John F. Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants*

**About John F. Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants***

At a time when the issues of refugees and immigration have taken center stage in this country, the message of President John F. Kennedy's classic essay *A Nation of Immigrants* is as relevant today as it was when it was published 59 years ago. That is why the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and publisher Harper Perennial have reissued this landmark essay on the contribution of immigrants to American society in honor of the centennial of John F. Kennedy's birth.

The essay, first published posthumously, was the last manuscript ever written by President Kennedy. After ADL reached out to the then-junior senator from Massachusetts, he agreed to write an essay highlighting the contribution of immigrants at a time when the country was locked in a debate about the direction its policy should take.

Throughout his presidency, John F. Kennedy was passionate about the issue of immigration reform. He believed that America is a nation of people who value both tradition and the exploration of new frontiers, people who deserve the freedom to build better lives for themselves in their adopted homeland. This book offers the late president's inspiring suggestions for immigration policy and presents a chronology of the main events in the history of immigration in America.

As continued debates on immigration and refugees engulf the nation, this paean
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. In addition, some of the questions below can be used as jumping off points for students to write essays on those topics proposed by the questions.

If you are unable to read the entire book as a group or class, use the activity below (insert hyperlink) to engage participants in reading and discussing excerpts from the book.

**“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).

Discussion Question: 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).

Discussion Questions: 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.

Discussion Questions: *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.

Discussion Question: *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).

Discussion Questions: *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/Discussion Question: Research what these coded words and phrases are, and how anti-immigrant advocacy groups, the media and politicians in the 19th, 20th and 21st century use them to exclude, demoralize and make immigrants (whether legal or undocumented), 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).
Discussion Questions: *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’s happening in the photo?
- What does the photo tell you about the immigrant(s)?
- What do you observe the immigrants carrying?
- What are some of the items you think they might have brought with them in their packs and baskets?
- Why do you think these items 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?
- If you could ask them a question, what would you ask?

**Interpreting Video**

Watch the video of Kennedy’s speech to the ADL in 1963 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).

Discussion Questions: In your own words, discuss 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).

Discussion Questions: 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
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.”

Discussion Question: 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.

Discussion Questions: 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.

- 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act
- 1923 Supreme Court Case: United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind
- 1924 Immigration Act
- 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarren Walter Act)
- 1954 Operation Wetback
Discussion Question: 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.”

Discussion Question: 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.

Discussion Questions: 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).
Discussion Questions: 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?

Excerpts Activity
Divide students/participants into small groups of 5-6 people each. Distribute the following excerpts with accompanying questions and have each group discuss their excerpts and respond to the questions. When finished, each group should read aloud their excerpt and summarize their small group discussion. This can also be assigned as a reading and writing assignment or a follow-up research project.

Excerpt #1 (page 4)

Little is more extraordinary than the decision to migrate, little more extraordinary than the accumulation of emotions and thoughts which finally leads a family to say farewell to a community where it has lived for centuries, to abandon old ties and familiar landmarks, and to sail across dark seas to a strange land. Today, when mass communications tell one part of the world all about another, it is relatively easy to understand how poverty or tyranny might compel people to exchange an old nation for a new one. But centuries ago migration was a leap into the unknown. It was an enormous intellectual and emotional commitment. The forces that moved our forebears to their great decision—the decision to leave their homes and begin an adventure filled with incalculable uncertainly, risk and hardship—must have been of overpowering proportions.

Discussion Questions: What does the excerpt mean? Do you agree with the point of view expressed? How is the situation similar or different to what’s happening in today? In what ways does this excerpt resonate with your experience? What does Kennedy value about the immigration experience? What other questions do you have?
The search for freedom of worship has brought people to America from the days of the Pilgrims to modern times. In our own day, for example, anti-Semitic and anti-Christian persecution in Hitler's Germany and the Communist empire have driven people from their homes to seek refuge in America. Not all found what they sought immediately. The Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, who drove Roger Williams and Ann Hutchinson into the wilderness, showed as little tolerance for dissenting beliefs as the Anglicans of England had shown to them. Minority religious sects, from the Quakers and Shakers through the Catholics and Jews to the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, have at various times suffered both discrimination and hostility in the United States.

