

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Wet Foot, Dry Foot, Your Foot, My Foot

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Immigration reform and the [Wet Foot, Dry Foot Policy](#) in Cuba evokes strong passions on all sides. In the aftermath of Fidel Castro stepping down after approximately 50 years as the leader of Cuba, officially passing the baton to his younger brother Raúl; and with more than a million Cubans; and an estimated 11.6 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States—and in consideration of the historic December 2014 agreement by President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro to normalize relations between the United States and Cuba, the time is ripe for President Obama to continue to prioritize and full-court press immigration reform and policies toward Cuba.

These groups combined immigrate to U.S. soil for economic reasons, freedom, democracy, life and liberty. Not significantly different than those immigrants from “the

school of hard knocks,” who landed on Ellis Island, many of whom did not have proper documentation.

The immigrant story of struggle and strength is also my story. My family background is one that spans continents and cultures, politics, economics and history. It is the life of teachers, preachers, engineers and small business. It is traced from the Hellenistic Period in Greece, to the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, to Trinidad in the Caribbean, and the Good Hope School, under the arches besides the ocean where palm trees wave in the breeze on St. Croix.

From poverty to privilege, my roots help me reflect on the adversity my ancestors faced as they worked hard and pushed the boundaries of opportunity. Armed with this knowledge, I empathize with those immigrants that arrived at Ellis Island. Throughout the famine years, nearly a million Irish arrived in the United States and settled on the fringes of society, living in slums and nursing the cholera disease caused by unscrupulous landlords. Between 1900 and 1915, 3 million Italians immigrated to America. They were mostly artisans and peasants. Dubbed “new immigrants,” their goal was to work in the mines and earn a living wage, similar to the needs of today’s immigrants to earn a livable wage and provide for their family.

My mind is heavy as I think about the Jews who were targeted during the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924, as they continued to sail into the Port of New York on boats hidden in rugs with fake passports, striving to make their way.

I understand those immigrants from Asia who arrived at Angel Island to build American railroads. I understand the dark storm of The Middle Passage and the plight of slavery and my heart wrenches in sadness. I understand The Trail of Tears and the plight of Native Americans being forced from their own land. I hold great compassion for all of these immigrants, their stories, and journey to the United States.

This puzzle of struggle, character, work ethic, faith, courage and opportunity, put together equates the American Dream, alongside those of us who extend a helping hand to those less fortunate. But the dream does not end there.

While I am empathetic to the immigrant story, I have the highest regard for the rule of thumb, as America is a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws.

Immigration reform is complex. If America is to move beyond symbolism, comprehensive immigration reform providing a path to earned citizenship for workers who are here illegally; a plan strengthening our borders, homeland and national security; and a cradle-to-grave strategy restructuring a practical guest worker program in our global economy can be achieved for present-day immigrants who come to our shores in search of the American Dream.

Let’s bring immigrants out from the shadows of life and create an environment where they can earn legal status and pay taxes. After all, we are a nation of immigrants. According to the Pew Research Center, if current trends continue, the demographic profile of the United States will continue to rise as 82 percent of immigrants and their descendants will contribute to this growth in population from 296 million in 2005 to 438 million in 2050.

An analysis of these numbers means that unless there are future changes in immigration policy or other events that dramatically alter these projections, immigration will be a key driver of national population growth in the coming half century. Surely, 2015 is not the time to abandon qualities like character, work ethic, faith, courage and opportunity that make the United States special and unique.

Feature Image: Cuban migrants rush ashore Friday to touch land and be eligible to say under the wet-foot, dry-foot U.S. policy. Copyright © Star Image (305)733-2866 William Forshee

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