

## WHO DOES SHE STAND FOR?

As the Statue of Liberty turned 100, our long battle over immigration was having its moment in Reagan's America

*By Paul A. Kramer*



Fourth of July weekend, 1986, was an awkward time for President Ronald Reagan to rededicate the Statue of Liberty as a welcome light to immigrants. Speaking on immigration during his acceptance of the Republican nomination for president in July 1980, Reagan had welded fragments of [Emma Lazarus' famous sonnet](#), installed on the statue's base, to an American exceptionalism and Protestant nationalism Lazarus had not shared. "Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely?" he asked. When it came to the question of whose search for safety mattered, his examples were aligned with Cold War priorities: "Jews and Christians enduring persecution behind the Iron Curtain, the boat people of Southeast Asia, of Cuba and Haiti, victims of drought and famine in Africa." America, it seemed, was synonymous with the freedom that immigrants craved, but some immigrants' hunger for air mattered more than others'.

Once Reagan was in office, his administration made immigration policy an extension of an aggressive, militarized foreign policy. Despite the 1980 Refugee Act signed by President Carter, which set the criteria for asylum broadly as a “well-founded fear” of persecution, Reagan’s Immigrant and Naturalization Service politicized refuge, disproportionately granting asylum to those fleeing Communist states and denying it to nearly all applicants from

violent, oppressive regimes the United States supported, like those of El Salvador and Haiti. Migrants who were owed asylum hearings were denied them. Where for decades, undocumented asylum applicants in state custody had been released on bond unless considered dangerous, from 1981 onward, many were imprisoned in detention centers, some of them leased-out jails. Meanwhile, U.S. military, political, and economic aid to right-wing regimes was helping uproot tens of thousands of Haitians, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Filipinos, some of whom found themselves at the United States’ increasingly harsh, punitive borders. The Sanctuary Movement, a campaign by faith communities to help migrants fleeing death squads and violence in Central America remain in the United States, was surveilled, infiltrated, and prosecuted by the administration.



The cover of *Newsweek's* issue featuring the Statue of Liberty's 100th anniversary celebration. The Reagan administration used the occasion to reinforce nationalist and Cold War understandings of the Statue's meanings.

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Ever since Europeans first set foot in North America, those with shallow claims to being American have had [strong ideas about who belonged](#). Donald Trump, in trying to bar refugees and immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, terminating temporary protected status for Haitians and

Salvadorans, and threatening hundreds of thousands of childhood arrivals to the United States with deportation, is drawing on deep nativist currents in American life. Writing 25 years before the Declaration of Independence, in a treatise on the demographics of the Pennsylvania colony, Benjamin Franklin expressed his worries about the arrival of Spaniards, Italians, Russians, Swedes, and the French, people who possessed what he called “a swarthy Complexion”; he complained that Germans were becoming so numerous that they threatened to “Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them.”

But the founders also believed that the United States, if it wished to advance republicanism in a world of monarchies, needed to open its arms to those fleeing tyranny elsewhere, particularly Europeans. The U.S. must serve as what George Washington and others called an “asylum” for “the oppressed of every Nation and Country.” They also believed that the United States needed

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immigrants and their labor to build up American industry and infrastructure, seize North America from Native Americans, and extend what they called the “empire of liberty” across the continent. When European Americans argued over who should and shouldn’t be allowed to immigrate, that debate played a critical role

in making them “native” to North America, at least to themselves. Before too long, deciding that the person just behind you as you stepped off the boat was a scary immigrant was a venerable American tradition.

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When Americans debate immigration, they have, for 132 years, inevitably found themselves wrestling with the meaning of a colossal, copper-green woman who carries a torch. As a physical and symbolic object, the Statue of Liberty is so inescapable, so encrusted in tourist kitsch, we forget she's weird. She's stern-faced, but a symbol of

welcome. She's from abroad, but stands for America. Facing onto the world from New York Harbor, is she a beacon or a border guard?



"WILL IT COME TO THIS:"

It's often forgotten that, before it was ever strongly associated immigrant welcome, the Statue was often depicted as a guardian and gatekeeper, protecting American purity from European immigrant rabble, as in this 1906 cartoon.

