The ceremony in which Marta Quintanilla Call became a U.S. citizen was held in a cavernous high-school auditorium in Oakton, Virginia. She and 499 other immigrants stood, put their hands on their hearts, and repeated the oath of allegiance, prompted by a woman on the stage. Next came a videotaped congratulatory message from President Obama and a slideshow of American scenery accompanied by a recording of Lee Greenwood singing “God Bless the U.S.A.” The country hit, played incessantly on radio stations after the 9/11 attacks and again after Osama bin Laden was killed, would have struck some of the immigrant Americans as inappropriate if they knew what the songwriter actually thought about foreigners. “If America changes to the point that it is no longer a Christian nation and no longer protects itself from aliens who come and go,” Greenwood said in 2010, “then it won’t be America anymore.” The new citizens nevertheless seemed to feel welcomed. At the end of the ceremony, they cheered
and waved the little American flags they received with their naturalization certificate.

Though the ceremony was not personal or intimate (or culturally sensitive), its very size made it impressive, because of the diversity on display. The people who filled the auditorium that morning in August 2014 came from 82 countries (about half with a non-Christian heritage) and represented nearly all the nationalities on the planet. Many of the women wore headscarves, and some of the men wore skullcaps. Three of the top four countries represented—India, Pakistan, and Ethiopia—had prior to 1965 been allocated only a few U.S. visa slots per year.

The fourth country was El Salvador, Call’s native land. Along with her, 37 other Salvadorans took the citizenship oath. For Marta, the ceremony was the culmination of a sojourn in America that had begun 22 years earlier at a detention center on the Texas-Mexico border. America to her was the place where imagined futures did not seem hopelessly out of reach, as they would have in the village where she was raised. She wore a new black dress for the occasion and had her hair highlighted with a blond streak. A colleague from her Days Inn cleaning job met her at the high school with a dozen red roses, which Marta held throughout the ceremony. Her husband and their two young children, Kimberly and Carlos, accompanied her to the ceremony, as did Jonis, Marta’s son from her first marriage. They celebrated afterward at the International House of Pancakes. Erick and René, the two sons from El Salvador, were still resentful of her and jealous of Jonis, and they skipped the ceremony. Both nevertheless wanted to follow in their mother’s footsteps and intended to apply for citizenship themselves as soon as they could. René, the younger, said he wanted to join the Army.

In theory, the decision to become a U.S. citizen separates migrants who want only to take advantage of economic opportunity from those who are ready to acquire a new national identity. It suggests an ideological commitment that goes beyond the intent to live and work in the United States simply for money. As a “legal permanent resident,” Call could have stayed in the United States indefinitely while retaining her Salvadoran citizenship, but she was determined to vote in U.S. elections, carry a U.S. passport, and be as much a part of America as her husband and three U.S.-born children. One reason Chinese migrant workers encountered such hostility in the western U.S. in the 19th century was that they were not seen as coming to the country to start new lives. The men often journeyed alone, under
labor contracts, and intended eventually to return to their families in China. The idealized immigration story is that people come to America freely, with a willingness to participate fully in the country’s life.

A similar criticism was sometimes made of Hispanic immigration. A 2013 study by the Pew Hispanic Center found that people arriving from other parts of the world were almost twice as likely to become U.S. citizens as were those coming from Mexico or Central America. One possible explanation was the proximity of their homelands, which made it easier for these Hispanics to maintain old bonds that might otherwise be broken by the migration experience. Critics of Hispanic immigration also pointed to the prevalence of Spanish-speaking communities in the United States, suggesting that this showed that Hispanics were not assimilating. Samuel Huntington argued in his 2004 book *Who Are We?* that the scale and persistence of immigration from Mexico and the rest of Latin America, along with the widespread and continuing use of Spanish by immigrants from those countries, “could change America into a culturally bifurcated Anglo-Hispanic society with two national languages.”

