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Margaret Chase Smith Library 2015 Student Essay Contest: Xenophobia and Amnesty

Taylor Plourde

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THIRD PLACE ESSAY

Xenophobia and Amnesty

by Taylor Plourde

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. In this issue, we feature the three prize-winning essays as the Margaret Chase Smith Essay. The 2015 essay prompt asked students to weigh in with their opinions about what current U.S. immigration policy should be in light of the historical backdrop of alternating cycles of welcome and wariness toward foreigners. In the third place prize-winning essay, Taylor Plourde describes the pattern of xenophobia that has often permeated American attitudes about immigrants. She discusses some of the ways forward to dealing with the current situation of immigrants who have come illegally into the country.

The streets are lined with the fruits of their labor. The city is built upon foundations that they produced. The nation didn't want them here. They are immigrants—the Lucas family to be more specific. The Lucases fled their homeland, Ireland, during the Great Potato Famine in the late 1800s and traveled across the Atlantic to America. Their welcome wasn't exactly warm: they were treated as pariah. Hardly anyone would associate with them, that is, other than fellow Irish immigrants. The family struggled for a while, traveling farther and farther north in the hope of finding somewhere they were welcomed. Eventually the family found their niche: Portland, Maine. They opened up their successful brick company there, and truly started their new life. Before the Lucases knew it, their bricks were everywhere and used all over Portland, from the streets to the houses. They were lucky to find a place where they could succeed and escape the dark cloud of hate immigrants are subjected to when migrating

to America. Other immigrants haven't been as lucky as my family was. Others have had to fight tooth-and-nail to get where they wanted to be, and even then sometimes it took generations.

Often America is labeled the "melting pot," but a closer look reveals that it takes many years, laws, and generations for the melting to take place. Historically, immigrants were rarely welcomed with open arms, if they were welcomed into the nation at all. Laws were passed in the 1880s and 1920s to prevent immigration, which were the first "major step[s] toward a closed society" (Hirschman 2014: 73) Over the past century, there have been a plethora of illegal immigrants coming to America, mainly Latino, seeking an opportunity for a better life. These new immigrants face some of the same hurdles that immigrants of the past had, the most prominent being the xenophobia that has always engulfed the nation.

In the past, America made an effort to restrict immigration in an attempt to

ease the public's fears that new immigrants would take jobs from and lower wages for American citizens. In most cases, however, immigrants take the lower-level jobs, which gives Americans the opportunity to achieve a higher-level occupation and the opportunity for a higher wage (Hirschman 2014). However, these fears are not at the root of the xenophobia; it is the fear of the unknown that all other xenophobic fears spawn from. American citizens project this fear onto immigrants through discrimination and racial hatred.

There are many Americans, like the man depicted in Figure 1, who lash out against immigrants and politicians who support amnesty because "America [is] for Americans," as the man's shirt says. This image is a wake-up call for all Americans who are anti-immigration; it draws a parallel between the picketing nationalists and the Klu Klux Klan. This image overemphasizes the connection between the two groups so the purpose becomes clear: Americans are acting out of fear by opposing immigration as a whole, which metastasizes into racial hatred. This fear lurks in Americans and prevents them from seeing that immigrants actually provide a variety of economic benefits to the nation such as helping "relieve the per-capita fiscal burden of native born for the national debt, national security, and public goods" (Hirschman 2014: 75). They aren't a threat.

Even if we were to ignore xenophobia as a variable in Americans' uneasiness toward immigrants and immigration reform in general, there still is the issue of what to do about the nation's immigration policy. Recently America's immigration policy has been brought back into the hot-seat due to President Barack Obama's controversial executive order in November 2014. The order is a call of amnesty for a large percentage of the current illegal immigrants residing in the United States. President Obama's order

FIGURE 1: **Immigration and Racism**

Source: John Cole. Immigration and Racism. Daryl Cagle's Political Cartoons 2007, https://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/95d0ead8-95b1-4038-89b0-2e8d75f58a33.html

has ignited a whirlwind of immigration reform and incited two key topics that the reform must address: what is to be done about all of the illegal immigrants already in the country, and what can we do to prevent future immigrants from arriving illegally?

The first topic has inspired many debates among amnesty supporters and deportation supporters. One potential conclusion always seems to make an appearance: "If we aren't going to let them stay, then that only leaves us with one other option, make them leave." However, from a purely logical perspective, deportation is not really an option for the country. If the government deported millions of immigrants, some of citizens would support of the action, but others would oppose displacing thousands of families and community members, which would hurt the reelection chances of politicians who supported the deportation. Even if the action to

deport all illegal immigrants over a designated period of time was approved and supported by the public, "it would take more than 30 years to deport all 11.3 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States" at a rate of nearly 400,000 immigrants a year (*Washington Post*, November 20, 2014). Not only is it illogical to deport all the illegal immigrants, but it's also impractical. Instead of wasting time, money, and resources on sending people back, we should grant amnesty to the majority of the illegal immigrants. However, I'm not saying that we should just hand out amnesty to those who went out of their way to break federal law; amnesty should be contingent on a few requirements.

Amnesty is a touchy subject in America. Some Americans agree with Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, when he argues that amnesty "rewards

liars and scofflaws," and "mocks those who obeyed the law" (Krikorian 2014: 31). I and many other Americans find validity in Krikorian's statements, but still support amnesty. Krikorian does make a good point though: giving those who broke the law what they wanted is only rewarding bad behavior, which is why I believe that we need requirements for those seeking amnesty. Amnesty seekers must meet at least two requirements: they have resided in America for a determined time period and show evidence of an established life.

As a nation established on the principle that all people have an unalienable right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," it is our duty to grant immigrants who are able to prove they have established lives for themselves in America amnesty and remove the constant fear of deportation. President Obama's 2014 executive order grants a legal reprieve to parents of American citizens and parents of "permanent residents who've resided in the country for at least five years," (*Washington Post*, November 20, 2014), which offers a reasonable time period of residency: five years. To prove an established life, undocumented immigrants would need to provide evidence of a place of residence, a stable occupation, and a plan for the future. By meeting these requirements, they would prove to the nation that they have the drive and desire to build a better life, one that would benefit the nation's economy and culture.

Illegal immigration is like a cracked wall, however, and we need to develop a patch to fix the crack. To establish such lenient restrictions on amnesty, we would need to develop a "zero-tolerance strategy along the entire border" (Krikorian 2014: 30), which would be our patch for the crack. Zero tolerance means that it is a criminal offense to cross the border without legal documentation or to overstay a visa (Krikorian

2014). Additionally, by preventing illegal immigration, we are thereby lowering the level of immigration in general, which, according to Krikorian (2014: 32), will "ease pressure on welfare and the health and education systems and promote assimilation."

This system of cleanup and prevention would reduce the amount of illegal immigrants in the future, while not uprooting the lives of those who have found their homes here in America. However, this system can't and won't be put in place until Americans come to terms with the source of their xenophobia: fear of the unknown. It won't be easy for Americans to break away from what has been reinforced over and over throughout the nation's history, but it is the only way to move toward an effective reform on immigration: one that is fair and just. 🐚

REFERENCES

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Taylor Plourde of Lisbon High School won the third place prize. She is attending Roberts Wesleyan College in New York, majoring in communications with a focus on journalism. While at Lisbon High, she was on the yearbook committee, played softball, and helped create the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. She is also involved as a volunteer in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program.