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Streets Paved With Gold: Immigration and The Image of America

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In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed a bill reforming the United States' highly restrictive immigration policy. The site chosen for the ceremony was symbolic—the base of the Statue of Liberty. For Johnson and most Americans the statue was the most appropriate location to enact a bill that liberalized the nation's immigration law. In the minds of many the Bartholdi statue represented what immigrants expected of America and what America expected of itself. It was the guardian of the "golden door" to a land promising liberty, opportunity, freedom, and refuge. These words were part of the symbolism that surrounded an image of America built around immigration, an image that one might argue is at the core of the way the nation views itself and wishes to be viewed in the late-twentieth century.

Yet, from the point of view of history, that image is not entirely accurate, just as the interpretation of the Statue of Liberty is not. The statue was not built to welcome immigrants, nor was immigration a principal concern of its French creators. As illustrated by John Higham in his perceptive article, "The Transformation of the Statue of Liberty," the monument (which was a gift of the French government to commemorate the American centennial) represented a French political statement; one built upon admiration of political liberty in America. That it became something other in the minds of the world is due in large part to Americans, particularly those of late nineteenth and early twentieth century immigrant origin, who saw it as the symbol of a land of liberty where the streets were paved with gold. Emma Lazarus, the daughter of an established New York German Jewish family, began that transformation with her poem "The New Colossus" which she wrote to help raise funds for the erection of the base of the statue. (The gift was made in 1876 but the statue was not dedicated until 1886.) She perceived it as a symbol relating to her own experiences as the descendant of immigrants. It became the keeper of the golden door through which her family had entered America and through which she saw increasing numbers of people arriving. The fact that her poem, which celebrates the concept of America as a haven for the poor and oppressed, was eventually inscribed on a plaque and in the 1940s moved to a position of prominence at the statue evidenced the emergence of her feelings on a national

scale. Later, the installation of a museum of immigration at the base of the statue furthered its metamorphosis as a symbol of that phenomenon (see Higham, "The Transformation of the Statue of Liberty" for the best analysis of the changing symbolism of the Statue of Liberty).

The transformation of the Statue of Liberty is, perhaps, the most representative example of an evolutionary change in the way a nation has chosen to see itself and the manner in which it has come to view immigration as central to its history and identity. Contemporary Americans will argue whether the nation is a melting pot or "salad bowl" but most will not, and cannot—given their own family histories—deny the role immigration has played in the nation's history. "Land of opportunity," "home for the oppressed" are common, everyday phrases with which few established citizens would disagree (despite the fact that some may still wish to halt immigration); but what such phrases connote was not always the image America presented to the world. That image, like the contemporary perception of the Statue of Liberty, represented an evolutionary change in the way the nation incorporated immigrants and immigration into its own self-definition.

It is true that from the days of European discovery, the New World was viewed from abroad as a source of riches. It was not the expected landfall in the spice-rich land of India, but rather an exotic new territory in which gold and silver excited the imaginations of Europeans and sealed the fate of its indigenous peoples. The fact that it was referred to as the "new" world says much about the role expectation played in the evolution of its image. However, the gold and silver of the *conquistadors* does not necessarily equate with the expectations of later generations of immigrants—there is a great gulf between exploitation and expectation. The ability to exploit the New World was, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, largely limited to those who already possessed power or social standing. For the common European, colonial America was, for many years, a fate to be avoided rather than a destination promising riches or social advancement. It was indentured servants, black African slaves, and petty criminals who created an unwilling workforce in the evolving colonial economy (see Daniels; and Jones, *American Immigration*.)

How and when the common person's image of the New World changed is arguable. The process was gradual, taking hold of the imagination, perhaps, only in the early eighteenth century as the economy of the English colonies expanded. This expansion conjoined with more idealistic aspects of English settlement on the East Coast of North America to begin the transformation. The portion of the settlement that became New England was perceived as a true City on the Hill by English Puritan dissenters beginning in the 1620s. William Penn's colonial experiment in the colony that bore his name provided tolerance and hope for a broader group of Protestant dissenters later in the century. Lord Baltimore's colony of Maryland promised but never really delivered tolerance for Roman Catholics. Late in the colonial period, James Oglethorpe established Georgia as a haven for debtors and

one of the few southern colonies closed to slavery. That closure and the general nature of the colony would change well before American independence so that Georgia, despite its reformist image, came to be seen as one of the several slave-based agricultural economies of the South.

