

Who Is an American?

by Richard R. Mayer

As Americans we are often un-American when it comes to illegal aliens.

The word “illegal” connotes something contrary to the law; yet what more clearly defines our law than those unalienable rights spelled out in the Declaration of Independence or what better describes our land than its heritage as a haven for those wishing to better themselves? Can we logically describe as “alien” those who seek freedom, opportunity, and equality before the law?

America is a unique concept. It is a land whose people are defined not in terms of nationality but of outlook. It is what one believes that makes an American, not skin color, religion, or language.

An American is described by his beliefs, his adherence to certain clear principles not of religion but of religious freedom, not of status but of equality of treatment, not of privilege but of opportunity. By this measure there are many true Americans who do not reside here, and others who vegetate here but are not truly Americans.

There is concern that those who come to this land may take jobs from local residents, secure false social security cards, passports, and drivers’ licenses, or go on welfare. But are such regimentation and programs really the

American heritage? And is beating someone out of a job by being more willing and competitive really un-American? Such objections come from those who have obtained privileged or protected positions through licensing, certification, seniority, or monopolization and who are not willing to compete in a free and open market.

Do I, because I was born here, have greater claim than one who has made the conscious choice to come to the United States? Do I through mere chance and by none of my own doing have a greater claim to being an American than he who has made the effort?

I think not. I only am an American by being an American, by making that choice daily in my life. And the refugee who makes that choice is also a true American, as much as I—a brother of the spirit, as Americanism is a matter of the spirit. He has the right to live, to provide for himself, and to care for his family, without certificate of occupancy or let from petty official or regulatory agency.

Through our churches and legislatures, we dole out billions of dollars in foreign aid—anything to keep the natives happy (and away from our shores). We charitably give to others, so long as they’ll stay where they “belong.” But we will not grant them the right to practice Americanism, claiming this as a privilege for those who got here first. This isn’t very American. □

Mr. Mayer is a surveyor living in Schuylerville, New York.

Tear Down This Wall

by Russell Shannon

Last June, after his conference at Venice with the leaders of Japan, Canada, and Western Europe, President Reagan made a brief but significant visit to Berlin. There, in front of the Brandenburg Gate, he issued a striking and much-publicized challenge to the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev.

The Berlin Wall has stood for two and one-half decades as a symbol of repression by both the East European countries and the Soviet Union. Driven to digging tunnels and making other desperate attempts, people held behind the wall have sought to break through to gain the freedom and opportunities enjoyed in the West. In the process, some have perished.

The border between Eastern and Western Europe has not always been sealed. Now, at a time when the Soviet leader is preaching a policy of "glasnost" (openness), President Reagan urged him to take a dramatic step beyond talk to action. As a sign that he really means what he says about expanding freedom, President Reagan urged:

"Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall."

Yet less than one month after the President's proclamation, a terrifying event revealed that Soviet Russia and its satellites have no monopoly on border problems. Not far from El Paso, Texas, a railroad car was opened to disclose the bodies of 18 Mexicans who had perished in a desperate attempt to cross the Mexican border into the United States.

The border between Mexico and the U.S. has not always been sealed. Until about a century ago, we welcomed people from other

lands. No walls had been erected and so no one stood guard at our gates to check entry visas. Immigrants came in great numbers, some escaping political tyranny and religious repression, others responding to the promise of economic opportunity.

Indeed, according to Oxford University professor John Gray, in the century prior to World War I, not only in the United States but throughout Europe, "Everyone believed that free migration promoted prosperity. Statesmen took for granted that the freedom to travel was part of the market economy." Classical economists argued that, "Just as tariffs and quotas resulted only in dislocating the world market and decreasing economic welfare, so too immigration controls resulted in economic stagnation and the waste of human resources." (*The Wall Street Journal*, June 1, 1983)

Yet, toward the end of the last century, attitudes changed. We began to impose restrictions, first limiting the entry of Orientals, then others. By now we have a rather rigid system designed to control both the numbers and types of people entering the country. Although legislation passed by Congress in 1986 granted amnesty to many who were living here illegally, it also imposed new constraints on employers in an effort to make further immigration less attractive.

During the summer of 1987, numerous reports from the northwestern states revealed that crops of fresh fruits and vegetables were in danger of rotting for lack of labor to harvest them. Why do we deny entry to willing laborers when there is so clearly much work to be done?

Professor Shannon teaches in the Economics Department, Clemson University.