

America's Best (with Peter Siavelis)

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Emma Lazarus's injunction to the world to "give us your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" – edged as it is on the base of the Statue of Liberty – tells us something important about America. It also tells us something important about Emma Lazarus.

What it tells us about America is that immigration is something that this country has done better than anywhere else – and by miles.

What it tells us about Lazarus is that she did not think much about a certain set of miles: the miles and miles of the Mexican border with the United States. Emma Lazarus was many things, but she was never a Minuteman.

Immigration these days is a matter of huge contention. It comes at us packaged in imagery that is often dramatic but invariably imprecise.

So what do we actually face?

** Do we face floods of Mexican humanity sweeping across porous American borders?*

** Do we face a Southwest re-conquered by Mexican guile and stealth?*

** Is it a matter of low American wages dragged further down by an endless supply of Mexican labor; or of over-stretched welfare systems brought to breaking point by the arrival of the Hispanic poor?*

** Is American culture being 'diluted' by the arrival of people with a different language and values?*

** Is the Rio Grande no longer a barrier to the criminal or the terrorist? Are both pouring into America now?*

** Is amnesty a solution, or simply an encouragement to those who have not yet come? Is the Republic under threat?*

We need to know.

We need to know because the lives and happiness of millions of people depend upon our knowledge and our votes –the lives and happiness of people born here, and the lives and happiness of people coming here from countries abroad.

As a generation we have a huge responsibility that we cannot duck: the responsibility of reconciling America's historic mission as the land of the free with a principled response to the presence among us of so many who have come freely but uninvited.

¹ Also published as **Inmigracion: volviendo a elaborar el debate** in *Que Pasa* October 4-10, 2007)

To some of us, the answer is simple. Just send every illegal immigrant back? But for those with a more nuanced mind, that simplicity is too quick, too easy, too neglectful of other realities. The question is how to incorporate those realities.

** How to factor in the quality of so many of these new arrivals: people as hardworking and God-fearing as we like to think we are ourselves?*

** How to factor in the manner in which whole sections of American business have come to rely on their hard and low-paid labor, and we on the low prices for consumer goods that low-paid labor allows?*

** How to factor in that low wages have many causes, of which immigration is only one?*

** How to explain why so many Hispanic immigrants have come and stayed so recently, where once their predecessors came only to return home?*

How to take the heat out of our thinking? How quietly to examine the complexities with which public policy must necessarily deal? How to be sophisticated citizens in a world that requires our sophistication?

Simple answers require no effort. Prejudice requires no thought. But the resolution of complex problems requires both effort and thought. Overwhelmingly it requires knowledge. We live in the most important democracy on earth. There can be so safe space for prejudice here. Knowledge, not prejudice, must be our guide. We owe that much at least to ourselves, and to the world that looks to us for leadership.

The knowledge that we need will not come easily, but it is available. Making it available is one of the tasks of the education system in our time. Wake Forest University recognizes its responsibility in that task; which is why we invite you to join us. The University is open October 3-5 to anyone keen to know. We have gathered the cream of American scholarship on immigration issues to give us the knowledge we need to vote with intelligence on a policy issue of vital importance.

Come join us. Join the debate. Lift the bar: let knowledge be the guide and prejudice the casualty. Come 'recast the debate' with us. Come, rekindle Emma Lazarus's dream.