Georgia's lapse into slavery, the intolerance toward non-believers in New England, Penn's dislike of Catholics, and other similar manifestations of seventeenth and eighteenth century biases or liberal limitations cause today's observer to view the British colonial venture as less than ideal. Moreover, many of the actions that could possibly be attributed to a liberal conscience can also be interpreted as schemes to attract the labor force that would insure colonial success. Whether America was a refuge for the oppressed or simply an employer seeking a work force is a question of long standing.

Yet, the colonies did begin to see themselves increasingly as a place apart from the Old World. Although they saw their governmental liberties as part of their English heritage, they felt themselves different from Britain, and, particularly, from the governing systems of Europe. Increasingly in the Old World, Europeans of common birth began to perceive an opportunity for both employment and the chance for increased personal liberty (or, put in another way, a lessening of oppression). The movement of the Protestant Irish to the colonies in large numbers following the 1720s is a major example of this trend. Faced with discriminatory legislation and unjust rents in the area of Ireland they had subdued for the Crown, the Scotch Irish found land and tolerance on the frontiers of Pennsylvania and the Carolinas (see Leyburn; and Jones, "Scotch-Irish").

By the mid-eighteenth century, the colonies had ceased to be places to be avoided. However, their image as a place of economic opportunity and tolerance achieved substantial recognition only with and after the American Revolution, an event that codified, so to speak, the concept of "liberty" and announced it to the world. Within the rhetoric of the Revolution, however, relatively little explicit attention was given to the concept of the new nation as a refuge for others oppressed by governmental tyranny. Admittedly, some of the more radical revolutionaries, such as Thomas Paine, did go so far as to see the new nation as "the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe" (24). And, the Declaration of Independence lists restriction of immigration and naturalization as one of the causes of the break with the mother country, but does so largely because the crown's rulings in these areas stifled economic growth. Nearly a decade later, the Constitution almost avoided the matter altogether except in addressing the need of the national government to deal with matters of naturalization.

Taken together, the founding documents of the American Republic do not exhibit the same symbolism with which the nation would identify itself some two hundred years later. There are no promises of refuge, no claim to impose similar systems elsewhere in the world, and no statements either for or against immigration. Rather,

America's political foundation is just that: a structure of laws and general ideals born of the age of rational enlightenment that speak of personal liberty—both political and economic, rather than a manifesto to export or propagate those ideals elsewhere. These were, in large part, expected to grow internally, in the isolation of the continent. If they were to have influence abroad, it would be by example; that is, by serving as a political city on the hill, American republicanism would eventually change the Old World.

Indeed, given the fragility of the new nation, there was a concern that the American republican experiment might be harmed by immigration. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and other early leaders did, at one point or another, speak of immigration in a positive light, but they, particularly Jefferson, also viewed immigrants as possible infective agents, bringing monarchism and other Old World systems and attitudes to the New World. This fear of alien philosophies entering the American body politic would rise again and again during the ensuing two centuries—there has always been a concern that outsiders would taint or compromise the experiment. The founding fathers did not envision America as a potential nation of nations, but as a substantially homogeneous country built on a rational and enlightened political and economic base.

The counterpoise to this attitude and, indeed, the real birth of the image of America as a refuge and a nation comprised of outsiders would arise only in the years after the Napoleonic Wars. At that time a substantial new global migration began, driven by economic and social changes that swept eastward from the British Isles. Literature and, later, other forms of communication helped promote this migration and, more important, created an image of America that the immigrants would, along with their worldly baggage, bring to and propagate in the New World. Travel guides, personal narratives, advertisements, and letters were the specific agents that spurred the evolution of the image of the United States as a land of opportunity (see Hanson).