For the far right, the openness with which the statue has become associated is a threat. On Aug. 2, CNN reporter Jim Acosta challenged senior policy adviser Stephen Miller—architect of the White House's hard line on immigration—about the president's proposal for a policy that favored highly educated English speakers and cut legal entries in half. Acosta pointed out that the Emma Lazarus poem didn't say anything about speaking English or computer programming. Miller replied, echoing a common nativist talking point: "The poem that you're referring to, that was added later, is not actually a part of the original Statue of Liberty," he said. The statue was "a symbol of liberty and light in the world," not of immigrants coming to the United States. Despite his eagerness to



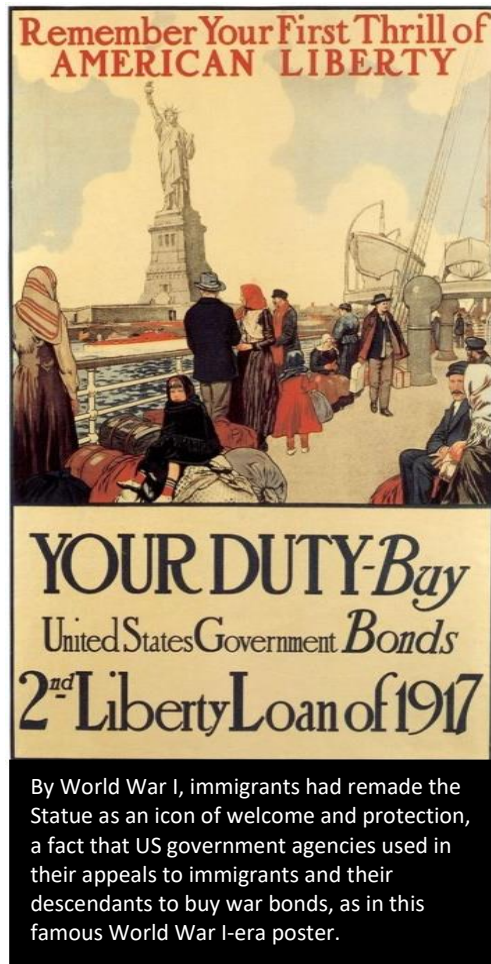
discuss history that day, Miller did not bring up his Russian Jewish ancestors, refugees who fled anti-Jewish violence in Belarus.

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In truth, the statue has always proved an elusive shape-shifter when it comes to immigrants. For several decades after its dedication in 1886, it was seen by many Americans as representing a militant

warrior-goddess guarding the nation's gates from swarming European rabble. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the most well-known poem that brought together the statue and immigration wasn't Lazarus' refugee-welcoming "The New Colossus." It was New England writer and editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich's rabidly xenophobic "[Unguarded Gates](#)," first published in 1892. The poem called out to "Liberty," a "white Goddess," warning her of a "wild motley throng" on the nation's unprotected doorstep: Malayans, Scythians, and Slavs

who brought "unknown gods and rites," "strange tongues," and "tiger passions, here to stretch their claws." When the Ku Klux Klan drove a parade float through downtown Bellingham, Washington, in May 1926, leading a 750-person procession, its centerpiece was a Statue of Liberty, towering over six hooded Klansmen.



By the early 20th century, recent immigrants and their descendants made the statue—one of their first sights upon entering New York Harbor—into their emblem and talisman. For Amelia Meisner Lindsay, a Russian immigrant who had been a child at the time

of her 1905 crossing, the encounter was mystical. “I knew at once that she had recognized us,” she recalled in a 1977 essay. This was the statue Emma Lazarus had written of in 1883, a “Mother of Exiles.” But it took another half century, years of activism, a war against fascism, and the upward mobility of European immigrants to fully displace the nativist guardian in the American public imagination. (The plaque bearing Lazarus’ poem was indeed only installed in the statue’s base in 1903.) By the early post–World War II period, the statue, the poem (especially its viscerally memorable “huddled masses”), and even its author were becoming interchangeable, and “The New Colossus” was being memorized and recited by schoolchildren along with “Paul Revere’s Ride.”

