



Immigration in the Presidential Campaign, Part 1

The chance of a political lifetime for real reform

By Stanley Renshon

About This Series

Substantial levels of legal and illegal immigration, averaging well over a million people every year, have become the accepted norm in recent decades. That norm was enforced by a consensus of establishment political and civic leaders from both parties and their allies. Alternative views were suppressed or shamed. And the preferences of ordinary Americans, about immigration policies, and much else, were generally ignored.

As a result, a growing level of public resentment and anger has developed, with Americans seething at what they feel is the incompetence, arrogance, and clubby insularity of Washington “elites”. And they have acted on those feelings in the last several midterm elections, transforming the makeup of their state governments and the U.S. House of Representatives.

President Obama promised “hope and change”, but has governed instead in accord with his leftist vision of transformation. He leaves office as modern history’s most divisive president. His legacy will be of having governed by executive fiat, including in the critical area of immigration. There, he issued a massive executive amnesty and changed immigration enforcement rules so that millions of illegal aliens are essentially free from any an expectation that they will suffer consequences for having broken American immigration laws.

The public wants something very different from the next president, and the question is: Will they get it? If either Democratic candidate gets elected, the public will get much more of what they have already repeatedly said they don’t want.

If any of the remaining Republicans win, it’s likely that the public will get some of what they have been asking for from American immigration policy. However the question there is what exactly will that be. Almost all of the Republican candidates were said to be running from the “right”, but exactly what that means for specific immigration policies is far from clear.

This series of *Backgrounders* examines why conventional wisdom regarding immigration has become increasingly untenable, as well as recent events that have made real immigration reform possible for the first time in four decades.

It also examines the major candidates from each party on a series of crucial immigration issues. Each of them has a very different history with immigration questions, and their positions have all changed as a consequence of, and in response to, the pressures of the campaign.

Therefore for each of these candidates, the issues addressed in this series are not only what they have said and what that means, but also what they should be asked.

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The Chance of a Political Lifetime for Real Reform

The 2016 presidential election represents a once-in-a-political-lifetime opportunity to rethink America's deeply flawed immigration system and help rescue it from the erroneous "conventional wisdom" that has dominated the immigration debate for decades. And in so doing, it may begin to help resolve America's real immigration crisis — a system that does not serve national interests, but one that poisons public trust.

Immigration policy is rarely at the top of public concerns, especially with a major economic downturn and molasses paced-recovery now in its eighth year and counting. Add to that the renewed concern about terrorist attacks, and it is surprising that immigration has moved to be a top-tier issue in the 2016 public campaign debate. Yet it has.

A Pew poll on the public's priorities found that immigration was mentioned by 51 percent as a "top priority", up 11 points since 2013, especially among Republicans.¹ An AP/NORC poll also found that immigration was a top-tier concern for those polled, and 83 percent of those polled said that a "great deal" or "a lot" of effort should be expended in trying to solve the issue,² although they were skeptical it would be done.

However, the most important and obvious indicator that immigration has become a top issue is that the candidates and the public are talking about it repeatedly.³ This has been particularly true of almost all of the Republican debates to date, and as well as in the far smaller number of Democratic debates. The Republican candidates have all tried to distinguish themselves from each other, and from their past positions on immigration, while the Democrats have engaged in what amounts to a policy bidding war to win the support of Hispanic activists. The result is unprecedented attention to the issue and some of its important component parts, the effort to clearly define just what amnesty and enforcement mean, for example.

Immigration has become a top-tier issue for a variety of reasons. Its prominence owes much to Donald Trump's loud, blunt, and continuous assault on political correctness.⁴ His challenges to the two-decade-long pseudo-consensus favoring "comprehensive immigration reform" opened a long-suppressed flood of public doubt and dissatisfaction about what Americans have been consistently told they must think about immigration, among other important policy issues.⁵

In the last four decades, Americans' concern with immigration policy has been growing, and rightly so. Unprecedented numbers of legal immigrants, unprecedented numbers of illegal aliens, immigrant population increases of 715 percent that have been projected from 1970 to 2060, and sharp political challenges to the very idea of a primary American national identity have increasingly worried many Americans. So has decreased public commitment to the very basic idea that assimilation to that primary American identity is a central and absolutely necessary underpinning of the country's openness to substantial immigration.

Immigration is not "just another issue."⁶ It is a basic foundation of American political, economic, social, and cultural life, and increasing worries reflect growing public appreciation of that fact.