Not that this was entirely new. John Smith, as the first propagandist for the British New World, wrote works that sought to foster investment and settlement in the Virginia colony (see Van Tassel for bibliographic data on Smith's writings). Smith's works did not shy away from the considerable troubles that the early colonists had experienced and they did provide descriptions that, if read carefully, give a fairly clear history of the colony. But more than anything else they promoted the concept of opportunity in the New World. However, in the period of hand-operated printing presses and limited literacy, seventeenth and eighteenth century works such as these had a relatively small circulation.

The same nineteenth century industrial revolution that upset traditional societies, first in northern and later in eastern and southern Europe and set immigration in motion, also provided the means for a huge expansion in information. By mid-century, steam powered printing presses, cheaper paper stock, color lithography,

and instant telegraphic communications revolutionized the manner in which Europeans came to learn about America.

Guide books and accounts of journeys in the new American Republic first found an audience in the British Isles. In addition to providing practical advice about travel, deportment, and opportunity in America, these volumes also drew upon a theme that Smith and others had exploited, that being the newness and vastness of the land. The tales of gold and silver that had entranced the Spanish became, by the early 1800s, tales of endless landscapes, inexhaustible forests, and new opportunity for those ready to work on the new continent (see Hanson for bibliographic details on these guide books, accounts of journeys and tales).

Immigration from the German states—by far the most substantial wave to arrive in America in the period 1820-1880—was lured, driven if you will, by the power of the printed word. Volumes such as G. Bossert's *Das Wanderbuchlein nach Nordamerika*(Travelogue [about a trip] to North America) (1842) provided both practical and fanciful details of life in the United States. As was the case with books directed toward the British Isles, the emphasis was on rural, rather than urban opportunity (Hanson 191-192).

Within this literature, one style assumed a particular importance. Travel journals provided the veracity of first-hand experience. More important, most provided descriptions of the social and political systems in the United States. De Tocqueville's work is the prime example of this genre. The descriptions it contains about life and society in the new nation seem to have found their way today into every basic text on American history. But de Tocqueville was not the only foreigner to travel in and write about the United States. Hundreds of similar titles in a variety of languages appeared in the years before the American Civil War (see Hanson for bibliographic details on these works).

Each provided images of America that were alien, but, as such, interesting to Old World residents curious about a system that promised tolerance, and fostered land ownership and individual enterprise. The books that created this image of America were not always glowing in their descriptions. For example, Ludwig Gall's *Meine Auswanderung nach den Vereinigten-Staaten in Nord Amerika* (My Emigration to the United States in North America) (1822) described both the countryside and the anti-immigrant attitudes he experienced in his visit during the depressed times following the end of the War of 1812. Yet, despite their warnings that the United States was not a true paradise on earth, and that tolerance there had its limits, travel journals and emigrant guide books still built an image of plenty and expectation in the European mind that would come, eventually, full circle, to be the image Americans would hold of themselves (Hanson 107).

The new communications technologies were, by the 1840s, complemented by a general rise in literacy on the continent. But illiteracy was not a hindrance to the

spread of news of opportunity in America. Special European immigrant newspapers such as the *Allgemeine Auswanderungs Zeitung* found their way to village taverns where the literate read to those who could not read. Such periodical publications provided fresh and relatively up-to-date information on America whereas travel guides and tour accounts, if they were honest, fell out of date within a year or two of their publication (Hanson 150-151, 157).

Up-to-date information was critical to the potential emigrant, for economic opportunity, rather than political freedom, was often his or her primary motivating force. Certainly, the political system and the natural resources of the New World were central to the prosperity it promised, but the predominant image in the minds of those who considered America as a potential new home was of a land of boundless economic opportunity. However, one had to understand the ups and downs of the market, so to speak, to gain maximum advantage. Interestingly, the phrase "streets paved with gold," which alludes to the economic side of the American image, eventually came to symbolize expectations that, in many instances, were not fully met. (For a thorough examination of immigrant expectations of America, including the view that it was a land where the streets were paved with gold, see Hoerder and Rössler, 1-33 in particular for a synopsis of such expectations.) It is, in one sense, a metaphor for a naïve, blind belief in the New World. But most immigrants were not naïve; they carefully watched the newspapers and read the letters of other immigrants to ascertain if and when they should depart. Any communication system that could provide fuller, more accurate information about opportunities, and thus perhaps increase chances of success, was critical to the entire process of immigration.

