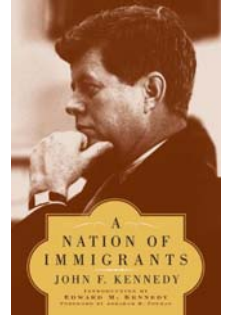


## A Nation of Immigrants John F. Kennedy

### Discussion Guide for Secondary Level Educators

After students read *A Nation of Immigrants* (Harper Perennial, 2008) by President John F. Kennedy, engage them in furthering their understanding of immigrant communities and immigration issues in the U.S. – historically and in contemporary times – by using some of the suggested topics and questions below.



#### **“We Are America”**

In the Foreword to the new edition, ADL National Director Abraham H. Foxman describes recent immigrant rights marchers carrying banners that read “We are America” (page xiii). How does the makeup of today’s “we” in that slogan compare and/or contrast with the country’s demographics before the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965?

#### **Tocqueville’s America**

Kennedy opens the first chapter by describing the observations of a nineteenth century French political thinker and historian, Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote in his famous work *Democracy in America* (1835) that America was a place “that did not restrict (Americans’) freedom of choice and action” (page 2). How much freedom of choice and action did immigrants of that time actually experience in America? Did their country of origin or race play a role in the degree of freedom they had? Explain your response.

#### **Americans are Immigrants**

Kennedy argues that “every American who ever lived, with the exception of one group, was either an immigrant himself or a descendant of immigrants” (page 2) and that the exception – Native Americans – were considered by some to be immigrants themselves. Would you consider Native Americans immigrants? Do you think the label “immigrants” is an appropriate term for African Americans, who Kennedy acknowledges were “bought and sold and had no choice” in immigrating to this country (page 7)? How would you define an “immigrant”? How do we understand the term “immigrant” today, and does it match with who Kennedy considered immigrants?

## Reasons for Immigrating

In Chapter 2, Kennedy outlines three main reasons why immigration to the U.S. took place: freedom from religious persecution, political oppression and economic hardship. To what extent do you think these still apply today?

## Xenophobia and Nativism Today

Kennedy writes “But emotions of xenophobia – hatred of foreigners – and of nativism – the policy of keeping America ‘pure’ ... continue to thrive” (page 38). How does he support this claim? Who does he identify as targets of such xenophobia and nativism? In what ways do these emotions still influence today’s public opinion about immigration and immigrant communities?

## Coded Language of Xenophobia and Nativism

In the Foreword, Foxman reports that while the immigration debate has included valid and sincere arguments on both sides of the issue, it has also been framed at times by vitriolic anti-immigrant – and particularly anti-Latino – rhetoric and propaganda, not only from extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan but also anti-immigrant groups that have positioned themselves as legitimate, mainstream advocates against illegal immigration. While the former do not hide their hatred, the latter groups use coded language to provide the veneer of respectability yet aim to demonize immigrants: “However, under the guise of warning people about the impact of illegal immigration, these anti-immigrant groups often invoke the same dehumanizing racist stereotypes as hate groups” (page xiv). Kennedy also notes the use of such coded words in the late 1800s to exclude and demean, such as the specific use of the word “American” to exclude Chinese immigrants, and “foreigners” and “savage hordes” to instill fear of immigrants “taking over” the country. Research what these coded words and phrases are, and how anti-immigrant advocacy groups, the media and politicians in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century use them to exclude, demoralize and make immigrants (whether legal or illegal), and those who are perceived as immigrants, seem sub-human. To what extent, if any, has this language changed throughout the centuries?

## Addendum to “Give me your tired...”

In contrast to the ideals set forth in Emma Lazarus’ words on the Statue of Liberty, Kennedy paints a different picture of the U.S. by adding to her quote, “as long as they come from Northern Europe, are not too tired or too poor or slightly ill, never stole a loaf of bread, never joined any questionable organization, and can document their activities for the past two years” (page 45). Why do you think Kennedy felt it was important to add to Lazarus’ quote? What would your addendum be, given the present-day attitudes frequently expressed about the immigrant community?

## Interpreting Photos

Write a brief analysis of one of the photos in the section of immigration photographs, using some or all of the following questions:

- What does the photo tell you about the immigrant(s)?
- What do you observe the immigrants carrying?

- What are some of the things you think they might have brought with them in their packs and baskets?
- Why do you think these things might be important to them?
- What can you surmise about the people in the photograph from their appearance?
- What, if anything, can you tell about their economic situation based on the clothing they are wearing?

### Interpreting Video

Watch the video of Kennedy's speech to the ADL in 1963, located at <http://www.adl.org/immigrants/video.asp>, and answer the following questions:

- President Kennedy mentions that "America was to be the great experiment." What do you think he meant by this?
- In your own opinion, do you think "the great experiment" was successful or not?

### Fallacy of Melting Pot

In Chapter 5, Kennedy uses the phrase "melting pot" to describe how immigrants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds can blend into a "single nationality" as Americans. However, he is quick to share the limiting nature of this phrase: "We have come to realize in modern times that the 'melting pot' need not mean the end of particular ethnic identities or traditions" (page 35). Discuss in your own words whether you agree with Kennedy's argument of the limited use of "melting pot." What other words or phrases may work better to describe this situation, e.g., tapestry?