In response to those concerns, Americans have been told not to worry, everything's fine. Moreover, they are told that the way to fix these problems is to do much more of what we have already been doing that got us to this conflicted state — add more immigrants and refine our enforcement techniques until they affect only the worst criminal offenders. As some in Congress and many more Americans have rejected these pseudo-solutions, a campaign of silencing and shaming with accusations of being anti-immigrant, racist, and worse has been mounted, somewhat successfully, to silence them.

Whatever happens to the candidacy of Donald Trump — and I am no supporter of having him in the White House — he deserves credit for having broken the "spiral of silence" that has descended on American debate on immigration and other issues.⁷ No, Americans do not agree with the characterizations that Trump has made about Mexicans, among others. But they are relieved and grateful to have someone who has raised the underlying concerns that they feel, even in a way they don't agree with, because everyone else has been providing false reassurances. Or they have been telling the American public that those who don't hold the correct views are politically and morally unfit for enlightened company.

No more. Whether you call it a "populist earthquake"⁸ or a "full scale revolt,"⁹ the dam has broken, and conventional immigration "wisdom" is unlikely to survive.

Cracks in the Immigration Spiral of Silence Begin to Appear

In 1984, Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, a specialist in German public opinion research, published a book with the University of Chicago Press, entitled *The Spiral of Silence*.¹⁰ In it, she tried to understand why ordinary Germans had not been more vocal in their opposition to the gradual rise and consolidation of Hitler's regime.

Her answer was that ordinary people were reluctant to express opinions that they thought were too different from those they thought constituted the majority of views out of fear of social stigma and isolation. Not hearing anyone else express a view contrary to supporting the regime because of the controlled media, most of those who thought differently kept quiet. Their quiet self-censorship then became a self-fulfilling prophecy reinforcing the "prevailing" pro-Hitler view, and those who differed but kept quiet added their contribution to the "spiral of silence".

Obviously, America is not pre-Nazi Germany and America's immigration debates are in no way comparable to the momentous life or death questions associated with the rise and consolidation of the Third Reich. Moreover, there has been a small but vocal group of real immigration reformers whose voices have been raised against the conventional wisdom. However, they have been drowned out and marginalized by political and civic insiders and special interests of both parties. As a result, America's immigration debates have a David vs. Goliath element to them because they have primarily been framed and discussed from the standpoint of the bedrock assumptions of the political left.

What is different now is not that the public has wholly changed its mind about immigration matters, but rather that for the first time there is a viable, legitimate counter-narrative with which to engage that debate, and it has developed a powerful voice. Three factors — Trump, trust, and national security — have created an unprecedented opening for questioning and discarding the narrowly framed and rigidly held narratives that have passed for "reform" in the immigration debate. Yet the old and increasingly questioned and discredited narrative will not fade without a fight. And even if it does, there remains the question of what will take its place.

That is the question that this series addresses.

Counter Narratives: A Disturbing Cascade of Immigration Realities

While Trump opened the floodgates, increasing public concern over immigration also owes a great deal to three events that followed his announced candidacy. These include the terrorist attacks in Paris and California and their links to ISIS jihadists, some of whom were migrants and immigrants. The Paris attacks were linked to the third event: the massive, unprecedented, flow of over a million Syrian and other migrants into the EU in 2015, with millions more expected in this and subsequent years.¹¹ And then there were as well the ugly sexual assaults committed against German women, primarily by migrants, on New Year's Eve, and the tragic murder of Kate Steinle by a previously deported illegal alien in San Francisco.

How Terrorist Attacks and Massive European Migration Helped to Change the American Immigration Debate

The first recent terrorist attack to change the American immigration debate took place in Paris on November 13, 2015.¹² At least one of the attackers carried a Syrian passport and may have entered Europe along the migrant trail.¹³ Several of the attackers were traced to an area in Belgium over which government officials said, "they lacked control."¹⁴ (The recent Brussels bombing was planned in the same area.)

The attack took place in the context of a vast migration into the European Union. In 2015, over a million migrants from countries including Syria, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq, Albania, Pakistan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Serbia, and Ukraine sought legal status in the European Union.¹⁵ That most likely under-represents the real number since over a million migrants have entered Germany alone,¹⁶ and that number does not include migrants reaching Sweden, France, Italy, Switzerland, and the UK. Estimates of between one and three million more migrants from countries outside of the EU are possible in 2016, according to the EU and the UN.¹⁷

The million new refugees arriving in Europe this year and next are testing, and in some cases overwhelming, European economic, political, and cultural resources to deal with these high immigration levels. That fact brings to mind that the European number of one million new immigrants per year almost parallels the number that the United States takes in every year.

