

“American citizenship is eroding”

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Victor Davis Hanson

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The following is an abridged version of a talk delivered at Hillsdale College on October 2, 2019, during the College’s 175th anniversary gala. Videos of this and other speeches delivered during the gala are available at fourpillars.hillsdale.edu.

Today many condemn the idea of nationalism by connecting it to race hatred (e.g., white nationalism). But historically, the modern nation-state has proven uniquely suitable to preserving individual rights. The American nation in particular was successful in uniting individuals of different races, ethnic backgrounds, and creeds into one people based on shared principles, a unique physical space, and a common national story. Our nation is the best example in human history of positive nationalism.

The key to this benign nationalism is American citizenship, based on an understanding of American exceptionalism and formed by the American melting pot. But today, our citizenship is eroding and, along with it, American nationalism in the positive sense is disappearing.

American citizenship is eroding in three ways.

First, we are blurring the line between mere residents and citizens. We have between 45-50 million non-native-born residents in the U.S. today—the largest absolute number we’ve ever had. There’s no legal problem with the 30 million of them who have green cards or have acquired citizenship—although even 30 million is a challenge for the American melting pot to assimilate and integrate.

But we also have, according to a recent Yale and MIT study, about 20 million people who are here illegally. In regard to them, the classical ingredients of American citizenship—the right to leave or enter the country as one pleases, for example, or to vote in elections, or to reside here as long as one pleases—are being blurred.

Where I live, in California, if you're here illegally, you can *de facto* go back and forth across the border as you wish. In San Francisco, you can vote in some school board elections (the same is under consideration in some places in New England). And as we see with the DACA program, illegal residents can *de facto* live in the U.S. indefinitely.

Some policies even discriminate against citizens. An illegal resident in California who is charged with a crime is not subject to federal immigration law to the full extent, whereas a citizen who flies into Los Angeles from overseas without a passport will be detained. If you are in California as an illegal resident, you can obtain a driver's license as citizens have in the past; whereas for citizens, starting next year, there will be an extra burden: to travel by commercial air, they will have to provide at least three sources of proof of citizenship to obtain a valid ID—given the apparent devaluation of the driver's license.

People who come to the U.S. illegally and in great numbers usually do not have the degree of investment citizens do in our constitutional documents and are often unacquainted with our national story. Candidates from south of the border today fly into California's Central Valley to campaign. Illegal residents vote in their home countries' elections—and yet are unacquainted with political issues and candidates here in the U.S.

To avoid a fragmentation of society based on racial and ethnic chauvinism takes an extra effort to keep the melting pot working. We're no longer making that effort. Indeed, we're doing the opposite, encouraging diversity rather than unity.

Second, we're becoming a country of tribes. The idea of multi-racialism—the notion that we're of different races but we share a common culture—is eroding.

At many colleges and universities today, you can choose in advance the racial background of your roommate. Campuses have "safe spaces" that are reserved for people of particular races. There are dorms where students segregate according to race. Ethnic studies departments thrive by emphasizing racial exceptionalism.

Do we wonder why Elizabeth Warren chose to be a Native American, which, according to her own logic—the power of white privilege and systemic racism—would put her at a disadvantage? The answer is that she sought a careerist advantage. And Harvard was happy to comply: the law school bragged that she was its first "woman of color" faculty member.

I went to a grammar school that was about 90 percent Mexican-American. Some people who I went to first grade with later changed their names from Juan to John and dropped the accent on their last names. Now in their 60s, they're changing back to Juan and adding back the accents. Why? Because there is now a disadvantage in identifying as an

un-hyphenated American, and an advantage to belonging to a tribe. And the danger is that this logic of tribalism leads to the kind of social breakup and civil discord that we saw in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and Iraq.

Third, the middle class, which had been encouraged and celebrated since the time of the American Founding, is now under sustained attack.

A solid, property-owning middle class anchors the nation. Traditionally, its members show the sobriety and judgment to achieve autonomy. They don't look to government for help. They stand as a barrier against both property redistribution and crony capitalism.

Today, America's middle class is threatened. Homeownership is down to about 62 percent from 71 percent just over ten years ago. The percentage of a family budget that goes to housing has risen from 20-30 percent in the 1950s to 30-40 percent today, especially in coastal corridors. Middle class wages, until an annual increase of three percent under President Trump, had been frozen for ten years. And we have an aggregate \$1.6 trillion in student debt.

If the middle class continues to erode, we will become a nation of peasants and oligarchs. In California, more than one out of five people live below the poverty line—despite the fact that California has one of the highest number of zip codes of America's most affluent people and the highest number of billionaires. If you drive through Palo Alto, you'll see people living in RVs because they can't afford to buy or rent a home—and these are people working for Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Oracle, and Apple, with a total market capitalization of nearly \$4 trillion.

Additionally, we are seeing a formal assault on the Constitution by our elites.

Consider the nullification of federal law through the creation of sanctuary cities, in direct defiance of the immigration statutes. (Of course, such nullification seems to go only one way: otherwise, imagine how our elites would respond if the people of Provo, Utah, decided within their municipal jurisdiction to nullify federal handgun registration or the Endangered Species Act.)

Almost every single Democratic candidate for president is in favor of abolishing the Electoral College, which is in the Constitution to ensure equal representation to people living outside big cities, and to prevent the splintering of the electorate into several small parties.

There is also a growing academic attack on the mode of electing the U.S. Senate—"Why should North Dakota or Wyoming have the same number of U.S. Senators as New York?" progressives ask, in their eagerness to make U.S. Senators proportionally elected in the manner of House members.

This insidious assault on the Constitution results from the fact that popular elections haven't been going the Left's way, and the Left believes that its superior moral agenda justifies using any means necessary.

Ancient authors from Plato and Aristotle to Petronius and Tacitus have suggested that affluence combined with leisure paradoxically creates a laxity that leads to the kind of societal and institutional disintegration we are currently seeing. Another major ingredient of our current crisis is the failure of our education system to offer disinterested instruction, following from the post-1960s takeover by the Left of our colleges and universities.

In response, we need to support colleges that continue to teach the principles and practices of liberty. We must support policies that recognize the distinction between citizens and non-citizens and that bolster the middle class. And we need to defend the Constitution, our last great hope to ensure American continuity and security.