Coming to the United States
A Land of Milk and Honey?

Lexington

A Lesson in American Greatness

From an old acquaintance

SOURCE: https://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21737565-old-acquaintance-lesson-american-greatness

NOTHING is more American than Emmanuel Makender's discontent. A 35-year-old taxi driver in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Mr Makender has a comfortable four-bedroom house and two cars outside it. He earns $40,000 a year, the average family income in Grand Rapids, which means his pregnant wife need not work. Yet when congratulated on his achievements, he says he hopes "to be successful one day". Dissatisfaction, hunger and striving are intertwined. "Still living the American dream, we struggle on!" he says, at the end of a two-hour catch-up.

Lexington had met Mr Makender 18 years before, in different circumstances. He was then a destitute war orphan living in a fly-blown refugee camp in northern Kenya. A fugitive from the war in Sudan, which had claimed an estimated 2m lives, including most of Mr Makender's immediate family, he had fled his village six years earlier, after soldiers attacked it one night. They killed his father, three of his siblings and, he thought, his mother, leaving him, aged around 12, terrified and alone in the dark.

He joined a straggling column of fugitive children, mostly boys, who trekked hundreds of miles east to Ethiopia to escape the war and rebel press gangs. But another war broke out there, so they trekked back across Sudan to Kenya. The arduousness of the journey, which Mr Makender survived by eating wild plants ("Some were so bitter," he says) and many did not, made them a celebrated disaster story. They were known as the Lost Boys, and, on November 4th 2000, the

day your columnist visited Kakuma refugee camp, America offered them sanctuary. Over the next year 3,800 Sudanese children and teenagers were resettled in 18 states. It was one of America's biggest resettlement projects.

It also illustrates two of the Refugee Admissions Programme's traditional strengths. Since it was launched in 1980 it has had an average quota of 95,000 refugees a year, more than that of any other rich country. America has also tended to take the most forlorn cases. Some were victims of its foreign-policy blunders, including hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees. Yet this tendency also reflected the values and self-confidence of a country founded by fugitives, which, over the ensuing four centuries, has been relentlessly successful at turning them into productive citizens. Those traditional strengths no longer apply, however. Because refugee policy is one of the few bits of the immigration system President Donald Trump controls, he has ravaged it.

This year's refugee quota, 45,000, is the lowest in three decades, and is not expected to be met. Mr Trump also excluded a lot of wretched people from it, by temporarily placing additional restrictions on anyone from a secret list of 11 countries, which is said to include South Sudan, as well as Syria and Iraq. A low-cost nativist signal to his supporters, these are the biggest changes Mr Trump has made to America's immigration regime. They are also counter-productive, as well as cruel, a typical case of nativists mistaking American strengths for weakness.

The argument against refugees, which Republican governors in Texas and Michigan were making even before Mr Trump's election, is that they are a financial burden and security threat. Both charges are unfounded. For though it is true that refugees represent a bigger upfront cost than other migrants—America spends between $10,000 and $20,000 resettling each one—they repay that in spades. A decade after their arrival, the average income of a refugee family is close to the American average. Mr Makender has paid over $100,000 in taxes. Americans can also relax about their odds of being killed by a refugee. None of the 3m-odd fugitives America has taken since 1980 has been involved in a fatal terrorist attack. That reflects the rigour of America's vetting, refugees' hunger for advancement—and America's ability to feed it.

Not all the Lost Boys have thrived; some hit the bottle and ended up in jail (as might anyone orphaned, shot at and chased by crocodiles). Yet a few have done extremely well: one is a diplomat, another a chess master. Mr Makender, whom Lexington traced through a Lutheran charity that fixed his resettlement, is more representative. A few days after he learned "about something called snow", he was ensconced in Michigan with a family of white evangelicals ("my American parents", he calls them) and attending high school. He meanwhile worked evenings in a grocery, a part-time job he has maintained, even as he has found better-paid work, because "the people there are nice to me".

He has also worked in a factory, making granola bars, and completed two years of a three-year nursing degree. He did not finish it because he had such little luck finding an internship he began to suspect that America, though short of nurses, was not ready to hire an African man as one. "When you keep getting called back for job interviews and not getting the job, you suspect there is something else going on," he shrugs. But he kept on working, ten hours a day, often seven days a week.