But the delay in Hispanic assimilation was also tied to other factors, notably poverty and low educational attainment, often associated with a lack of self-confidence. A 2000 survey of Salvadoran immigrant parents with children in Fairfax County public schools found that fewer than 30 percent had completed high school, and more than 80 percent reported household incomes of less than $40,000 per year. Call could have applied for U.S. citizenship earlier than she did, but she did not feel ready. To become a citizen, she had to be able to speak, read, write, and understand basic English and demonstrate some knowledge of U.S. government and history. Having reached only the fourth grade in her rural Salvadoran school, she was barely literate in Spanish, much less in English, and the burden of raising children and struggling constantly to make ends meet had left little time for education.

To prepare for the language and civic tests and learn more about the naturalization process, Marta attended nightly citizenship classes sponsored by Catholic Charities. Volunteer instructors tutored her and fellow immigrants on such matters as the number of senators and representatives in Congress and the roles of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. The immigrants needed to learn what led to the Declaration of Independence and what was in the
U.S. Constitution. The students could continue in the class as long as they wanted, and Marta became one of the stalwarts, often reassuring others who were feeling overwhelmed by the material and the language barrier. “I was afraid to come to this class the first time,” she told a Senegalese woman who was ready to give up. “I have been in this country for more than 20 years, but the first time I came to this class, it was like I was in the country for the first day.”

A close evaluation of Hispanic acculturation data suggests there was scant reason to worry that their growing presence in the country would dilute America’s national identity or lead to cultural separatism. The 2000 Fairfax County survey of Salvadoran immigrants like Call found that while 83 percent had arrived in the United States with no English at all, most of their children by the time of the survey spoke English well enough to translate for them. In a 2007 article, four political scientists examined available data for Hispanic immigrants and found that they “acquire English and lose Spanish rapidly beginning with the second generation” and that their educational attainment and political attitudes suggest “a traditional pattern of political assimilation.” A scholar at the RAND Corporation, after comparing the trajectories of various ethnic groups in America, found that “education advances made by Latinos are actually greater than those achieved by either Europeans or Asian migrants,” meaning that as a group their educational attainment rose steadily from generation to generation. Hispanics were joining the American mainstream, just as previous immigrants had.

A broader and more difficult question was whether immigrants who became American citizens would genuinely embrace the American ideology. The woman from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) who presided at the naturalization ceremony at Oakton High School told the assembled immigrants to cheer as their origin countries were announced, and then she encouraged them to applaud again and wave their flags when they officially became Americans, as if they had been reborn. She said they should speak English whenever they could, take part in elections, and otherwise fulfill their civic responsibilities, but she also told them they should feel free to continue speaking their native language, celebrate their own cultural backgrounds, and stay true to their own religions.

The question of what it should actually mean to become American had been debated for decades. The term “assimilation” was resisted by some immigrant advocates because it suggested that people arriving from other lands were obliged
to give up their distinctive histories and embrace the dominant culture in their new homeland. When almost all newcomers to America shared a European background, the question was less pressing, but that changed with the arrival of a much more diverse immigrant population after 1965. In 2006, the George W. Bush administration organized the Task Force on New Americans with representatives from 12 cabinet departments. In its report, “Building an Americanization Movement for the Twenty-first Century,” the group attempted to balance the celebration of ethnic diversity and the promotion of national unity by distinguishing between the cultural and political aspects of a new citizen’s identity. “The cultural sphere—traditions, religion—is up to the individual,” it concluded. “The Task Force focuses on the shared common identity that binds us as Americans in the political sphere.” Government policies, it said, should concern “not cultural but political assimilation,” which the group defined as “embracing the principles of American democracy, identifying with U.S. history, and communicating in English.”

Distinguishing between the political and cultural spheres of the American identity, however, did not address the question of whether the United States should have a common political culture, meaning the values, attitudes, and beliefs that shape the nation’s approach to politics. Issues such as minority rights, civil liberties, the role of the state, and the place of religion in public life were largely unresolved. What, for example, was the significance of the national motto, E pluribus unum, which is usually translated as “Out of many, one”? One of the most provocative offerings about American identity came from the liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who claimed that a “cult of ethnicity has arisen among non-Anglo whites and among nonwhite minorities” and that it was endangering a distinctive American identity. “It belittles unum and glorifies pluribus,” he wrote in his book The Disuniting of America. He detected a slackening commitment to America’s unique goal, which he said “was not to preserve old cultures, but to forge a new American culture.”