Yet even as the exile’s statue joined the American vernacular, promises of shelter and freedom extended to newcomers outstripped those made to the descendants of forced migrants from Africa. Langston Hughes put it this way in the *Chicago Defender* in 1950: “With her face toward the Old World welcoming the refugees of poverty and oppression, terror and hate, Liberty stands in New York Harbor—some have said—with her back to Harlem.” He called on black Americans to ask the country, insistently: “Shouldn’t we at least have the same chance that refugees have? When will you permit us the privileges you offer Russians, Germans, Poles or Danes who come to our shores?” Liberty, he said, “would take delight in asking those questions for us.”



African Americans had always had a complex relationship to the Statue of Liberty; many were critical of the ways its promises of liberty and freedom for recent European immigrants were not extended to the descendants of forced migrants from Africa. This June 1941 cartoon, celebrating America’s welcome to European refugees, conveys what for many Americans was the whiteness of the Statue and her offer of shelter.

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power: While associated with America, it stood resolutely offshore, looking askance at the nation and posing urgent questions from the border. You could drape its base with Stars and Stripes bunting each Flag Day, but the statue remained stubbornly alien. She came from France. Waves of early 20th-

century immigrants had transformed her into a 305-foot-tall thorn in the side of the United States' racist immigration laws. Notably, Lazarus' statue did not demand that immigrants make the U.S. stronger, wealthier, or more diverse—its protection was predicated on nothing more than the humanity and vulnerability of those to whom it was offered. It was easy enough to miss the fact that Lazarus' sonnet made no reference to the United States: The freedom her statue stood for was not of America or by America, but beyond America.



While US nationalists made the Statue into an exceptionalist symbol of the United States, as uniquely embodying universal liberty, others positioned the Statue as necessarily foreign and offshore, representing universal values to which the US itself must be held accountable. Amnesty International protestors in London objecting to the Trump administration's Muslim ban in April 2017, in showing the Statue as ashamed, drew on this latter meaning.

Reagan's statue, by contrast, was America itself. "We are the keepers of the flame of liberty," he said at the climax of his opening address at the centennial



Ronald Reagan speaking at "Liberty Weekend" celebrations of the Statue of Liberty's centennial in 1986. The administration faced the difficult challenge of hailing the role of past immigrants in American life while keeping its own aggressive, Cold War approach to immigrants and refugees from the Caribbean and Central America offstage.

ceremonies, delivered on Governors Island. "We hold it high tonight for the world to see, a beacon of hope, a light unto the nations." Planners of the event had placed immigrant symbolism at the heart of "Liberty Weekend" proceedings, foregrounding immigrants as the recipients of American benevolence and reflections of American greatness. But as became clear over four days of fireworks, tall ships, lasers, trumpet fanfares, Elvis impersonators, warships, Jazzercise dancers, pop ballads, and yacht flotillas, the statue invoked at the anniversary bore little resemblance to

Lazarus' giantess, no matter how many times "The New Colossus" was invoked. One could have been forgiven for having no idea there was an ongoing refugee crisis in which the United States was implicated. "The intense debate over

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current immigration policy hardly can be found in the official Liberty Weekend program," noted one reporter for the Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel.

Instead, the arrivals invoked at the event in song and speech were immigrants out of a nostalgic miniseries, safely sepia-toned into the past with their worn caps, tattered



shawls, and hopeful eyes; the event had been orchestrated by Hollywood television and movie producer David Wolper. The festival's immigrants were strivers, not sufferers. They worked hard and virtuously, their labor coated over with gauzy populism, their inner selves invested with a capitalist spirituality. It was to their credit, Reagan said, that they had "labored all their lives" to keep their children fed, clothed, and educated. They were, mostly, of European descent. By the 1980s, most immigrants to the United States were from Asia and Latin America, but eight of the 12 naturalized citizens honored with "Liberty Medals" during the event were white. The poverty of past immigrants was quaint, circumstantial, and not morally disqualifying, assuming that it



Ronald and Nancy Reagan honoring the immigrant recipients of Liberty Medals during Liberty Weekend celebrations. The festivities celebrated highly accomplished immigrants as contributors to American life, loyal patriots, and exemplars of capitalist self-discipline, while other immigrants could hear the gala from detention facilities in Lower Manhattan.

channeled them into productive work rather than protest. Most fundamentally, America's immigrants had possessed what Reagan called "an abiding love of liberty": It was not exactly clear what he meant, but unquestioning loyalty to the United States, economic self-responsibility, and material self-fulfillment were key ingredients. The event's most celebrated immigrants were almost-Americans. Thousands participated in one the largest mass naturalizations in American history. Chief Justice Burger performed a swearing in at Ellis Island and, via satellite hookup, at massive, televised ceremonies across the country.