Working out

After a trip to South Sudan, where he was joyfully reunited with his mother, he started sending most of his wages to her and to pay for the education of three nephews, in Kenya and Uganda. That illustrates another virtuous potential of refugees. They tend to be generous to those they leave behind and better at targeting their assistance than aid agencies. That is good for their new country as well as their old one, because thereby they create networks for future commerce and

exercising of soft power. The businesses Somali-Americans have started in Mogadishu may head off more anti-American rage than any counter-terrorism measure.

There is, of course, another argument for barring refugees. Some Americans simply don't want more foreigners in their midst, and it is their right to hold that view. Yet the politicians who dignify it with specious arguments are making fools of themselves and harming America. Refugees make the country stronger, as well as better. They always have.

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[A Daughter of an Immigrant—Vanita Gupta—and a Different Version of the American Dream]

SOURCE: https://civilrights.org/about-us/staff/vanita-gupta-president-ceo/

Vanita Gupta is an experienced leader and litigator who has devoted her entire career to civil rights work. Most recently, from October 15, 2014, to January 20, 2017, she served as Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General and head of the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division. Appointed by President Barack Obama as the chief civil rights prosecutor for the United States, Gupta oversaw a wide range of criminal and civil enforcement efforts to ensure equal justice and protect equal opportunity for all during one of the most consequential periods for the division.

Under Gupta's leadership, the division did critical work in a number of areas, including advancing constitutional policing and criminal justice reform; prosecuting hate crimes and human trafficking; promoting disability rights; protecting the rights of LGBTQ individuals; ensuring voting rights for all; and combating discrimination in education, housing, employment, lending, and religious exercise. She regularly engaged with a broad range of stakeholders in the course of this work.

Selected high profile matters during her tenure included the investigations of the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Chicago police departments; the appeals of the Texas and North Carolina voter ID cases; the challenge to North Carolina's HB2 law and other transgender rights litigation; enforcement of education, land use, hate crimes, and other statutes to combat Islamophobia and other forms of religious discrimination; the issuance of statements of interest on bail and indigent defense reform, and letters to state and local court judges and administrators on the unlawful imposition of fines and fees in criminal justice system; and the Administration's report on solitary confinement.

Prior to joining the Justice Department, Gupta served as Deputy Legal Director and the Director of the Center for Justice at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). She joined the ACLU in 2006 as a staff attorney, where she subsequently secured a landmark settlement on behalf of immigrant children from around the world detained in a privately-run prison in Texas that ultimately led to the end of "family detention" at the facility. In addition to managing a robust litigation docket at the ACLU, Gupta created and led the organization's Smart Justice Campaign aimed at ending mass incarceration while keeping communities safe. She worked with law enforcement agencies, corrections officials, advocates, stakeholders, and elected officials across

the political spectrum to build collaborative support for pretrial, drug, and sentencing policies that make our federal, state, and local criminal justice systems more effective and more just.

Gupta began her legal career as an attorney at the NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund, where she successfully led the effort to overturn the wrongful drug convictions of 38 individuals in Tulia, Texas, who were ultimately pardoned by Governor Rick Perry. She then helped negotiate a $6 million settlement on behalf of her clients. She also consulted with European civil society organizations working to advance the rights of the Roma.

Gupta graduated magna cum laude from Yale University and received her law degree from New York University School of Law, where later she taught a civil rights litigation clinic for several years.

[Vanita Gupta is the President and CEO of the Leadership Conference (A coalition of civil and human rights organizations), and is] married to Chinh Q. Le, legal director of the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia, and has two young sons.

ESSAY

Why an [East Indian] girl chose to become an American woman

SOURCE: https://qz.com/1218598/why-an-indian-girl-chose-to-become-an-american-woman/

By Abhinanda Bhattacharyya

I was born in India. What can I say about India that hasn't already been said about this big, beautiful country, where the culture and history run so deep that the people there have been killing each other for centuries and centuries? India is the most interesting, smelly, soulful melting pot of too many things and too many people I have ever seen. And the food is so good, the people so kind.

But India failed women and India failed me.

