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ASSIMILATION AND THE RULE OF LAW

By Stephen L. Bakke  March 24, 2017



This discussion of assimilation is an expansion of a topic I introduced in a recent article about “Diversity, Identity Politics and E Pluribus Unum.” Here are the major points of that article:

- In the recent past, Americans have tried to deemphasize our differences following the principle of E Pluribus Unum – the concept of “out many, one” which presumes assimilation.
- That principle is very compatible with another idea – that being the Martin Luther King Jr. ideal of deemphasizing our differences. He thought we should judge people not “by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”
- Unfortunately, progress toward King’s ideal slowed as “political correctness” and “identity politics” became prominent in politics and on college campuses.
- A renewed emphasis on racial and cultural differences has led many groups to strive for separateness and to reject assimilation.
- Over-zealous demonstrations of tolerance have evolved into political correctness and often extreme intolerance.
- The President’s goal of reversing the political correctness trend should help the United States return to an attitude of acceptance for assimilation.

Martin Luther King Jr. had a very positive influence on the U.S. While aggressively advocating for social justice, he spoke in a way that could both motivate his minority constituency, as well as help white America understand his peaceful methods and transformative goals. King’s final writings give us a peek at his vision for the future.

I believe King sought to achieve that which I am hoping for when I argue for better assimilation. While emphasizing aggressive social justice goals, his last thoughts were full of hope that his ideal of looking past our differences would be achieved. He felt true integration could become a reality.

Since people have different ideas of what constitutes assimilation, I should clarify how I’m using the term. First, assimilation is NOT a requirement that immigrants mimic or imitate Americans. It doesn’t require giving up one’s religion. It’s not a means of subordinating immigrants and their culture to the existing citizens. And, it’s not the same as “acculturation” whereby traditions and heritage disappear following military or political conquest.

Assimilation IS the process whereby immigrants encounter and react to a new set of experiences and challenges in the context of their very different life experiences. It’s a difficult process to be sure, but immigrants must survive, and hopefully thrive, in a very different environment than they are familiar with. There’s no way to avoid the challenges of this process.

Assimilation happens when these newcomers take the initiative to make adjustments necessary to thrive in their new situation. Isolating themselves economically and socially from the rest of the community is an impediment to effective assimilation. Our version of multiculturalism is too often reinforcing mistrust, and it's tearing the country apart. Difference shouldn't imply distance, and diverse shouldn't mean separate.

Finally, setting those considerations aside, I believe the most indispensable requirements of assimilation are for immigrants to understand our institutions, embrace our Constitution, and comply with our laws. Those are desirable, and reasonable minimum expectations.