Discussion Questions: What does the excerpt mean? Do you agree with the point of view expressed? How is the situation similar or different to what's happening today? In what ways does this excerpt resonate with your experience? Why do you think there is bias and discrimination against religious minorities and what can we do about it? What other questions do you have?

The history of cities show that when conditions become overcrowded, when people are poor and when living conditions are bad, tensions run high. This is a situation that feeds on itself; poverty and crime in one group breed fear and hostility in others. This, in turn, impedes the acceptance and progress of the first group, thus prolonging its depressed conditions. This was the dismal situation that faced many of the Southern and Eastern European immigrants just as it had faced some of the earlier waves of immigrants. One New York newspaper had these intemperate words for the newly arrived Italians: “The flood gates are open. The sally-ports are unguarded. The dam is washed away. The sewer is choked... the scum of immigration is viscerating upon our shores. The horde of $9.60 steerage slime is being siphoned upon us from Continental mud tanks.
Perhaps our brightest hope for the future lies in the lessons of the past. The people who have come to this country have made America, in the words of one perceptive writer, “a heterogeneous race but a homogeneous nation.” In sum, then, we can see that as each new wave of immigration has reached America it has been faced with problems, not only the problems that come with making new homes and learning new jobs, but, more important, the problems of getting along with people of different backgrounds and habits.

Each new group was met by the groups already in America, and adjustment was often difficult and painful. The early English settlers had to find ways to get along with the Indians; the Irish who followed were met by these “Yankees;” German immigrants faced both Yankee and Irish; and so it has gone down to the latest group of Hungarian refugees. Somehow, the difficult adjustments are made and people get down to the tasks of earning a living, raising a family, living with their neighbors and, in the process, building a nation.

Discussion Questions: What does the excerpt mean? Do you agree with the point of view expressed? How is the situation similar or different to what’s happening today? In what ways does this excerpt resonate with your experience? Why do you think each wave of immigrants had a difficult time accepting the immigrants who came after they did? What other questions do you have?
But the very problems of adjustment and assimilation presented a challenge to the American idea—a challenge which subjected that idea to stern testing and eventually brought out the best qualities in American society. Thus the public school became a powerful means of preparing the newcomers for American life. The ideal of the “melting pot” symbolized the process of blending many strains into a single nationality, and we have come to realize in modern times that the “melting pot” need not mean the end of particular ethnic identities or traditions. Only in the case of the Negro has the melting pot failed to bring a minority into the full stream of American life. Today we are belatedly, but resolutely, engaged in ending this condition of national exclusion and share and abolishing forever the concept of second-class citizenship in the United States.

Discussion Questions: What does the excerpt mean? Do you agree with the point of view expressed? How is the situation similar or different to what’s happening today? In what ways does this excerpt resonate with your experience? How do you balance the idea of the “melting pot” and at the same time, ensure that ethnic and racial groups can retain their unique identities? What other questions do you have?

Excerpt #6 (pages 35-36)

Sociologists call the process of the melting pot “social mobility.” One of America’s characteristics has always been the lack of a rigid class structure. It has traditionally been possible for people to move up the social and economic scale. Even if one did not succeed in moving up oneself, there was always the hope that one’s children would. Immigration is by definition a gesture of faith in social mobility. It is the expression in action of a positive belief in the possibility of a better life. It has thus contributed greatly to developing the spirit of personal betterment in American society and to strengthening the national confidence in change and the future. Such confidence, when widely shared, sets the national tone. The opportunities that America offered made the dream real, at least for a good many; but the dream itself was in large part the product of millions of plain
people beginning a new life in the conviction that life could indeed be better, and each new wave of immigration rekindled that dream.