When I moved to the United States on a scholarship to go to Bard College in upstate New York in August 2009, I still had my high school hair (bangs) and my high school boyfriend. I did not know anything about AMERICA. When I arrived at JFK, I was alarmed and traumatized to learn that you had to "rent" the luggage carts for US$5. At the time, this converted to about 250 Indian rupees, and luggage carts were always free at Indian airports. How But India failed women and India failed me. was I going to earn 250 rupees back for my parents? My parents had saved up for years so that my brother and I could pursue this life, and I couldn't even drag two suitcases around on my own. I felt guilty as well as poor.

When I arrived at Bard later that same week, I found myself confused about whether I was under-dressed or over-dressed. Hipsters were trending that year, and I looked around the campus and thought to myself, "they must all be here on scholarship."

In my first class at Bard, First Year Seminar, or FYSEM, we talked about Hegel. I had not done any of the reading, because I had started to and then didn't understand a word of what Hegel was trying to say. All I could think, as my peers used big words to discuss and refute Hegel's ideas, was Hegel rhymes with Kegel. It was going to be a long four years.

In the years following my not learning anything about Hegel in FYSEM, many things changed for me. I studied math and also became a convincing BS-er. Every semester I signed up for as many classes as I could fit in my schedule. I learned how to sit at a big round table and say things in a way that made it seem like I knew what I was talking about, and soon enough I was able to make a convincing argument about pretty much anything. I also learned how to drink irresponsibly and still live to experience the hangover the next day. In other words, I became college educated.

What changed the most for me, though, was how I thought about my own country. I was about eight thousand miles away from my parents, from the house that they had moved to in Mumbai that had never felt like home. Every time I flew back in college—a total of three times—I started to feel more and more isolated from my country. I felt anxious when I flew in that direction, and relieved when I flew back. When I made it past the mean but mostly bored Customs and Border Protection employees at JFK, I breathed. I felt free.

The last time I flew back to India, almost six years ago now, I was a senior in college, about to graduate. When I stepped out of Mumbai's international airport, into the humid but cool "winter" air, my father did not recognize me. My mother would later joke but not joke that my father had pointed at every young woman walking out of the arrivals area, except me, and enthusiastically exclaimed, "there she is!"

When I sat in my parents' shiny new Honda that they were so proud of, they asked me about my flight, and then asked me if I was ready to get married. They were joking, but I told them no, I was not.

Then what was my plan? they wanted to know. I was about to graduate from college, what was next? How was I going to survive? I'll be fine, I said, you watch. I didn't know that I was going to be fine, but found myself saying so in a small voice anyway. They relented, I relented.

I looked out of the window, onto the familiar streets of the city I was born in, a city I once loved.

I spent much of that winter break in my parents' apartment, in the bedroom that was only mine when I was there. I volunteered with Teach for India during the day, but spent the evenings in my room. My parents didn't allow me to leave the house alone after dark, because India was not safe for women, and I didn't know my way around the city. Sexual assault and violence against women was a well-known fact in India, and it was about to become a world-famous fact too. I wondered what it would be like if I ended up having to move back.

I felt oppressed. Not by my parents, but by the weight of being a female in a country that didn't know what to do with its women. I wondered what it would be like if I ended up having to move back. But if I had to, I would be able to do it, I told myself. India wasn't made for women, so what, I had to live, right?

On Dec. 16, 2012, a girl who became known as Nirbhaya, meaning "fearless," was gang-raped, tortured and beaten by six men on a bus in South Delhi. She was twenty-three years old, a physiotherapy intern, and was coming home from watching a movie with her friend on the night of her assault. I watched with the rest of the country, and soon enough the rest of the world, as the gruesome details of the incident unraveled. When Nirbhaya died a few days later in a hospital in Singapore, we were all stunned into silence, but only for a minute. Then there was anger, and grief, and protests. People took to the streets across the country and asked the bigger questions—how could we live in a place where the circumstances allowed something like this to happen? How could this happen? How could men do this to women?

Then there were the anti-protesters, the ones who blame women, the ones who think nothing is wrong. That's a lot of people in India, and the world, unfortunately. I guess this is what happens when a country is shaken like this, we become polarized. But, at least we see each other.

