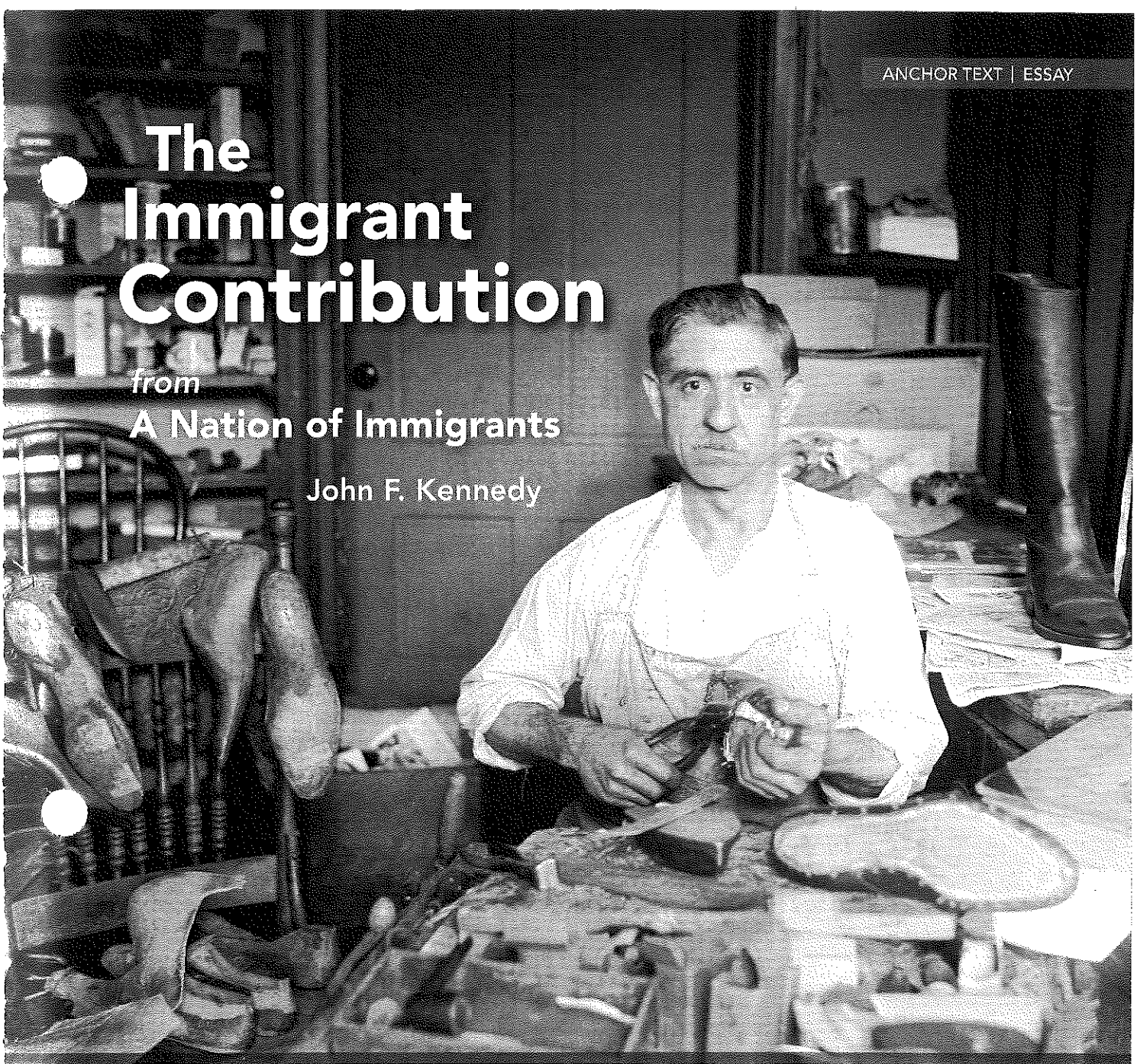


The Immigrant Contribution

from
A Nation of Immigrants

John F. Kennedy



BACKGROUND

John F. Kennedy wrote the book from which this excerpt was taken when he was a United States senator. He was a prominent supporter of immigrant rights, and ran for president on a platform that included the extension of those rights. He opposed legal distinctions between native-born and naturalized citizens, stating, "There is no place for second-class citizenship in America." He greatly influenced and inspired the immigration reforms of the late twentieth century.