Discussion Questions: *What does the excerpt mean? Do you agree with the point of view expressed? How is the situation similar or different to what’s happening today? In what ways does this excerpt resonate with your experience? What are some of the limitations of Kennedy’s vision of social mobility? What other questions do you have?*

**Excerpt #7 (page 39)**

The First World War led to another outbreak of nativism. A new group, adopting the program of the Know-Nothings and the name of the Ku Klux Klan, came into being, denouncing everything its members disliked—Negroes, Catholics, Jews, evolutionists, religious liberals, internationalists, pacifists—in the name of true Americanism and of “Nordic superiority.” For a season, the new KKK prospered, claiming five million members, mostly in the South but also in Indiana, Ohio, Kansas and Maine. But, like the other nativist movements, the fall of the Klan was as dramatic as its rise. It died when a genuine crisis, the depression, turned people’s attentions away from the phony issue of racism to the real problems facing the nation. In later years, the Jew succeeded the Catholic as the chief target of nativist hysteria, and some Catholics, themselves so recently persecuted, now regrettably joined in the attack on the newer minorities.

America had no cause to be smug about the failure of these movements to take deep root. Nativism failed, not because the seeds were not there to be cultivated, but because American society is too complex for an agitation so narrowly and viciously conceived to be politically successful. That the nativist movements found any response at all must cause us to look searchingly at ourselves. That the response was at time so great offers cause for alarm.

Discussion Questions: *What does the excerpt mean? Do you agree with the point of view expressed? How is the situation similar or different to what’s happening*
today? In what ways does this excerpt resonate with your experience? What similarities do recent groups and movements such as nationalism and the “Alt-Right” have with nativism movement of the past? What other questions do you have?

Excerpt #8 (page 45)

The famous words of Emma Lazarus on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty read: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Until 1921 this was an accurate picture of our society. Under present law it would be appropriate to add: “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 a questionable organization, and can document their activities for the past two years.”

Discussion Questions: What does the excerpt mean? Do you agree with the point of view expressed? How is the situation similar or different to what’s happening today? In what ways does this excerpt resonate with your experience? What is Kennedy’s critique of immigration efforts based on his adjusted suggested language on the Statue of Liberty? What other questions do you have?

Excerpt #9 (page 50-51)

Immigration policy should be generous; it should be fair; it should be flexible. With such a policy we can turn to the world, and to our own past, with clean hands and a clear conscience. Such a policy would be but a reaffirmation of old principles. It would be an expression of our agreement with George Washington that “The bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions; whom we shall welcome to a participation of all our rights and privileges, if by decency and propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment.
Discussion Questions: What does the excerpt mean? Do you agree with the point of view expressed? How is the situation similar or different to what’s happening today? In what ways does this excerpt resonate with your experience? How is the current climate around immigration policy similar to and different than what is espoused by Kennedy? What other questions do you have?

Additional Resources for Students

ADL Lesson Plans on Immigration

- Sanctuary Cities and Non-Violent Resistance
- The “Muslim Ban” and the Power of Protest
- We Were Strangers Too: Learning about Refugees through Art


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.


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.


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. For excerpts of this series and a companion guide, go to Active Voice's Web site.

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.

Video: JFK Speech to ADL
In January 1963, President John F. Kennedy was presented with ADL's America's Democratic Legacy Award in honor of his commitment to fair immigration reform and his vision of an America of equality and freedom for all. This archival footage offers highlights from his remarks to ADL in accepting the award.

Video: Sen. Edward M. Kennedy on “A Nation of Immigrants”
In this May 2007 video from the Anti-Defamation League's Shana Amy Glass National Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C., Senator Edward M. Kennedy, D-MA, announced the re-issuance of “A Nation of Immigrants,” his brother’s classic essay on immigration in America, and issued a call for meaningful immigration reform.

Note: video was not available on ADL website.