My departure day for the United States was fast approaching. I counted down the days, because my anguish had turned into sickness and anger. I hated India. Nibhaya's death represented something bigger, for me and the rest of the country. I grew up accepting that I would have to adjust my lifestyle around men, their advances, their violence. It happened every day in India. Women were brutally raped, assaulted and killed on a daily basis, sometimes in cities, many times in remote, isolated villages and towns. Those incidents, we would never find out about.

The police and government participated and enabled. It was terrible, but no one wanted to become a statistic. So we went on.

After Nirbhaya's death, there was a public outcry for change. And there was, in fact, some change. The maximum punishment for rape became the death penalty, instead of life imprisonment. The leaders acknowledged that the government and the police had failed. Some of the things we already knew were spoken out loud. This was hardly compensation, but it was something, a dialogue, at least. Finally.

But, the issue with systemic oppression and cultural bias is that change is not enough. You have to un-do the damage already done. You have to look inwards, and ask the harder questions. What were the messages Bollywood had been teaching us for decades? What had our history taught us about men, and women? What were our own biases?

Driving to the airport in Mumbai in January of 2013, I decided not to come back. I didn't know how I was going to do it. Immigration, especially for Indians in the US was an uphill journey. Every year thousands of Indians, and other immigrants returned to their home countries who did not want to return.

But I was going to find a way. If not the United States, somewhere else. I could never again live in a country where, to some, to many, I was less than a human.

My resolve to stay out of India ruined my psychological well-being for a few years, as these things go. I would not go back. But now, instead of being up against potentially violent Indian men, I was up against the United States Customs and Immigration Service and the Department of Homeland Security.

After graduating from Bard later that year, I went on to work at a private boarding school in a small city in New England as a high school math teaching fellow. The program was a two-year fellowship, through which I earned a master's degree in Education from the University of Pennsylvania. My coworkers were smart and kind, my students bearable on most days, and the opportunity almost too good to be true. The school worked with me to extend my visa, and I was grateful, as this meant that I was not buying that one-way ticket to Mumbai. Yet.

But I was unhappy. The truth was that I had accepted this job because it kept me out of India, not because I wanted to teach. When it came time to apply for jobs the fall of my second year, I applied for teaching jobs again, because this just made sense. On interviews, the people on the other end of the phone asked me why I wanted to teach. I told them about that time that student who hated math discovered that she loved math in my class, or how I enjoyed teaching my students about Graph Theory in a Geometry class, and how teaching math had taught me to look at math differently. I became pretty good at my "why I want to teach" speech.

But I didn't want to teach. I just wanted to stay the hell out of India.

I eventually accepted a job teaching high school math at a private school in Minneapolis. When I flew into Minneapolis for the interview, it was early February. I had never been that cold in my life, but looking around the city, the lakes, the tall, bundled-up people, I thought, "sure. Why not?"

The school in Minneapolis invested thousands of dollars into hiring lawyers who put my packet for the H-1B visa together. The H-1B is a work visa that American companies apply for every year to hire foreign talent. The applications go through a lottery, and every year 65,000 applications are accepted for review.

In 2015, the year that my application was sent in, USCIS received 172,500 applications for the 65,000 slots. Mine, of course, didn't make it through the lottery. I suppose sometimes the universe steps in.

The day I received the news, I went to my long block class in the afternoon and taught something about vectors, maybe.

I had applied to graduate programs in computer science on the side, being the type of person who covers her bases. I was not a good candidate, since I hadn't studied computer science as an undergraduate. I had written a small program in Java for my senior math project at Bard, and knew a thing or two about web development. I wouldn't have accepted me.

The only school I was accepted to in the end was the University of Southern California. It was the only way I would be able to stay in America, so I moved to California.

The master's program at USC was my biggest failure to date. The program had been marketed toward people who didn't have a background in computer science—me. When I arrived on

campus, I found myself surrounded by mostly Indian and Chinese people who had studied computer science or worked in technology for years. I knew why they were there; it was the same reason I was there. I passed my classes, but barely, even though I studied every day, all day. This had never happened to me before. A couple months into working for my boss John at my campus job, I quit, holding back tears of shame. I would have to drop out and go back to India. I had failed in my own mission. That fall, the only thing I looked forward to was the moment I could fall asleep every night.