Two technological innovations sped the printed word in the nineteenth century. The first was the steamship that provided scheduled and more rapid transatlantic crossings. This affected both the travel of immigrants and the passage of information. Early sailing ships had taken well over a month to cross the ocean and sailed only when they had a full cargo. However, by mid-century service took place on regular schedules. By century's end crossings took a week or two at the most. While steamships carried immigrants to America, they returned to Europe with information in the form of newspapers, mail, and, by the 1890s, an increasing number of returnees with first-hand stories of life in America (Daniels 185-188).

The increasing flow of mail from immigrants to their families and villages came to be known as "America letters." They served as the primary link in the chain of immigration, providing details on job opportunities and conditions and, very often, containing money. While travel guides and newspapers might be believed, people could put greater faith in a letter from a brother, father, or cousin. By the late nineteenth century the volume of transatlantic mail was enormous and the information it contained priceless. For example, the Czarist police in Congress Poland routinely intercepted and read letters from Polish immigrants living in North and South America to gain information not just on political activities abroad,

but on emigration trends that might change the nature of the population in Congress Poland itself. At least one box of these letters survived the bombing of Warsaw in World War II, and today provides one of the clearest views of how Polish immigrants judged their experiences in the New World.

The second technological innovation, the telegraph, initially carried messages from the ports to inland cities. After 1866, the trans-Atlantic cable allowed European news services to keep fully up to date with the American economy. Thus, the emigrant newspapers gained more credibility by being able to report economic downturns more rapidly. By the end of the American Civil War, technology and literacy had combined in Europe to create an image of the United States that increasingly focused on economic opportunity. While the image of the political freedom in America was still present, it was economic opportunity that formed the primary temptation for hundreds of thousands of Europeans trying to find their place in a new global industrial order.

As information fostered a growth of immigration, Americans had to begin to modify their image of their nation in relation to that phenomenon. That modification came slowly. The United States of 1820 was a relatively homogeneous country. Low levels of immigration during the preceding two decades had permitted the nation to become one largely of American-born individuals. Ethnic group identity was disappearing by 1820. In Pennsylvania, for example, German heritage was on the wane as evidenced in the demise of German-language newspapers in Philadelphia. The Dutch background of the residents of the Hudson Valley became more the substance of legend than of reality. However, between 1820 and 1860, the nation would have to absorb five million immigrants, and in the years between 1860 and 1924 another 31 million. To do so and survive, the United States had to arrive at a new political and philosophical understanding of itself in order to accommodate this enormous influx. It did so by melding its founding political concepts with the image of expectation that came to its shores with the immigrants (Jones 63-65).

Throughout this period, and, indeed, up to the present, the nation has based its image on the concept of serving as haven for those seeking freedom. Though Paine's may have been a radical voice in the 1700s, his message eventually became central to the national self-image. This self-image has come to the forefront many times in the past 200 years. Revolutionary heroes such as Louis Kossuth were lauded when they visited the United States. Refugees of the Polish revolution of 1830 and of the continental revolts of 1848 were welcomed to America's shores. In some instances, the "People of the Book," the Jews, were welcomed both as curious newcomers in the mid-nineteenth century and as a group fleeing oppression during the Czarist pogroms at century's end. It was the sight of the first pogrom refugees that spurred Lazarus to rediscover her immigrant heritage. The late 1940s brought the Paine version of America into full focus when the ideological struggle with Communism demanded that the country officially become a haven. It was no

longer simply a part of the New World, but the leader of "the free world." The terms "refugee" and "displaced person" became commonplace in the national lexicon in the late 1940s and in doing so provided a plebeian alternative to the older term, "political *émigré*." Tens of thousands of displaced people from Ukraine, freedom fighters from Hungary, and anti-Castro activists from Cuba were the refugees of the Cold War era. Today's continuing debate over what constitutes a political refugee, particularly on the issue of the Haitian "boat people," represents the ongoing testing of this part of the self-image.