SCAN FOR
MULTIMEDIA 

Oscar Handlin has said, "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history." In the same sense, we cannot really speak of a particular "immigrant contribution" to America because all Americans have been immigrants or the descendants of immigrants;

NOTES

descendants (dih SEHN duhnts) *n.* people who are the offspring of an ancestor



^ This photo shows the first Chinese telephone operator in San Francisco in the early part of the twentieth century.

Pupin (Serbian), in electricity; Enrico Fermi (Italian) in atomic research; John Ericsson (Swedish), who invented the ironclad ship and the screw propeller; Giuseppe Bellanca (Italian) and Igor Sikorsky (Russian), who made outstanding contributions to airplane development; John A. Udden (Swedish), who was responsible for opening the Texas oil fields; Lucas P. Kyrides (Greek), industrial chemistry; David Thomas (Welsh), who invented the hot blast furnace; Alexander Graham Bell (Scot), who invented the telephone; Conrad Hubert (Russian), who invented the flashlight; and Ottmar Mergenthaler (German), who invented the linotype machine¹.

8 But the anonymous immigrant played his indispensable role too. Between 1880 and 1920 America became the industrial and agricultural giant of the world as well as the world's leading creditor nation.² This could not have been done without the hard labor, the technical skills and the entrepreneurial³ ability of the 23.5 million people who came to America in this period.

1. **linotype machine** printing machine that sets type in whole lines, instead of letter by letter, in order to print faster.
2. **creditor nation** country that owes less money to other countries than other countries owe to it.
3. **entrepreneurial** (on truh pruh NUR ee uhl) *adj.* related to being an entrepreneur, or someone who starts a business and is willing to risk loss in order to make money.

14 But the very problems of adjustment and assimilation presented a challenge to the American idea—a challenge which subjected that idea to stern testing and eventually brought out the best qualities in American society. Thus the public school became a powerful means of preparing the newcomers for American life. The ideal of the “melting pot” symbolized the process of blending many strains into a single nationality, and we have come to realize in modern times that the “melting pot” need not mean the end of particular ethnic identities or traditions. Only in the case of the Negro has the melting pot failed to bring a minority into the full stream of American life. Today we are belatedly, but resolutely, engaged in ending this condition of national exclusion and shame and abolishing forever the concept of second-class citizenship in the United States.

15 Sociologists call the process of the melting pot “social mobility.” One of America’s characteristics has always been the lack of a rigid class structure. It has traditionally been possible for people to move up the social and economic scale. Even if one did not succeed in moving up oneself, there was always the hope that one’s children would. Immigration is by definition a gesture of faith in social mobility. It is the expression in action of a positive belief in the possibility of a better life. It has thus contributed greatly to developing the spirit of personal betterment in American society and to strengthening the national confidence in change and the future. Such confidence, when widely shared, sets the national tone. The opportunities that America offered made the dream real, at least for a good many; but the dream itself was in large part the product of millions of plain people beginning a new life in the conviction that life could indeed be better, and each new wave of immigration rekindled the dream.

16 This is the spirit which so impressed Alexis de Tocqueville,⁶ and which he called the spirit of equality. Equality in America has never meant literal equality of condition or capacity; there will always be inequalities in character and ability in any society. Equality has meant rather that, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, “all men are created equal . . . [and] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights”; it has meant that in a democratic society there should be no inequalities in opportunities or in freedoms. The American philosophy of equality has released the energy of the people, built the economy, subdued the continent, shaped and reshaped the structure of government, and animated the American attitude toward the world outside.

NOTES

assimilation (uh sihm uh LAY shuhn) *n.* process of adapting to the culture of an adopted country

Immigration is by definition a gesture of faith in social mobility.

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark nouns and verbs that have positive connotations, or emotional associations, in paragraphs 15 and 16.

QUESTION: What common thread of meaning connects these words?

CONCLUDE: How do these words add to the author’s argument?

6. **Alexis de Tocqueville** (uh LEHK sihs duh TOHK vihl) (1805–1859) French political thinker who traveled through America in 1831. Afterward, he wrote about his experiences in a book called *Democracy in America*.