In the meantime, the US Army had opened up a program enabling non-US citizens and non-permanent residents to naturalize through the Army.

I joined the United States Army at 23, feeling that I was out of options. It was the toughest decision of my life, but I made it overnight, me on this side of the world, my family on the other side, all of us apprehensive, but somehow sure. I enlisted in the Army Reserves in November 2015. I dropped out of USC in December.

A few months later, having completed basic training, I swore in as an American citizen in the uniform of my newly adopted country's army, in front of a couple thousand soldiers and civilians. I wondered what lay ahead of me. New struggles, probably. Better struggles, in my mind. Struggles I could handle. I'm an American now. But America has problems too.

I'm an American now. But America has problems too. I worry for people of color, for women, for people in the LGBTQ community, for people who find themselves in the line of fire of a psychopath's gun on a Sunday night at a concert, or at a church, or at a club, or on the street. I worry for people who have been systemically oppressed, people who are up against forces greater than them. I know what this is like.

But, if I need to leave my house at 3 in the morning to drive to drill 100 miles away, I do. When I am out late at night, I don't worry too much about coming home alone. I forget to text my mother sometimes that I am okay, but when I forget, she forgives me, because I live here, and not there.

I have not returned to India since the winter of Nirbhaya's death. I will go back someday soon, so I can see my parents and my four-foot-11-inch-tall grandmother. But I will be coming back, to where I can breathe. Even if it's just LA's dry, dusty, smoggy air.

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6 Immigrant Stories that Will Make You Believe in the American Dream Again

SOURCE: https://www.forbes.com/sites/monteburke/2016/10/04/6-immigrant-stories-that-will-make-you-believe-in-the-american-dream-again/#489f48a80278

By Monte Burke

Thomas Peterffy was born in the basement of a Budapest hospital on Sept. 30, 1944. His mother had been moved there because of a Soviet air raid. After the Soviets liberated Hungary from Nazi occupation, Hungary became a satellite state, laboring under a different kind of oppression: communism. Peterffy and his family, descended from nobles, lost everything. "We were basically prisoners there," he says. As a young man Peterffy dreamed about being free from that prison--in America.

At the age of 20 he hatched an escape plan. At the time Hungarians were allowed short-term visas to visit family in West Germany, and he took advantage of this. When his visa expired, like millions who have immigrated to the U.S. illegally in recent years, he didn't go back home. Instead he left for the U.S. Peterffy landed at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City in December 1965. He had no money and spoke no English. He had a single suitcase, which contained a change of clothes, a surveying handbook, a slide rule and a painting of an ancestor.

Do Won and Jin Sook Chang.

Peterffy went to Spanish Harlem, where other Hungarian immigrants had formed a small community, moving from one dingy apartment to another. He was happy, if not a bit afraid. "It was a big deal to leave home and my culture and my language," he says. "But I believed that in America, I could truly reap what I sowed and that the measure of a man was his ability and determination to succeed. This was the land of boundless opportunity."

Indeed it was. He got a job as a draftsman in a surveying firm. When his firm bought a computer, "nobody knew how to program it, so I volunteered to try," he says. He caught on quickly and soon had a job as a programmer for a small Wall Street consulting firm, where he built trading models.

By the late 1970s Peterffy had saved $200,000 and founded a company that pioneered electronic stock trades, executing them before the exchanges were even digitized. In the 1990s he began to concentrate on the sell side of the business, founding Interactive Brokers Group, which has a market cap of $14 billion. Peterffy, 72, is now worth an estimated $12.6 billion.

Sergey Brin

Thomas Peterffy embodies the American Dream. So does Google founder Sergey Brin ($37.5 billion). And eBay founder Pierre Omidyar ($8.1 billion). And Tesla and SpaceX founder Elon Musk ($11.6 billion). And Rupert Murdoch, George Soros, Jerry Yang, Micky Arison, Patrick Soon-Shiong, Jan Koum, Jeff Skoll, Jorge Perez, Peter Thiel. As well as a couple dozen others who also immigrated to this country, earned U.S. citizenship--and then a spot on The Forbes 400.