EU and American circumstances are not identical, obviously. The EU has over the last decade taken in unprecedented numbers of Muslim immigrants and has had difficulties absorbing and integrating them.¹⁸ This knowledge, coupled with the rise of militant jihadist groups like ISIS, and their previous terrorist attacks in France and Great Britain,¹⁹ set off alarm bells in the United States.

The immediate question raised by these developments is how the United States can remain safe while continuing to be a welcoming new home for legal immigrants. The larger issue, however, beyond keeping bad people out, is to ensure that all who come do so in the context of America's national interests. And that includes not only asking what the country can provide to those who come, but a genuine attachment to the country itself on the part of new immigrants over time. In a phrase, real assimilation.

The Immigrant Vetting Controversies

The most immediate source of the immigration debate in the United States after the Paris attacks was the Obama administration's decision to take in 85,000 refugees in fiscal year 2016 (including 10,000 Syrians) and possibly increase that number to 100,000 in 2017.²⁰ With the Paris terrorist attacks freshly in mind, concerns were raised about the possible dangers of admitting so many migrants from that war-torn country.²¹

However, the Obama administration said it was proceeding with its plan to admit Syrian refugees despite both the Paris and Brussels attacks.²² One reason it was able to do so, the administration said, was because "Syrian refugees to the United States were thoroughly vetted"²³ and "received the most intensive vetting of any group coming into the United States."²⁴ The administration published a detailed flow chart of the vetting procedures on the White House website meant to reassure the nervous public²⁵ and the president insisted there was "no contradiction' between welcoming refugees and U.S. security."²⁶

He was mistaken, and had reason to know that he was.

Senior U.S. national security officials, including Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and FBI Director James Comey, had raised concerns in earlier congressional hearings, including: How do you screen people from a war-torn country that has few criminal and terrorist databases to check?²⁷

Direct answer? You can't.

A Second Major Terrorist Attack, This Time in the United States

The evidence for that reality unfortunately arrived rather quickly in the form of a terrorist attack in San Bernardino, Calif., that killed 14 Americans.²⁸ American-born Syed Rizwan Farook and his recent immigrant wife, whose public support for ISIS had gone undetected by the administration's vetting process, were responsible.²⁹ Eight days before the attack the president held a press conference in which he assured Americans that, "right now, we know of no specific and credible intelligence indicating a plot on the homeland."³⁰ And the sobering news was that he was right.

Marco Rubio, who sits on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said, "As someone who has access to very sensitive information, I can tell you for a fact that ISIS understands our legal immigration system and is seeking to exploit it."³¹

Mr. Trump asked the administration to pause its Syrian refugee program "until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on,"³² even as two more refugees from Iraq were arrested on terrorism charges³³ and the number of recent refugees arrested since 2014 on terrorism charges was raised to 113.³⁴

Trump was roundly attacked and condemned for voicing this idea,³⁵ yet a plurality of voters (46 percent) supported it.³⁶ Peggy Noonan's deft insight captured the dynamic state of play at work between these events, Americans' changing views of the immigration debate, and Mr. Trump's role:³⁷

He changed the debate when he asked for a pause in Muslim immigration until America “can figure out what’s going on.” In the age of terror, that looked suspiciously like common sense. Americans do not want America to become what Europe is becoming.

And what is Europe becoming? A place where assimilation is failing.

The Risk of Taking Assimilation for Granted

Americans tend to take immigrant assimilation as a given, and they shouldn’t. The political philosopher Michael Walzer warned about “the new tribalism” sweeping some parts of Europe when he published his book, *What It Means to Be an American*, and tried to explain why that had not happened here yet.³⁸ He concluded that formerly “outsiders” had wanted to become part of the established community and that community, over time, negotiated an inclusion agreement in good faith. Note that central to the success of that effort was the outside group’s wish to become part of the established community, not a group apart. And in order to do so, the outsiders were willing to accept, within reason, the basic cultural and premises of the established community.

No more.

Peter Salins’s seminal book, *Assimilation, American Style*, was written because he feared that “Americans no longer appreciate the value of assimilation as an indispensable means of integrating America’s immigrants and unifying its ethnically diverse population.”³⁹ His worry was that “ethnic federalism” was “antiassimilationist to its core”, and that it explicitly rejected “the notion of a transcendent American identity.”⁴⁰ His was a worry echoed by liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.⁴¹ David Hollinger, inquiring into what a “post-ethnic America” might look like warned against the invidious efforts of the “racial ethnic pentagon” to divide Americans against each other on the basis of their skin color and ethnicity.⁴²

The apogee of this my-ethnic-group-first-and-foremost mentality is well captured by U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez’s (D-Ill.) comment that, “I have only one loyalty and that’s to the [Hispanic] immigrant community.”⁴³ Such sentiments result in efforts to make the concerns and preferences of “my group” paramount. From this perspective, any identification with a primarily American identity is a case of false consciousness.