But *émigré* revolutionaries and those fleeing harsh political or religious persecution have always been (relatively) a small part of those who came to the United States. Most immigrants had no visible political baggage and, indeed, many, particularly Catholics, were suspect in the US as enemies of republicanism. While Americans could, perhaps, argue that almost all immigrants, until rather recently, came from non-democratic countries and thus were seeking a new political freedom, the image based on the words of Paine needed further modification if it was to encompass the realities of the huge demographic change confronting the nation. Somehow, the economics of immigration had to be made to conform to the image. However, the economics of immigration seemed, at times, antithetical to the view of America as a haven for the politically oppressed. By the 1890s, Americans could not ignore the fact that many people routinely moved back and forth between Europe and America according to economic needs rather than political desires. America seemed not so much a refuge as a workshop, as dollars and former immigrants readily moved back to less than democratic homelands.

I would argue that the new image of America, which more fully encompasses the economic side of immigration, has evolved completely only in the past fifty years although it has been in the making since the end of the American Civil War. By shifting the focus to immigration, rather than simply to political refuge *per se*, this new image successfully melds the economics of immigration with the long-standing concept of the nation as a haven for the oppressed. To examine this change more closely, one needs to look at three major American symbols.

The first is Plymouth Rock, the site at which the Pilgrims landed in 1620. Plymouth Rock, along with the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving, has been taken for granted as representing the overall culture of America until rather recently. The Pilgrim experience in particular, and New England in general fit very well into the image of self government, republican values, and personal independence that was the vision of America fostered by Jefferson and Washington. It was also one that grew more intense in the face of the waves of immigration and economic change in the nineteenth century. The creation of organizations such as the Society of Mayflower Descendants, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Colonial Dames, and the Sons of the American Revolution not only provided cultural solidarity for people of older American stock in the midst of tremendous demographic change, but also served to bolster the view that it was liberty and not economics that stood

at the core of the nation (see Seelye for an exhaustive analysis of the meaning of Plymouth Rock in America).

Plymouth Rock and the values for which it stood, ironically, played a part in almost stopping immigration to America in 1924. By the 1890s, the scope and nature (largely eastern and southern European in origin) of American immigration raised calls for its restriction, most of which came from New England or rural America. The obvious economic character of the movement was troubling, but more troubling was the fact that many of the newcomers seemed to be different from what constituted a "normal" American. In an era that saw the growth of popular and scientific investigations of race, a concern about eugenics, and a belief in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon "race," the new immigration seemed not to fit in the then current image of America (see Higham,*Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism* 131-157 for an extensive discussion of the development of racially-based biases toward immigrants).

The movement to restrict immigration presents a long and complex history that cannot be explored in the limits of this paper. For various reasons, economic and/or idealistic, presidents ranging from Grover Cleveland to Woodrow Wilson vetoed measures that would impose a literacy requirement on all immigrants, maintaining that such measures would violate America's tradition of serving as a refuge. But, in what Higham characterizes as the "tribal twenties," the government stanched large-scale immigration with the passage of the National Origins Act. That act, which sought to preserve the American population mixture as it stood in 1920 says much about what many Americans wanted for a national self-image. It was an image that hearkened back to Plymouth Rock and the cultural background of the early European settlers. Essentially, the National Origins Act promised that America would remain a nation in which northern European ancestry was predominant (Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism*).

While all of this was occurring, two additional symbols that would eventually come to reflect America's self image, the Statue of Liberty and the immigration station at Ellis Island, were constructed. President Cleveland unveiled the Statue of Liberty in 1886, at a time in transportation history when it would dominate the path of thousands of steamships that carried immigrants into the nation's largest port. No matter what its French creators had intended, those who saw it interpreted it differently. It was large and awe-inspiring to people who had left the cities, villages, and small farms of Europe. It was, perhaps, confirmation that things were larger and more beautiful in America. It was, perhaps, confirmation of the stories carried in guide books, newspapers, and family letters of the wealth to be found in the new country. And for some, it was confirmation that the liberty denied to them in the conservative empires of Europe could be found in America.

