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## Give us still your masses...

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The voices of xenophobia once again reverberate throughout America. Anxious advocates of nativism envision huddled masses of impoverished, uneducated, disease-ridden criminals who sneak across our porous borders to steal jobs and murder our citizens.

Even in the early 20th century, when most newcomers were European, some part of anti-immigrant sentiment reflected widespread fear of job loss. Whenever the jobless rate soared, so did the forces of nativism.

But since Sept. 11, 2001, stereotyped images of immigrants have turned decidedly more negative. Myths and misconceptions about newcomers have assumed the status of cultural truisms.

Myth 1: Criminals and terrorists are over-represented among immigrants.

Actually, they are vastly under-represented. **The National Center for Policy Analysis estimates that if native-born Americans had the same low probability of being incarcerated as all immigrants, our prisons would have one-third fewer**

**inmates.** El Paso and San Diego have extremely low homicide rates; not coincidentally, they also have large populations of immigrants. Closer to home, 74 percent of Lawrence's 95,000 residents are foreign-born. In 2005, the Immigrant City had zero murders.

Myth 2: Unlike previous generations of immigrants from Europe, today's newcomers do not want to assimilate. In reality, every immigrant group has maintained its ties with the old country. At the turn of the 20th century, for example, Italian immigrants formed organizations of mutual assistance. Similarly, many Jewish newcomers settled in urban centers, where they established ghettos based on their shared religious identity. For all immigrant groups, assimilation generally came in the second and third generations.

Myth 3: Illegal immigration is uniquely associated with our present population of newcomers. It is true that illegal immigration has increased not only in the United States, but around the world. According to the Pew

Hispanic Center, 12 million immigrants to the United States are considered illegal. However, 40 percent of them crossed the border legally and overstayed visas.

But illegal immigration is nothing new to the United States; nor is it restricted to Latinos. When legal immigration from Europe became limited by quotas in 1924, illegal immigration soared. Many Europeans migrated first to Canada or Mexico and then illegally slipped over the border. By the 1930s, the U.S. Border Patrol was established to exclude and deport illegal newcomers from Europe, not Latin America.

Myth 4: Unlike previous generations from Europe, most immigrants from Latin America and Asia are poor and uneducated. Actually, most newcomers through the centuries were destitute. In the mid-1800s, many Irish fled famine. In the United States, Irish women took jobs as servants or domestics; Irish men toiled in mines or built railroads and waterways.

At the turn of the 20th century, millions of newcomers from Italy found a new life in

America. Almost 80 percent were unskilled workers. Not unlike their predecessors, many present-day immigrants are poor and uneducated. Through hard work and perseverance, they can take advantage of opportunities in their adopted country.

Immigrants also create jobs here. Without the influx of foreign investment and skilled labor during the 1990s, our nation would have experienced economic stagnation or decline rather than growth.

Almost everybody agrees that immigration reform is desirable. Policy changes

granting amnesty, erecting a wall along our Southern border, establishing guest worker status or deporting illegals are debated daily on talk radio, on cable TV and in Congress. Hopefully, the outcome will reflect a rational analysis of our national needs rather than hysteria based on stereotyped thinking.