Precisely 42 slots on The Forbes 400 belong to naturalized citizens who immigrated to America. That's 10.5% of the list, a huge overperformance considering that naturalized citizens make up only 6% of the U.S. population. (If you add noncitizens, about 13% of American residents are foreign born, but there is also a slew of noncitizen billionaires, such as Chobani Yogurt king Hamdi Ulukaya and WeWork founder Adam Neumann, who by dint of their passports don't qualify for the 400 but still live, and create jobs, in the U.S.)

For all the political bombast about immigrants being an economic drain or a security threat, the pace of economic hypersuccess among immigrants is increasing. Go back ten years and the number of immigrants on The Forbes 400 was 35. Twenty years ago it was 26 and 30 years ago 20. Not only is the American Dream thriving, as measured by the yardstick of entrepreneurial success, The Forbes 400, but it's also never been stronger. The combined net worth of those 42 immigrant fortunes is $248 billion.

According to the Kauffman Foundation, immigrants are nearly twice as likely to start a new business than native-born Americans. The Partnership for a New American Economy, a nonpartisan group formed by Forbes 400 members Murdoch and Michael Bloomberg, reports that immigrants started 28% of all new businesses in the U.S. in 2011, employ one out of every ten American workers at privately owned businesses and generate $775 billion in revenue. Some of these businesses are small, of course, like restaurants and auto repair shops. But others aren't: The National Foundation for American Policy, a nonpartisan research group, says that 44 of the 87 American tech companies valued at $1 billion or more were founded by immigrants, many of whom now rank among the richest people in America.

NONE OF THIS SHOULD be a surprise. Thanks to technology, it's never been easier to start a business of significance. And America's perpetual entrepreneur class, for nearly a quarter-millennium, has been made up of immigrants.

Robert Morris left Liverpool at the age of 13, helped finance the American Revolution and signed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Stephen Girard emigrated from France and started an American bank that underwrote most of the U.S. government's war loan during the War of 1812, saving the country from financial disaster. John Jacob Astor, a young musical-instrument maker from Germany, built a fortune in fur trading and real estate in the U.S., and became one of the country's first great philanthropists. Fellow German Friederich Weyerhaeuser became an American timber mogul. Scotland-born Andrew Carnegie built one of the great fortunes in the U.S. in the steel business and, like Astor, devoted his later life to giving it away. The founders of Procter & Gamble, Kraft and DuPont were all immigrants.

The very act of immigrating, exemplified by Peterffy, is entrepreneurial, a self-selected risk taken in an effort to better one's circumstances. It's a mind-set. "You leave everything you have and get on a plane," says Forbes 400 member Shahid Khan. "You can handle change. You can handle risk. And you want to prove yourself."

Thomas Peterffy

By and large the immigrants of The Forbes 400 fall into two baskets. Many, like Peterffy, came here to escape something. Sergey Brin's family left Russia when he was 6 years old because of discrimination against his Jewish family. George Soros survived Nazi-occupied Hungary. Igor Olenicoff's family was forced to leave the U.S.S.R. after World War II because of their tsarist connections.

Others had enough privilege to live anywhere but saw America as the place of greater opportunity. Musk attended private schools in South Africa. Murdoch's father was a knighted Australian newspaper publisher. Omidyar's father was a surgeon.

Rich or poor, America's entrepreneurial mind-set links them all. Americans-by-choice appreciate the opportunity and understand the corollary: that you can't count on anyone giving you a break but instead need to make it yourself.

Do Won Chang and his wife, Jin Sook, arrived at LAX on a Saturday in 1981 with not much more than a high school education the same year martial law was lifted in South Korea. He immediately scoured newspaper job listings, interviewed with a local coffee shop and by Monday was washing dishes and prepping meals on the morning shift. "I was making minimum wage. ... It wasn't enough to get by." So he tacked on eight hours a day at a gas station and on top of that started a small office-cleaning business that kept him busy until midnight. Jin Sook worked as a hairdresser.

While pumping gas, Chang noticed that men in the garment business drove nice cars, inspiring him to take a job in a clothing store. Three years later, after he and Jin Sook saved $11,000, they opened a 900-square-foot apparel store called Fashion 21. First-year sales reached $700,000, and the couple began opening a new store every six months, eventually changing the chain's name to Forever 21. They're now worth $3 billion.