Meanwhile, on the eve of the celebrations, about 4,800 immigrants were being detained by the federal government, facing deportation by an increasingly forceful INS. According to [the New York Times](#), more than 200 were being

held in a detention center in lower Manhattan, about a mile and a half from the festivities. There were men with long rap sheets and men who had been working \$2-an-hour jobs when they were swept up in INS raids. The Times story described Ramino Soto Uribe, 35, who arrived from Venezuela on a six-month tourist visa, overstayed, and had been working as a car painter in Paterson, New Jersey. He'd wanted a better life, a chance to put down some roots. A few weeks earlier, local police and immigration officials had found marijuana at the apartment he shared with some friends. They also found pay stubs, tracked him to his job, and arrested him. At the time of Liberty Weekend, he was fighting to remain in the United States and following television coverage of the revelry from inside the prison facility. He told the Times, "I would love to be at that celebration."

Ghulam Mohammad Paiman, a 22-year-old man from Afghanistan, had fought in the mujahideen army for three years, a "freedom fighter" in Reagan's campaign to push back the Soviet invasion. According to court papers, he had been tortured in a Kabul prison and would be "eliminated" if he were returned home. He had arrived at JFK Airport the previous January without a passport or visa, been arrested, and was being held in a cinder block room with barred windows. "When I came to this country," he told the Times, "I had high expectations of liberty and peace. I expected to be treated with dignity. I expected human rights to be honored. I am not a criminal. But I am treated like a criminal." Growing up in Afghanistan, he'd seen pictures of the Statue's lamp in schoolbooks. He could hear the party from the window of his cell. "The Statue of Liberty represents freedom and justice to many millions," he said. "But I am confined in this prison."

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Activists did not let the administration have the last word, protesting with marches, rallies, and editorials, before and during the centennial events, that the statue wasn't simply being rededicated; it was being body snatched. Anti-poverty campaigners asked why present-day "huddled masses" had been left out of the glitzy, privatized revelry. Black

writers charged that the histories of enslaved and free African migrants to America had been written out of the weekend's official memory. It was the Sanctuary Movement that served as the leading champion of the exiles' statue. Two days before the start of the centennial, five movement activists had been sentenced, but none received prison time. The press, in its trial coverage, had made a point of connecting Liberty Weekend to both the ongoing refugee crisis and the Sanctuary Movement that the events had scrupulously dodged. The effort was aided by prominent allies. "Those now leaving Central America are the new huddled masses," said Jesse Jackson, speaking on the eve of Liberty Weekend at a hearing in Los Angeles on the arrival of refugees to the city. In a February [op-ed in the Detroit Free Press](#), Coretta Scott King had strongly defended the Sanctuary Movement members. "As the nation prepares to celebrate the centennial of the 'mother of exiles,'" she wrote, they provided "a timely reminder of our obligation to honor our ideals and heritage." She closed by quoting "The New Colossus."

*"Back In Haiti, I Was Told She Held A Lamp."*



**HUGH HAYNIE** / *The Louisville Courier-Journal* / Nov. 16, 1981

Many observers, including this cartoonist, sharply challenged the Reagan administration's geopolitical double standards when it came to refugee admissions: a facilitating of entry for those fleeing Communist regimes, and barring of those fleeing right-wing, authoritarian regimes the US itself supported, like Haitians; in the case of Haiti, these restrictions were underwritten by racist fears.

The stark contrast between a long-awaited, immigrant-themed extravaganza in New York City and the mass deportation of the tired and poor won the Sanctuary Movement greater support. In June, the United Church of Christ passed a resolution advocating sanctuary. In presenting it, Rev. John Thomas stated that, as the nation prepared to celebrate the statue's birthday the following month, "we mock her spirit by turning away or deporting Latin Americans." In his homily at an ecumenical council, the politically conservative Cardinal John O'Connor, archbishop of New York, took away larger lessons from the anniversary. "All of us are here as refugees, all exiles, all pilgrims," he said, "and unless we can understand this reality, we cannot understand ourselves as a people or why we need the Statue of Liberty at all."