Many of these immigrants landed at the third symbol, the new immigration processing station of Ellis Island that opened in 1892. Although much has been said

about immigrants being turned away by inspectors at Ellis Island, most who arrived there went on to their destinations in the States. Ellis Island opened just as restriction became a major political issue. It was, ironically, an agency designed to facilitate the new economic, industrial immigration that the restrictionists opposed. Like the rationalized, organized, machine-driven economy that drew the immigrants, it was designed as an efficient means to select and then funnel labor into that system. Ellis Island sorted out those who would presumably be a burden or danger to American society but efficiently passed along those who would add to its economic growth.

It was this group of late nineteenth, early-twentieth century immigrants who began crafting the new image of America in which opportunity and prosperity became dominant features. Not that prosperity was a new concept—it certainly could be considered as one of the bases of personal happiness. And, the pursuit of happiness, thanks to Jefferson, has been a codified aspect of American life since 1776. In the industrial age, happiness became increasingly linked to personal advancement in station and in wealth—no more so than for those who came to America as part of what Dirk Hoerder has characterized as a mobile global workforce (*American Labor and Immigration History 1877-1920s*). Certainly, happiness was something other for Jefferson's yeoman farmer—it had more to do with land ownership, enterprise, and the liberty that derived from that combination. Later immigrants could find happiness while working in a factory or on a labor gang provided the hours, pay, and conditions were acceptable. Those who entered through Ellis Island helped create an America that Jefferson would not have recognized, but by merging their material expectations with his ideals they and their descendants created a new national image that was still bound, in part, to that held by the founding fathers.

The new image is one of personal fulfillment in which the material benefits of America are intertwined with advanced concepts of personal freedom. In some ways it is not unlike that held by those who venerated the ideals represented by Plymouth Rock since personal liberty remains at its core. But surrounding that core is a more material message. One could argue that this aspect of America was always there—Jefferson's farm for every yeoman was not a small material hope in the early nineteenth century. But the current self–image of America derives from a geometric expansion of material hopes and, more critically, from the nation's economic and military domination of the globe; all of which occurred within the life spans of the Ellis Island immigrants. There is a*hubris* to this image that is totally lacking in that which existed up to the late nineteenth century.

It was those immigrants who, like the earlier travel writers, propagated this version of America. While large farms, fertile soil, and open lands formed the landscapes in the guidebooks and narratives of ante-bellum period, the stories of post Civil War immigrants focused on wealth. Tales of former immigrants returning (via the new steamship) to the hometown in Europe and amazing friends with fancy new clothes and jewelry are so common as to have become clichés. Cliché or not, one could

easily neglect the fact that the former immigrant was a miner or steel mill worker in America, since he was still rich by the standards of his former peers. Then there were those immigrants who through their literary skills moved the new image beyond the old village and beyond the immigrant neighborhoods in America. Some, such as Lazarus and Israel Zangwell, served to keep the more idealistic aspect of the image alive, she with her poem, and he with his play, *The Melting Pot* (1909). That both were Jewish and, as such, very aware of the polar opposites of persecution and liberty explains why they emphasized what they did. By the mid-twentieth century a host of immigrants and the children of immigrants, such as Louis Adamic (*Laughing in the Jungle: the Autobiography of an Immigrant in America* 1932), Edward Bok (*The Americanization of Edward Bok: the Autobiography of a Dutch boy* 1920) and Michael DeCapite (*The Bennett Place* 1948), had created a substantial body of fiction and autobiography that reinforced the notion of immigration as central to the American character. However, a good portion of this literature focuses on personal struggle and tragedy and as such disabuses the reader of any belief in quick and easy riches in the New World (for an introduction to the vast amount of immigrant fiction and autobiographical writing see Holte and Payne).

The idealism of Lazarus and Zangwell endured, and the tales of hardship and pain contained in immigrant fiction and autobiography found an audience, but these sober messages were overwhelmed by yet more technological advances in communication which tended to stress the material aspects of life in America. The impact of American-made movies on global perceptions of the nation has been profound. From silent films such as *The Immigrant* (1917) to more recent offerings such as the*Coming to America* (1988)movies have visually convinced many that the streets are, indeed, paved with gold. More honest views of American immigrant life ranging from *HesterStreet* (1975) to *El Norte* (1983) are hard pressed to compete with the mass-market offerings of the film industry that purvey images of America filled with cars, skyscrapers, single family homes, and other such accouterments of “happiness.” These images have found their way abroad since the turn of the century. Today, American cinema dominates the world market.

