



New Americans: How Immigrants and Refugees Sustain the Promise of America

Tobin Williamson and Marko Mavrovic

On March 29, 2018, scores of people from around the world gathered in Louisville at an event hosted by the National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution. Dignitaries read remarks and eventually attendees swore an oath of allegiance to their new home: the United States of America. The joy of the participants in this naturalization ceremony—waving flags, registering to vote, smiling for selfies with the presiding judge—was something to behold. After years of the immigration process, they were finally American citizens. Immigrants have a special relationship with their new country because they often choose that country. By moving to the United States, do they contribute to its promise and allure? To what extent do immigrants galvanize national pride and a sense of national identity?

Twenty years earlier, Mile Mavrovic had his own naturalization ceremony. Born to a Croatian father and Serbian mother (both Yugoslav citizens), Mavrovic immigrated to the United States from Indija, Serbia in 1992 as cracks in Yugoslavia's social and political foundation were violently widening. Just twenty-one years old, Mavrovic chose America “for prosperity, for opportunity, for a better life.”¹ The civil war in his home country made it “hard to pick sides” as “the child of a mixed marriage.”² Mavrovic soon held a passport for a country that did not exist, but his dream was to become an American citizen. He applied for U.S. citizenship at the earliest opportunity and in July 1998, at the U.S. District Court in Chicago, he was naturalized. As he was sworn in, Mavrovic “felt a sense of pride and accomplishment” because he achieved the goal he had since first landing on American soil: “I finally felt that I belonged somewhere.”³

When asked on his naturalization exam if he would bear arms in defense of his new country, Mavrovic “answered yes, because this country has given me so much. It's the least I can do in return.”⁴ What has America given him? “Prosperity, freedom of religion, freedom to fail, freedom of expression.”⁵ It is this mix of liberal constitutional rights, economic opportunity, and the American Dream ethos that ensure he does not feel any less American, even though he was not born here. “I feel more American because I can tell the difference,” he said, noting some individuals take for granted the values he left Yugoslavia to pursue.⁶ According to Mavrovic, the United States is “still the best country in the world,” because “you don't need to speak the perfect language, to be born here to achieve great things and be a productive member of society. If you start from the bottom, you can get far.”⁷ His story, and those of other proud American immigrants (like those in Louisville twenty years later), exemplify American nationalism in its most ideal form. His gratitude for his improved quality of life manifests as pride in his new country—pride required for nationhood.

But how does one define the sometimes illusory and always intangible *nation*? Benedict Anderson famously conceptualized it as “an imagined political community.”⁸ He explained, “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members [...] yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”⁹ This inherent limitation reveals the need for a force to magnetize these disparate, uninitiated strangers into a fraternity of “deep, horizontal comradeship.”¹⁰ The values summarized by Mavrovic bring those strangers together under one banner of American national identity. As Anderson observed, it is a shared sense of nationalism “that makes it possible over the past two centuries for so many people to...willingly die for” the imagined fraternity of strangers.¹¹ While nationalism may not “[invent] nations where they do not exist,” as Ernest Gellner argued,¹² the national pride of immigrants like Mavrovic are literally essential to the nation; their willingness to defend their new, chosen country sustains the magnetism between members of our imagined community.¹³

Debates on the integrity of immigration have been part of American society from the country's inception up to today. The National Museum of American History held a "Many Voices, One Nation: Becoming U.S." exhibit exploring how immigration has shaped America's national identity.¹⁴ The State Department shared a video that began "America's diversity is the strength of our nation."¹⁵ Across the country, immigrants play vital roles in forming American identity.

Their cultural impact is apparent: What would Milwaukee or Cincinnati be without German heritage and festivals? Imagine Boston without Little Italy or the Celtics. Chicago's Czech and Polish history is legendary. These communities may be decades old, but new generations still make cities more vibrant, such as Nashville's Kurdish community¹⁶ and Bosnians in St. Louis, where "a once-dilapidated neighborhood..." called Little Bosnia "became the stuff of American dreams."¹⁷

Additionally, immigrants significantly contribute to civic life. The Chicagoland Czech-American Community Center exists to "make connections that bring cultures, advocacy and business closer together," particularly focused on community service.¹⁸ In Seattle, the Nisei Veterans Committee has a long history of civic engagement; its mission "is to preserve and honor the Japanese-American legacies and to provide community programs that meet the educational, cultural, and social needs of the broader community."¹⁹ They were honored at a ceremony in 2012 featuring Congressman Jim McDermott (D-WA), who called them "heroes who changed the course of history."²⁰ Occasionally, immigrants make a national impact by joining Congress. Seventy-six current members (14%) are first- or second-generation immigrants, with eighteen foreign-born.²¹ Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-IL) stated "My parents brought our family to the United States from India when I was only a few months old because they believed in the American Dream, just as immigrants do today."²² When Michelle Steel (R-CA) became the first Korean-American Congresswoman, she said "taking the oath of office to represent the nation that has blessed me with so many opportunities is a moment I will never forget."²³ Krishnamoorthi and Steele exemplify how immigrants demonstrate American pride.