The New Assimilation: Earnings, Not Emotional Attachment

The debate about assimilation and the importance of embracing a primarily American identity rather than a primarily ethnic or racial one has all but disappeared from immigration discussions. Instead, the focus is now on the question: How quickly are the children and grandchildren of immigrants surpassing their forebears, and how well do all these groups match up against their American counterparts. The more these immigrants tend to resemble their American counterparts, the more successful assimilation is deemed to have occurred.

A recent major study of immigrant assimilation makes this point explicitly: “The panel defines integration as the process by which immigrant groups and host societies resemble each other.”⁴⁴ They then spell this out more explicitly (emphasis added):

The process of integration depends upon the participation of immigrants and their descendants in major social institutions such as schools and the labor market, as well as their social acceptance by other Americans. Greater integration implies movement toward parity of critical life opportunities with the native-born American majority. Integration may make immigrants and their children better off and in a better position to fully contribute to their communities, which is no doubt a major objective for the immigrants themselves. If immigrants come to the United States with very little education and become more like native-born Americans by getting more education, they are considered more integrated.

Thus, from this view assimilation is primarily measured by gains in such tangible economic assets as educational levels, English language levels, median income, home ownership,⁴⁵ and naturalization. However, all of these new indicators, including political incorporation,⁴⁶ are *instrumental*. They measure how much of what immigrants coming here for “a better life” were able to achieve. As such, they are all measures of how much immigrants satisfied their self-interest in coming here.

Yet, they almost wholly neglect the long-term emotional attachment of new immigrants to the country, beyond the understandable self-interest that was the motivation for their immigration in the first place. Indeed a Pew poll found that 74 percent of immigrants in its sample said that economic opportunities “are the immigrant’s main reason for coming to the United States.”⁴⁷

And it is here that the new debates about whether assimilation is working are fought out.

The argument is now made that the Swedes, Italians, Irish, Chinese, and others were all once thought to be questionable candidates for becoming Americans, yet over time they did. Assimilation boosters say that new immigrants, too, will take that path and tout evidence that, to some degree, it is happening.

According to Pew (emphasis added),⁴⁸

Second-generation Americans — the 20 million adult U.S.-born children of immigrants — are substantially better off than immigrants themselves on key measures of socioeconomic attainment, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data. They have higher incomes; more are college graduates and homeowners; and fewer live in poverty. In all of these measures, their characteristics resemble those of the full U.S. adult population.

It is therefore, in the view of some, not too early to declare that Hispanics are the new Italians,⁴⁹ “following the path of earlier immigrants.”⁵⁰ According to one immigration and Hispanic assimilation booster, “There’s never been a greater quantity of expert and timely quantitative research that shows immigrants are still assimilating.”⁵¹

Are there any worries about Hispanic assimilation? Sure:⁵²

To be an impoverished immigrant who does not speak English and has few labor-market skills is not easy. Over time, the specific challenges — legal, cultural and educational — have changed. Yet the core parts of the story have not, including its trajectory. (Emphasis added.)

It turns out though that it makes quite a difference just whose trajectory you are discussing.

What, Me Worry?

Those trends may be going in what the new assimilationists see as the right direction for some, but they are by no means doing so for all.⁵³ Educational gaps? Less labor scarcity? Fewer unskilled jobs for lower educated immigrants? Less literacy? An 80 percent increase in limited-English-proficiency immigrants from 1990 to 2013?⁵⁴

Fewer marketable skills in our immigrant populations? The expansion, not the decline, of ethnic enclaves?⁵⁵ Massive ethnic replenishment that dampens marriage outside one’s group, which fosters assimilation?⁵⁶ More welfare use?⁵⁷ More poverty?⁵⁸ More out-of-wedlock births? Low high school graduation rates? Higher arrest rates? Higher incarceration rates?

No worries. While there are troublesome signs, the trends — for some — are going in the right direction. And therein lies another issue.

The massive influx of legal immigrants and illegal aliens, coupled with the addition of enormous numbers of guestworkers and other “non-immigrants” who stay in the United States, makes it very easy to find trends — many trends — and depending on what and how you count, they can arrive at the conclusion that motivated your search.