Schlesinger’s critics countered that his “unum” was simply a white Anglo-Saxon construct reflective of an earlier, less diverse America, and that it could not possibly bind all Americans in the post-1965 period, whether laudable or not. “A nation of more than 130 cultural groups cannot hope to have all of them Anglo-Saxonized,” wrote Molefi Kete Asante in his book The Painful Demise of Eurocentrism. Asante, a professor of African American Studies at Temple
University, argued that Schlesinger and others who wrote critically of multiculturalism were not only out of touch with the contemporary U.S. reality but were actually advocating a vision that would divide Americans, not bring them together. “Since the American idea is not a static but a dynamic one,” Asante said, “we must constantly reinvent ourselves in the light of our diverse experiences. One reason this nation works the way it does is our diversity. Try to make Africans and Asians copies of Europeans ... and you will force the disunity Schlesinger fears.”

Even the multiculturalists like Asante, however, recognized that “Americanization” brought certain obligations. Many immigrants were not accustomed to living in diverse communities, and accepting American values meant learning to respect people of different racial and cultural backgrounds. Americans of white Anglo-Saxon parentage had to appreciate the Asian or African experience, but Asians and Africans were also obliged to appreciate each other. The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform chaired by Barbara Jordan of Texas devoted an entire chapter of its final report to “Americanization,” focusing on the importance of “a covenant between immigrant and nation.” The United States, the commission concluded, “assumes an obligation to those it admits, as immigrants assume an obligation to the country they chose.” The commission emphasized that immigration is a voluntary act, and that those foreigners who choose to become U.S. citizens must necessarily accept certain principles, including the elevation of individual rights over collective rights. “Unlike other countries, including those from which many immigrants come,” the commission said, “rights in the United States are not defined by ethnicity, religion, or membership in any group nor can immigrants be denied rights because they are members of a particular ethnic, religious, or political group.” Whether such a formulation is inherently European or universal might be debated, but it would seem to put limits on the celebration of diversity per se. To adopt a position of pure cultural relativism would be to accept some customs or traditions that are antithetical to broadly accepted American values and norms. Forced marriage or genital mutilation are not to be tolerated, while freedom of expression and women’s rights are not to be abridged, regardless of how other cultures or countries view such issues.

The elaboration of an American political culture that guarantees freedoms but also respects diversity is inevitably a challenge in an era when so many people of such different backgrounds are coming together. “The mutual antipathy of tribes is one of the oldest things in the world,” Schlesinger observed. “Mass migrations produce
mass antagonisms. The fear of the Other is among the most instinctive human reactions.” While his detractors rejected Schlesinger’s diagnosis of what ailed the American nation, they could not dispute the potential for conflict he identified in a more diverse America. The bigger questions were what diversity meant and how to deal with it. The critics of immigration regularly cited the prospect of increased ethnic conflict as a reason for limiting the foreign influx. Otis Graham, one of the founders of the modern restriction movement, highlighted the possibility of “weakening social cohesion, mounting class and ethnoracial division, and even regional separatism.” Schlesinger argued that the multiculturalists were making things worse by not promoting commonality; the multiculturalists countered that the solution was to respect different cultural traditions.

Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist famous for his analysis of how and when Americans bond with each other, addressed the issue in a 2006 lecture he titled “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century.” Noting the increased ethnic diversity in the United States and other advanced countries due to rising immigration, Putnam said the consequence in the short run was reduced social solidarity. “New evidence from the U.S.,” he wrote, “suggests that in ethnically diverse neighborhoods, residents of all races tend to ‘hunker down.’ Trust (even of one’s own race) is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, friends fewer.” But this was only a short-term phenomenon. “In the long run,” he said, “successful immigrant societies have overcome such fragmentation by creating new, cross-cutting forms of solidarity and more encompassing identities.” Social behavior in this vein featured what he called “bridging” interactions between individuals of different cultural backgrounds, and he saw this as an area that could be supported by public policy and institutions. “My hunch,” he said, “is that at the end we shall see that the challenge is best met not by making ‘them’ like ‘us,’ but rather by creating a new, more capacious sense of ‘we.’”

(This article is excerpted from Tom Gjelten’s book, A Nation of Nations: A Great American Immigration Story.)