If one could disregard the movies, or if no relatives from America visited, the arrival, in Europe and elsewhere, of the American servicemen and women in World Wars I and II and during the Cold War did much to convince the world of the material, if not the moral, splendor, of the new New World. Of course the servicemen’s image had two edges. As many grateful, but somewhat jealous Britons would note during World War II, the Yanks were “over-paid, over-sexed, and over here.” Chocolate bars, cigarettes, and chewing gum became, in the war-ravaged cities of Europe, a sign of material superiority. Not only had the Americans won, but they apparently had not suffered in doing so. That many of these soldiers had European surnames was a fact not lost on the citizens of Berlin, Paris, or Antwerp—the sons of Europe had prospered and grown powerful in the United States. On the American side, tours of duty abroad, particularly during World War

II, served to reinforce the servicemen's image of their own country. Most returned convinced that America was a special place, far superior to the lands their ancestors had left.

The generation who served in World War II came into political power during the decades after the war. When President Johnson signed the immigration reform act of 1965 at the Statue of Liberty he approved legislation created by a Congress, many of whose members, through their ancestry, represented the immigration of the Ellis Island era. These members of Congress had experienced and participated in the rise of America to full world leadership. It was therefore a legislative body convinced of the special mission of the country and well aware of its own origins.

Under the leadership of Johnson, Congress passed a series of laws that reflected a new image of America. The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 may not have been products of legislative unanimity, but they were laws that derived from a need for the nation to live up to its ideals. Following passage of these laws that moved the nation toward racial equality, Congress passed the immigration reform act that dismantled the restrictive national origin system. Certainly, some members of Congress voted for the act in order to correct an affront to their own ancestry, but they also voted for it because they believed the United States, as a nation of immigrants, needed to manage immigration in a fair and racially impartial manner. Still fighting the threat of global communism, they also knew that the nation needed to take a stand in matters of ideological import. Thus, they drew upon personal experience and the concepts first fully enunciated by Paine in crafting the new law. The same Congress and President were responsible for creating "the Great Society," a series of programs that would guarantee economic well-being and opportunity to all Americans, thus fulfilling the expectations of generations looking for streets that, if not paved with gold, were at least open for opportunity (see Reimers for an excellent review of the politics underlying the change of the United States' immigration laws in 1965).

Earlier, in 1954, the United States had closed the immigration station at Ellis Island. Air travel and quotas had made the aging facility relatively useless. In 1990, the Ellis Island immigration facility opened again, this time as a museum operated by the National Park Service. Like the Statue of Liberty some four years before, it had been rebuilt and refurbished largely through private funds and under the leadership of businessmen such as Lee Iacocca whose ancestry had a real or emotional connection to both sites. Both were symbols restored by, and for, the generation of immigrants and their descendants who had constructed the new image of America as a haven for, and a place created by, immigrants. Both were also symbols of the material progress that had come to be seen, correctly or incorrectly, as an inherent part of the immigrant experience in America. Ellis Island and the statue framed the "golden door" that Lazarus had written of. Both were quite different from Plymouth Rock and from the nineteenth-century American self-image symbolized by Plymouth Rock (see Seelye 524, 626 for specific

comparisons between the symbolism of Plymouth Rock and Ellis Island). Unlike Plymouth Rock, a quiet shrine by the seaside that marked the landing of one ship on the shore of an uncharted wilderness, these were creations of an industrial age standing within a busy harbor where they had witnessed the passage of thousands of ships and millions of lives. But while both the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island now serve to institutionalize the dream of America as a place with endless possibilities, they still weave their image over a weft based on liberty. In doing so these symbols exemplify the relatively recent centrality of immigration as part of America's self image as well as challenge the nation to maintain its core values of individual rights and equalities in an era of new global economic and demographic realities.

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