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Leaders to Follow

WHO'S AN AMERICAN?

By Sara Tusek

This being an election year, there is quite a bit of pontificating in the media as to what it means to be an American. Each presidential candidate is trying to outdo the others in showing that he or she is a true American who represents the “real” America, and is therefore qualified to lead the country .

At the same time, the question of who is NOT an American (and what to do about those people) dominates some presidential debates. The terms “illegal immigrant” and “illegal alien” are used interchangeably; no matter what the label, being in the US without proper documentation, or working in

the US without official permission presents a big problem to the American way of life, according to most of the candidates. In fact, some candidates have gone on record stating that we need a fence around the country to keep out illegals.

Aside from the rather ridiculous Cold War image of a tall wall (concrete? electrified?) hemming in the continental US (Alaska and Hawaii would be left out, presumably), and the rather more sinister Cold War echo of walling in a country (think Berlin Wall, guards

shooting people as they vault the wall, and German Shepherds sniffing out illegals), the practicalities and expense of building and maintaining such a wall are mind-boggling. And for what? Illegal immigrants armed with cheaply-bought false passports walk through Customs controls every day; others tunnel under the border. How is a wall going to stop that?

So we are left with the question: who has the right to enter and stay in the US? Who is an American? Economists, sociologists, politicians, historians, anthropologists and other academics have their various criteria for being an American; is there a simple, clear definition that everyone can agree on?

BY BIRTH

If you are born in the US, you are a US citizen—an American. This holds true even if your parents are not US citizens. You automatically gain all the rights of citizenship simply by being born on U.S. territory (except in times of war, when US-born citizens can have their civil rights revoked, as in the case of Japanese American citizens interned in concentration camps during WWII—war changes the rules).

By this definition, many children born of illegal immigrant parents are, through no effort of their own, legal. It's an interesting, rather old-fashioned concept that being *in* a place makes you *part of* that place—with today's “borderless world” of cyberspace and rapid transportation, it's hard to imagine that the “born here, born American” concept will serve to define who is an American in the 21st century. *to p. 2*

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- Was founded in 1985 in Princeton, NJ
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Providing Leadership Development Services and Programs in the US and Europe since 1985

Who's an American?

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BY MARRIAGE

Those movies categorized as “romantic comedies” often tell of two people, not in love, who marry so that one can gain citizenship. Inevitably, what began as a business deal becomes “true love,” with all the attendant miscommunications which so amuse the audience.

In reality, marrying to become an American is not that easy. It takes a determined assault at bureaucracy to unite an American citizen with an illegal immigrant in the institution of marriage, and citizenship does not automatically accompany the marriage ceremony. The new bride or bridegroom may feel like an American, but that doesn't mean that anyone else sees him or her that way. In fact, if the newlywed has a strong “foreign” accent or exotic looks, it may be that some people will never consider him or her an American. Citizenship alone does not guarantee acceptance.

BY EDUCATION

As illegal immigrants in such states as California and Florida gain an economic foothold in America (usually by working for very low wages in jobs that are not well-regulated by law), their children often enter American public schools. Twelve years of intense socialization in a classroom setting will make an American out of any child who is willing to be taught. It could be argued that the public education system is the very best way to produce Americans, from legal and illegal students alike. The thousands of legal immigrants in the late 1800's from Southern and Central Europe became Americans by attending school. They also attended American churches, synagogues, museums, and settlement houses, moving on to jobs in American compa-

nies when they were ready to work. All these socialization opportunities produced a new generation of Americans with strange last names and odd customs.

WHO'S AN AMERICAN?

The US is a nation of immigrants, starting with the natives who presumably crossed the Bering Strait and made their way south from Alaska. Successive waves of immigrants built a country that values unity (the “united” states of America) in the midst of significant diversity. The US has absorbed bits and pieces of music, art, literature, architecture, family customs, religion, and other cultural flotsam from hundreds of very different places around the world.

Building a wall around America might satisfy some people's sense of safety and self-protection. But the truth is that no wall can keep out a person who is determined to breach it. As long as the US continues to expand, people will be needed to both produce and consume the goods and services of the American economy.

Many of these people will be the most talented and ambitious of their country of birth; will it harm the US to allow these people, whose contribution is valuable, to become Americans? Surely it's not too difficult to find ways to control the influx of immigrants into the US without turning them into criminals in the process.

Maybe a working definition of the true American is the person, living and working in the US, who sees the potential of all human beings and treats people with dignity and justice, while obeying the law and contributing to the betterment of his or her community. The Presidential candidates are all Americans—it's a constitutional requirement. Which of them is a “true” American?