### Civil Rights Movement

In Chapter 5, Kennedy argues that the process of integrating Americans under one nationality failed in the case of African Americans. He shares, "Today, we are belatedly, but resolutely, engaged in ending this condition of national exclusion and shame and abolishing forever the concept of second-class citizenship in the United States" (page 35). What is he referring to? Do you think African Americans were (and continue to be) shortchanged in this effort? Who else is missing from efforts to be brought into the "full stream of American life"?

### Unequal Laws

In Chapter 6, Kennedy discusses several laws and acts that have posed discriminatory limitations on immigration, namely and pointedly against Asian immigration. How does Kennedy explain the racist nature of these laws? Consider the following acts, court cases and programs, and explore how they have upheld racial discrimination, whether intentionally and/or as a result of historical racism.

- 1790 and 1795 Naturalization Act
- 1857 Supreme Court Case: *Dred Scott v. Sanford*
- 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act
- 1923 Supreme Court Case: *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*
- 1924 Immigration Act
- 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarran Walter Act)
- 1954 Operation Wetback

## Map of Immigrant Communities

Following Appendix A (pages 52 and 53), there is a pictorial representation of the ethnic majorities in each of the fifty states in the early 1960s, entitled “A Nation of Immigrants.” Update the representation to reflect current demographics, using Census data.

## Behind the Scenes

In the Foreword, Foxman shares that Kennedy, who was a junior Senator of Massachusetts, accepted ADL’s request to write this essay, and *A Nation of Immigrants* was published in 1958. After being elected President in 1960, Kennedy used this essay as a blueprint to advocate for a fairer immigration law that was not based on race or ethnicity. How does he organize the essay? Why does he start with the contributions of immigrants? How does he end the essay? Do you think this essay successfully argues against racial quotas and the need to reform the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act?

## Civil Rights Movement

During the time of this book, the Civil Rights Movement was challenging the racist laws and practices in this country. How did the Civil Rights Movement impact and influence the immigration debate?

## Impact of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act

In tribute to the death of President Kennedy in 1963, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. This act removed racial quotas inherent in previous immigration laws, thus leveling the immigration playing field. During his remarks at the signing of the immigration bill, Johnson echoed what several other proponents of the law argued that though reparative, “this bill that we will sign today is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions.” From your perspective, do you agree that it was not a revolutionary act? Why or why not?

## Visual Representation of Today’s Immigrants

The section of photographs in *A Nation of Immigrants* highlights the experiences and identities of immigrants to the U.S. up until the mid-1960s. What photos would you add to bring the collection up to the current day? Using the Internet or other print resources, research and identify photos of recent immigrants that accurately reflect current patterns of immigration or responses of people in the U.S. to immigration policy. Write a brief paragraph to serve as a caption for your selection(s).

## *A Nation of Immigrants: A Guide for Today?*

In the Introduction, Massachusetts Senator and brother of John F. Kennedy, Edward M. Kennedy espouses the relevance of this book, “Written five decades ago, its powerful vision still guides us” (xi). In what ways did this book increase your understanding of the immigrant community and immigration issues? If you were invited to contribute an Afterword in the book, what would you add to help other readers understand this topic?

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## Additional Resources for Students

**Blohm, Judith M. and Terri Lapinsky. 2006. Kids Like Me: Voices of Immigrant Experiences. Intercultural Press: Boston.**

In addition to over two dozen stories from teens, this book includes engaging and age-appropriate activities and resources. A bibliography of books and Web sites are also included.

**Documenting Stories of Immigration in Your Community: A Manual for Teachers and Students (2008)**

Inspired by a student project which resulted in the book [\*Forty-Cent Tip: Stories of New York City Immigrant Workers\*](#) (published by Next Generation Press), this how-to manual provides teachers and students with directions on how to implement this classroom project of documenting stories of immigration in their own community. It includes instructions on how to get permission from your interview subject, interview questions, essay writing and photography tips. Download the manual at

[http://www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/2008/01\\_great\\_american/pdf/Documenting%20%20Immigration%20Stories.pdf](http://www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/2008/01_great_american/pdf/Documenting%20%20Immigration%20Stories.pdf).

**Gita Saedi, Gordon Quinn and Steve James. 2003. The New Americans. Kartemquin Educational Films, Inc.**

This seven-hour three-part series follows these newcomers from each of their homelands through their first tumultuous years in America to pursue the "American Dream." The series includes stories of immigrant children. For ordering information and additional resources and support materials, go to PBS's Independent Lens at

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans/index.html>. For excerpts of this series and a companion guide, go to Active Voice's Web site at [http://www.activevoice.net/new\\_americans\\_mods.html](http://www.activevoice.net/new_americans_mods.html)

**NPR. The Immigration Debate.**

This site provides a variety of news reports about the immigrant community and the U.S. immigration debate. It includes a story about the impact of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act signed by President Johnson.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5310549>