Finally, the economic impact of immigrants can be transformative; they are economic drivers— even lifesavers— for many places.²⁴ In Louisville, Mayor Greg Fischer created an Office for Globalization in 2011,²⁵ later observing that immigrants "represent a significant portion of [Louisville's] future growth—filling jobs, building businesses, and infusing our region with a vibrant and diverse culture."²⁶ Indeed, Louisville would have lost population in recent decades without immigration.²⁷ Similarly, Somali immigrants helped revitalize Lewiston, Maine, though not without occasional tension.²⁸ "To ensure a future workforce," said former Maine Attorney General James Tierney, "Maine needs to attract younger residents like the Somalis."²⁹ Ironically, Lewiston's original growth came largely from French-Canadian and Franco-American millworkers decades ago, and "Franco-American culture is still woven into this city, where multigenerational families go to *memere's* (grandmother's) house for Sunday dinner and to French Mass on Saturdays."³⁰ In Arkansas, immigrants from places like El Salvador and Marshall Islands made sleepy regions "economic dynamos," according to *The New York Times*; "with tens of thousands of immigrants helping to catalyze its development, Northwest Arkansas has emerged as one of the country's fastest-growing metropolitan areas."³¹

As America's economy rebuilds from COVID-19, immigration is essential. Marcel Fratzscher and Simon Junker claim: "Even if many of the refugees' labor market prospects may be relatively poor for the first few years...the long-term gains are likely to exceed the costs."³² Stephen Moore and David Simon of the conservative think tank Committee to Unleash Prosperity add:

*"Decades of comprehensive analyses show immigrants improve the domestic economy and raise incomes for Americans. They reduce unemployment and have little to no negative effect on the wages of native-born workers. Skilled immigrants particularly benefit the economy as they raise wages for native-born workers. There are also six million jobs unfilled because of the lack of skills or because some service and agriculture jobs are [often] filled by immigrants."*³³

The ways new Americans contribute to America's national identity are at their core a national security issue, something foreign policy strategists should remember. "Generally," said Tufts University's Karen Jacobsen, "refugees or migrants that come into a town give a new injection of energy."³⁴ Still, increasing diversity rarely comes without tension, and "the integration of immigrants into multicultural societies is one of the biggest challenges of the twenty-first century."³⁵ How their new area receives them upon arrival is vital. As Sarah Martiny, et al. describe:

“Social psychological and immigration research has shown that feeling integrated and ‘at home’ in the receiving society contributes to immigrants’ successful integration and well-being... Immigrants’ national identity has positive consequences for education, participation in the labor market, and feeling integrated into the receiving society.”³⁶

Moreover, “research has shown successful integration of immigrants...benefits both the immigrants and the receiving societies.”³⁷ Immigrants like Mile Mavrovic sustain American nationhood by obtaining strong American identities and playing pivotal roles in American society. As Anne-Marie Slaughter rightly said: “the future of American power depends far less on military might than on the demographic change taking place within.”³⁸ As policy debates continue about welcoming immigrants and refugees, lawmakers and the public would be wise to keep this in mind.

Tobin Williamson is the Advocacy Manager for the Maine Immigrants’ Rights Coalition.

Marko Mavrovic is the Ethics Education Graduate Fellow at The Prindle Institute.

¹ Mile Mavrovic in conversation with Marko Mavrovic, September 7, 2021.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edition, (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁹ Ibid, 6-7.

¹⁰ Ibid, 7.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964) quoted in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edition, (London: Verso, 2006), 169.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ National Museum of American History, “Welcome Becoming US,” accessed Sept. 7, 2021, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/becoming-us/home>.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State (statedept), “America’s diversity is the strength of our nation, and it is reflected in @TeamUSA...,” Instagram, Sept. 4, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTZ2pNOBJcg/>.

¹⁶ Karen Loew, “Nashville Has the Most Kurds in the United States. And They’re Angry,” *Bloomberg CityLab*, Oct. 25, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-25/trump-has-angered-nashville-s-kurdish-community>.

