don't know me and I don't know you."

Perhaps we don't want to know about the tragedy and psychological and economic impact on tens of thousands of American-born children whose parents have been taken away by the authorities. But it is a fact that we are in the process of creating a whole generation of Americans who are becoming permanent outsiders, a vast second class of citizens.

When a society hides behind the apparatus of draconian policies, allowing the authorities almost unchecked power to detain and deport, the only logical outcome is injustice and cruelty.

Missing Voices

Missing from the national conversation are voices like that of the former secretary of state's, of pro-immigration reformers and civil rights leaders, who can speak on behalf of those who have no voice. Where are the leaders who can speak to the idea that it is not alien to American interests, but very much in our socioeconomic interest -- not to mention our spiritual health -- to integrate immigrants, that our nation functions best when we welcome newcomers and help them participate fully in our society?

What's missing is compassion.

If I am sympathetic to the plight of immigrants of all kinds, I have good reason: I was once a Vietnamese refugee. Like millions who left Vietnam, my family and I fled that country illegally, without passports. We entered another country without visas. That I am a writer and journalist today is due to the American generosity, my Americanization story is a love story, a success story.

But that generosity has all but faded. The United States is no doubt at a very important crossroads. In one direction is a country ruled by distrust, xenophobia and continual exploitation -- with its need to strengthen law enforcement. That choice offers us a society willing to look away while an entire population lives in fear, in a de facto police state. It's a country in which the immigrant becomes, indeed the enemy.

In the other direction is a global society defined by openness and with the understanding that we as a nation have always depended and thrived on the energy, ideas and contributions of newcomers. It's a promised land that can only be envisioned by the newcomer to our shore, who still dreams the dream. For even if we don't know it yet, we all desperately need to be reborn through his eyes.

[Andrew Lam is an editor of New America Media and the author of *East Eats West: Writing in Two Hemispheres* and *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*. His book of short stories, *Birds of Paradise*, is due out in 2013.]

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