The statue had badly needed repair and restoration as the centenary approached. Salt, harbor winds, and water damage had corroded its copper plating, leaving rusty iron support bars and gaping holes that were structurally unsound and symbolically unfortunate. The renovations that led up to the 1986 ceremony had done much. Figuratively speaking, they are ongoing: The Statue of Liberty is always being built and rebuilt, by various ideological architects, often at odds with each other. Many have cast her as American, facing outward to protect the

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nation and project American power across the globe; for these builders, immigrants were ultimately just the symbol and instrument of that power. But for Lazarus and those she inspired, the statue was there to offer what she had called "world-wide welcome" to those escaping danger—including dangers brought about by the actions of the United States.

These newcomers would, in turn, perpetually challenge the country she fronted with the question of where its responsibilities to the rest of the world ended and began. This statue was not—could not be—America. She was a migrant from some great, distant country whose papers the United States did not always honor.

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**At the 1986 events, no one expected the moment when the bombastic celebration of immigrants crashed into the well-being of an actual immigrant: Hue Cao, age 11.**

Hue Cao, age 11. While a very young girl, she had fled Vietnam with her widowed mother and siblings in 1979 in a small fishing boat and been picked up by a U.S. naval vessel, which provided them food, shelter, and clothing. Raised in Hawaii, she had submitted an essay on “What the Statue of Liberty Means to Me” for a centennial competition

and won statewide and then the national prize: a trip to New York for the celebration, where she would recite the essay, and a 1987 Nissan Sentra XE sedan worth \$9,000. The sixth-grader’s words resonated with Liberty Weekend themes of rescue, gratitude, and the equating of America and freedom. The Communists her family had escaped were “cruel, stern and ill-tempered.” “We wanted to live in America,” she wrote, “a land where there is liberty and justice.” The statue had [taken on powerful meaning](#) for her family: Whenever they would see its image, she recalled, her mother would “tell us that she is America.” Americans cared “for all people, from homeless to hopeless people”; it was “a place that lends a hand to those in need.”

But there was a problem. Cao’s family happened to be receiving Medicaid, food stamps, and welfare payments, and were only allowed to exempt \$1,500 of a car’s value from the strict asset caps laid down by federal regulations; if Cao [accepted the Nissan](#), they would be cut off from the assistance they needed. This was awkward. Everyone scrambled. President Reagan didn’t mention the issue when he congratulated Cao over the phone. “Believe me,” he said, “you have paid your dues.” According to an official at the Aloha Liberty Foundation, the White House had [pulled every string possible](#) to allow Cao’s family to keep the car, but there was no getting around the fear of over-privileged welfare recipients. In the end, the foundation liquidated the car and set up a college fund for Hue, and her family was given a used Buick Skylark worth \$1,499 by an anonymous donor. Flown from Honolulu to New York City with her family, Cao read her essay at the unveiling ceremony. Her mother, Lien Ma, and two of her brothers received U.S. citizenship during the weekend’s mass naturalizations. While in New York City, the family stayed at the Hotel St. Moritz on Central Park South, courtesy of real estate developer Donald Trump.



When four months later, on Nov. 6, President Reagan signed a sweeping new immigration law, it reflected the United States' divisions on the matter as well as its points of convergence. Immigrant rights advocates and their allies won legal status for undocumented immigrants who had entered the United States before January 1982, had lived there continuously, possessed some knowledge of the United States, and could prove they were not guilty of crimes. Opponents of amnesty received increased funding for Border Patrol enforcement, tightened status checks for any immigrant noncitizens who sought federal benefits, and a crackdown on the knowing employment of undocumented workers. The Reagan administration continued to sponsor repressive regimes whose actions displaced tens of thousands of people, many of whom struggled to find refuge in the United States, and many of whom were deported or turned away. Hue Cao's vision of America as a place that cared for all people, including those without home or hope, would have to wait.

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