"I came here with almost nothing," says Chang. "I'll always have a grateful heart toward America for the opportunities that it's provided me."

For Shahid Khan, a Pakistani, the logical place to immigrate was the United Kingdom, "but the U.S. was always the promised land for me." In January 1967 Khan landed at JFK, his generation's Ellis Island. His connecting flight to Chicago was diverted by a snowstorm, so the 16-year-old flew to St. Louis instead and took a bus to Champaign, to the University of Illinois, where he was enrolled as an undergraduate. He had $500 in his pocket. Khan got a job working as a dishwasher at night after school for $1.20 an hour. "I was overjoyed. You just couldn't get a job like that where I came from," he says. "My immediate thought was, Wow, I can work. I can be my own man. I control my destiny."

Khan eventually got a job as an engineering manager at Flex-N-Gate, an automotive manufacturer. A few years later, with $16,000 in savings and a Small Business Administration loan, he started his own company, which made bumpers for car manufacturers. He eventually bought out his old boss at Flex-N-Gate. His company now has $6.1 billion in revenues and employs around 12,000 people in the U.S.

A plant he's building in Detroit will employ up to 1,000 workers who will be paid $25 an hour. Khan is worth an estimated $6.9 billion.

He still immigrated to the U.K. in a small way: He bought the English Fulham soccer team. But lest anyone challenge his preference, he also owns that most American of billionaire assets: a National Football League franchise--the Jacksonville Jaguars.

Shahid Khan.

AMERICA HAS ANOTHER natural advantage that helps explain why so many immigrants are able to turn themselves into billionaires. The U.S. educational system has traditionally been a beacon, drawing the smartest and most ambitious young self-starters from across the world. Over the past few decades the billionaire formula has been increasingly simple: Come to America for college, fall in love with the country and the opportunities (and perhaps a future spouse), and stay here after graduation, putting that education to use creating the innovations (and jobs) that yield Forbes 400 fortunes.

The number of college-educated immigrants in the U.S. grew 78% from 2000 to 2014. Almost 30% of immigrants 25 or older now possess a bachelor's degree or higher, according to the Migrant Policy Institute--a figure that almost exactly mirrors the percentage for native-born adults. And a disproportionate number of these immigrants study math, science and other STEM disciplines that fuel most modern fortunes. In 2011 three-quarters of the patents from the top ten patent-producing universities in the nation had an immigrant inventor.

Romesh Wadhwani falls into that tradition. He attended India's legendary IIT Bombay technical college but in 1969 came to America to pursue a Ph.D. at Carnegie Mellon. He never left, founding Aspect Development, a software company, and Symphony Technology Group, a tech-focused private equity firm, on his way to a $3 billion fortune.

"It would have been virtually impossible for me to have started my own company in India in those days. There was no support for entrepreneurs," says Wadhwani. "There is a freedom in the U.S. to dream big dreams, the freedom to achieve based purely on merit rather than family background or previous wealth or social status."

Romesh Wadhwani

Chinese-born Andrew Cherng observed a similar meritocracy when he arrived in Baldwin, Kans. in 1966 to attend Baker University on a math scholarship. He'd gone to high school in Japan and found "it was hard for Chinese to blend in with the Japanese." A year later he met an incoming freshman from Burma named Peggy, whom he would later marry. "I didn't have any personal possessions when I came," says Cherng. "My drive came from being poor."

In 1973 Cherng opened a restaurant, the Panda Inn, in California with his father, a master chef who had emigrated to join him. Ten years later he and his wife, Peggy, opened the first Panda Express in a mall in Glendale, Calif. Having earned a doctorate in electrical engineering and worked as an aerospace-software-development engineer, she incorporated systems that have turned it into a 1,900-store, quick-serve food chain, one of the largest in the U.S., with $2.4 billion in revenues. The Cherngs employ 30,000 people and have raised more than $100 million for charity. "In America nothing will stop you but yourself," says Cherng.

