



A Nation of Immigrants

ADL Discussion Guide part 1

October 2018

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A Nation of Immigrants – Resource for Discussion

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

The message of President Kennedy's classic essay *A Nation of Immigrants* is as relevant today as it was when it was first published in 1958. This landmark monograph emphasizes the vast contributions of immigrants to American society. ADL and Harper Perennial have issued a 60th anniversary edition that includes an introduction by Congressman Joe Kennedy III and a foreword by Jonathan Greenblatt, ADL CEO and National Director.

This 2018 edition also features an updated suggested reading list and a timeline of the major events in the history of immigration in the U.S.



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Discussion Guide for Educators

After students read *A Nation of Immigrants*, 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.

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 the U.S. was a place “that did not restrict [Americans] freedom of choice and action” (page 3).

Discussion Questions: *How much freedom of choice and action did immigrants of that time actually experience in the U.S.? 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 3) 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 9)? How would you define an “immigrant”? How do we understand the term “immigrant” today, and does it match with who Kennedy considered immigrants?*



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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’ ... continued to thrive” (page 49).

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?*

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 58).

Discussion Questions: *Why do you think Kennedy felt it was important to add to Lazarus’ quote? How does this quote resonate in today’s climate?*



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Interpreting Photos

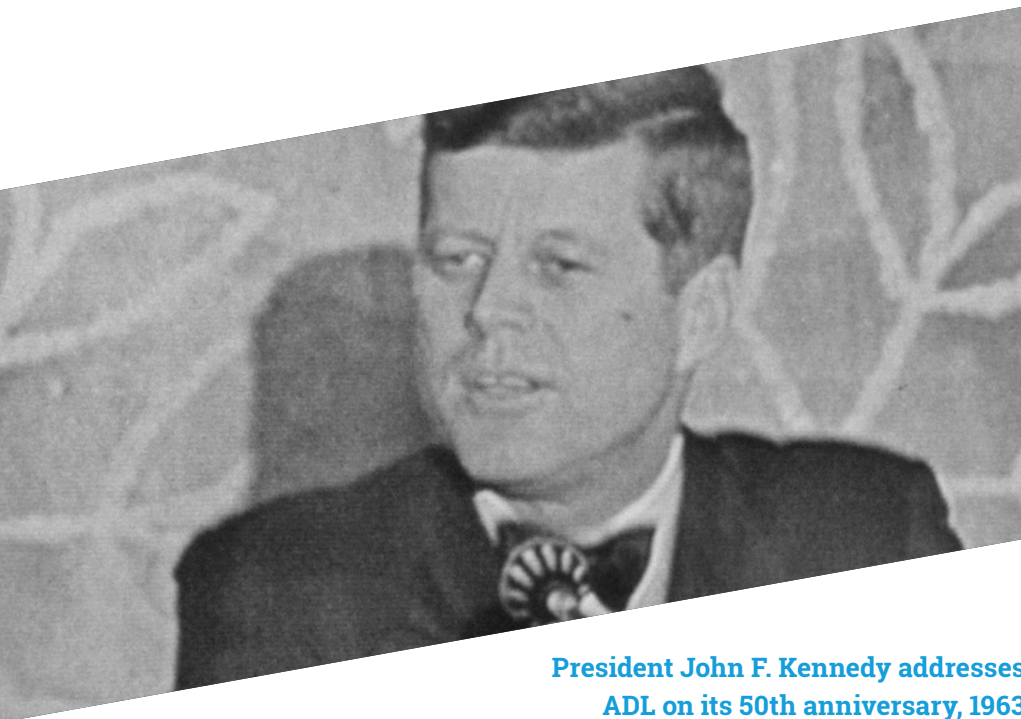
Write a brief analysis of one of the photos in the section of immigration photographs, using some or all of the following questions:

- 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, do you think you can tell about their economic situation?
- If you could ask them a question, what would you ask?

Interpreting Video

Watch the video of Kennedy’s speech to 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?



**President John F. Kennedy addresses
ADL on its 50th anniversary, 1963**

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Fallacy of The 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 45).

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 46).

Discussion Questions: *What is he referring to? Do you think African-Americans were treated unfairly 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

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Map of Immigrant Communities

Following Appendix A (pages 70 and 71), there is a pictorial representation of the ethnic majorities in each of the fifty states and Puerto Rico in the early 1960s, entitled “A Nation of Immigrants.”

Discussion Question: *Update the representation to reflect current demographics, using Census data.*

Behind the Scenes

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?*