¹⁷ Melina Delkic, “‘It’s Not the Same’: Why War Refugees Who Helped Revive St. Louis Are Leaving,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/18/us/bosnian-refugees-st-louis-midwest.html>.

¹⁸ Chicagoland Czech-American Community Center, “CCACC,” accessed Sept. 7, 2021, <http://www.chicagocacc.org/>.

¹⁹ Nisei Veterans Committee, “NVC and NVC Foundation,” accessed Sept. 7, 2021, <https://www.nvcfoundation.org/>.

²⁰ Nancy Bartley, “Northwest Nisei Soldiers Honored for WWII Service,” *Seattle Times*, Jan. 14, 2012, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/northwest-nisei-soldiers-honored-for-wwii-service/>.

²¹ Sara Atske, “Immigrants and Children of Immigrants Make Up at Least 14% of the 117th Congress,” Pew Research Center, Feb. 12, 2021, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/02/12/immigrants-and-children-of-immigrants-make-up-at-least-14-of-the-117th-congress/>.

²² Office of U.S. Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi, “Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi Appointed as Co-Chair of the CAPAC Immigration Task Force,” Press Release, Feb. 2, 2021, <https://krishnamoorthi.house.gov/media/press-releases/congressman-raja-krishnamoorthi-appointed-co-chair-capac-immigration-task-force>.

²³ Office of U.S. Congresswoman Michelle Steel, “Steel Sworn in to U.S. Congress Representing California’s 48th District,” Press Release, Jan. 4, 2021, <https://steel.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-michelle-steel-my-american-dream>.

- ²⁴ New American Economy Research Fund, “Map the Impact: Immigrants in the Largest 100 Metro Areas,” Aug. 16, 2021, <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/map-the-impact-immigrants-in-the-largest-metro-areas/>.
- ²⁵ Ed Green, “Louisville Creates Office to Pursue Global Business,” *Louisville Business First*, Feb. 25, 2011. <https://www.bizjournals.com/louisville/news/2011/02/25/louisville-creates-office-to-pursue.html>.
- ²⁶ Louisville Metro Government, “Global Louisville Action Plan: Welcoming Immigrants for Community and Economic Growth,” accessed Sept. 7, 2021, <https://louisvilleky.gov/document/globallouisvilleactionplan12162016pdf>.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Pat Nyhan, *New Mainers: Portraits of Our Immigrant Neighbors* (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House Publishers, 2009).
- ²⁹ Patrick Reardon, “A Yankee Mill Town Globalizes,” *Chicago Tribune*, Jun. 13, 2002, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2002-06-13-0206130003-story.html>.
- ³⁰ Maggie Jones, “The New Yankees: Before the Somali Refugees Showed Up, Lewiston, Maine, Was Just Another Struggling Mill Town. Now It Has a Mosque, Three Halal Shops, and--for the First Time in a Century--A Growing Population,” *Mother Jones*, 29, no. 2 (March-April 2004).
- ³¹ Miriam Jordan, “Decline in Immigration Threatens Growth of Regions on the Rise,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/10/us/immigration-arkansas-population.html>.
- ³² Marcel Fratzscher and Simon Junker, “Integrating Refugees: A Long-Term, Worthwhile Investment,” *DIW Economic Bulletin*, 5, no. 45/46 (2015): 612-616.
- ³³ Stephen Moore and David Simon, “Immigrants Do Not Steal Our Jobs, They Create Them in the Economy,” *The Hill*, Mar. 30, 2021. https://thehill.com/opinion/immigration/545572-immigrants-do-not-steal-our-jobs-they-create-them-in-the-economy?utm_sq=gpp8ivnnsf&rl=1.
- ³⁴ Jesse Ellison, “Lewiston, Maine, Revived by Somali Immigrants,” *Newsweek*, Jan. 16, 2009, <https://www.newsweek.com/lewiston-maine-revived-somali-immigrants-78475>.
- ³⁵ Sarah E. Martiny, Laura Froehlich, Jilwan Soltanpanah, and Maria S. Haugen, “Young Immigrants in Norway: The Role of National and Ethnic Identity in Immigrants’ Integration,” *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 61 (2020): 312–324.
- ³⁶ Sarah E. Martiny, Laura Froehlich, and Kay Deaux, “A Longitudinal Investigation of the Ethnic and National Identities of Children with Migration Background in Germany,” *Social Psychology*, 51, no. 2 (2020): 91–105.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Anne-Marie Slaughter on Why America’s Diversity Is Its Strength,” *The Economist*, Aug. 24, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2021/08/24/anne-marie-slaughter-on-why-americas-diversity-is-its-strength>.