Douglas Leone is another Forbes 400 member for whom an American education was a turning point. He was in middle school when he left Italy in 1968. His parents envisioned a life for him that included "upward mobility, something that wasn't possible in Europe." He wound up at Cornell and then earned postgraduate degrees from Columbia and MIT. "The American Dream is realized if you take advantage of the opportunity," he says. "I used my education as a vehicle to put me in a position to do something."

Leone worked sales jobs for the likes of Sun Microsystems and Hewlett-Packard before joining venture capital firm Sequoia Capital in 1988. He became managing partner in 1996. During his tenure Sequoia has invested in Google, YouTube, Zappos, LinkedIn and WhatsApp, and has played a role in the creation of countless jobs. "If I had to bet the over/under on one million jobs created by the companies we've been involved in, I'd bet the over," he says.

Leone is now worth an estimated $2.7 billion. His immigrant experience, he says, has been invaluable. "Being an immigrant provides you with a drive, one that never goes away. I still feel it today," he says. "Failure is not an option. I tell my kids that the only thing I can't give them is desperation. And I apologize to them for that." Spoken like someone who found quick success.

It should be noted, though, that in addition to the 42 immigrants, The Forbes 400 includes 57 people who are the children of immigrants, or 14% of the list (compared with 6% of U.S. citizens over 18), pretty much shattering the image of America's billionaire class as a bunch of blue bloods. That entrepreneurial hunger seems to continue for at least one generation. Sam Zell's Jewish parents escaped Poland before the German invasion in World War II and came to the U.S. "My father used to say that in the United States the streets were paved with gold, and he never lost his appreciation for how lucky he was that he and his family were allowed to come here and prosper," says Zell, who's made $4.7 billion in private equity and real estate investing. "They worked very hard and were very patriotic and certainly instilled that in us."

THIS ELECTION CYCLE'S immigrant-and refugee-bashing is a time-honored tradition here, with each wave of newcomers taking its turn in the crosshairs of those who see them as job-stealing criminals. The Germans gave way to the Irish, the Asians to the Arabs, the Catholics to the Jews. These days the targets are Hispanics and Muslims. "We've gone through these various cycles over the years," says Peter Spiro, a professor at Temple University who specializes in immigration law. "What's meaningful is that we've always come out of them."

What's also meaningful is that despite all the hot air America, a land of immigrants, remains decidedly pro-immigrant. A 2016 Pew Research poll indicated 59% of Americans believe that immigrants "strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents" (33% believe immigrants "are a burden on our country"). Our citizens naturally intuit that any slight downward wage pressure for unskilled workers is more than overcome by all the growth and job creation that immigrants excel in.

Douglas Leone.

But that dynamic could be challenged. The U.S. has been toughening its visa requirements for skilled workers (the famous H-1B). The U.S. has had the same visa and quota cap for skilled immigrant workers since 2004, even though demand for the visas has exceeded the mandated allotment.

In fact, the government has filled its quota within five days of opening it each year since 2014--at a time when a global economy means that many newly minted college graduates see more opportunity (or at least a fighting chance) in returning home.

As a result we're increasingly drawing the world's best and brightest, giving them access to our best knowledge--and then kicking them out, against their wishes, to compete with us from their original homeland.

So, what to do? Ask The Forbes 400 immigrants, including Peterffy, Khan, Wadhwani and Cherng. Even with their varied backgrounds, you'll find agreement on three broad principles.

First, educated and highly motivated immigrants should be encouraged, not discouraged, to come to the U.S. (President Obama has championed a proposal to admit immigrant entrepreneurs more easily--raise $100,000 from qualified investors and get a "startup" visa--but it's been bottled up in congressional partisan gridlock. A workaround proposal, not subject to congressional approval, was recently announced by the Department of Homeland Security and would grant temporary status to immigrants with an ownership stake and an "active and central role" in an American startup.)

Second, American borders should be more secure when it comes to illegal immigrants. And third, there should be a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants already in the U.S., which includes registering, paying taxes and following the law.

Perhaps this can help create some consensus, one that ensures that the American Dream stays exactly that. How fitting if it proved to be another billion-dollar innovation dreamed up by immigrants.

With reporting by Samantha Sharf, Grace Chung and Mrinalini Krishna.