If you ask the straightforward question: Are Hispanic immigrant drop out rates getting higher⁵⁹ or lower,⁶⁰ the correct answer would have to be “it depends.” It depends on the size and nature of samples being compared, the years being compared, the subgroups being compared and their characteristics, and the causal elements being taken into account. It also matters why you are asking and what you hope to do with the information.

Assimilation Numbers that Don't Speak for Themselves

Assimilation numbers, as noted above, regardless of the study in which they appear, don't speak for themselves. One reason is not the scarcity of those numbers, but their abundance.

This country has experienced a massive amount of immigration, both legal and illegal, since the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was passed. That number — 26,533,084 legal immigrants in a 27-year period — averages 982,706 new legal immigrants every year. Add to that a midpoint figure between 11 and 12 million illegal immigrants, and those numbers rise to 38,033,084 million or 1,408,632 every year for almost three straight decades.

It is now clear that these figures are a substantial underestimation. Recent revelations from DHS acknowledge that basically the United States “Doesn't Know How Many Foreign Visitors Overstay Visas”.⁶¹ In response to congressional pressure, DHS released an entry/overstay report for the year 2015 and said that 482,781 persons were believed to have overstayed their visas.⁶² The word “believed” is used because DHS, in spite of mandates and efforts stretching back more than decade, still has not developed an effective entry/exit system.⁶³

Moreover, those gaining entry with non-immigrant status, like students and guestworkers, by themselves add millions more to American immigration totals. Indeed, between 2000 and 2013, the federal government issued over 10 million visas for foreign workers. That number almost equals the number of legal immigrants, 13,435,726, admitted during that period. And there were the 5.5 million work permits issued to non-citizens outside of the numerical frameworks established by Congress.

The net result of those enormous, hard-to-fully-appreciate-or-comprehend numbers is that there are literally thousands of immigration trends actively unfolding in the country at any one time. This makes it difficult to distinguish the exceptions from the rule and whether the exceptions are sufficiently important to merit our attention and worry.

All of these elements make it extremely difficult to settle immigration debates by strictly referring to single studies, even good ones, as advocates often do, or even multiple studies, as scholars attempt to do. The most any such studies can do is inform, though not resolve the issues at hand. That is one reason why it is difficult, at best, to determine the level of the illegal population and whether it is going up, down, or remaining the same.⁶⁴

Or consider the issue of immigrant crime. One of the most detailed analyses of the various studies and numbers available concludes:⁶⁵

Some opinion surveys show that the public thinks immigrants overall or illegal aliens in particular have high rates of crime. On the other hand, a number of academic researchers and journalists have argued that immigrants have low rates of crime. In our view, poor data quality and conflicting evidence mean that neither of these views is well supported. Given the limitations of the data available, it is simply not possible to draw a clear conclusion about immigrants and crime.

And this brings us a central point about the new arguments about assimilation. They are, for many advocates, essentially political, not empirical arguments. The basic motive of these arguments is as much about immigration levels as they are about assimilation.

Ross Douthat's important insight about the 2013 Senate immigration bill holds true today:⁶⁶

The bill has been written this way because America's leadership class, Republicans as well as Democrats, assumes that continued mass immigration is exactly what our economy needs. As America struggles to adapt to an aging population, the bill's supporters argue, immigrants offer youth, vitality and tax dollars. As we try to escape economic stagnation, mass immigration promises an extra shot of growth.

The presumption that immigrants are a net economic benefit for the country and that therefore more immigration is better is precisely one of the pieces of conventional wisdom that are getting a new hearing in this election season.

The unexpected arrival of a million new refugees in Europe, with the prospects of a million more arriving in 2016, set off alarm bells thought the EU. The epicenter of this debate was Germany, which had opened its doors to all entering migrants without conditions or limits. The ugly sexual attacks on New Year's Eve in Cologne and other German cities touched off a fire

storm of anger and anguish.⁶⁷ Not surprisingly as a result for those attacks, “debate intensified over whether the country had made a mistake in opening its doors last year to more than a million migrants.”⁶⁸

The United States has not had such a singular, dramatic, powerful one-two punch to its immigration assumptions. Instead there has had a rising sense of unease about the nature of immigration, its levels, and its effect on the country. By and large this has been a silent debate, conducted quietly and outside of the “mainstream”.

Why? Not because the questions are unreasonable or illegitimate. They are entirely appropriate:

- How many immigrants are a sustainable number?
- What kinds of immigrants should we seek?
- How can we best help new immigrants to become emotionally, and not just financially, attached to this country?
- And how can we keep illegal immigration from being a continuing source of civic distress?

No, the reason for the decades-long disgruntled whispers, rather than a robust and necessary civic debate, is well captured by Ben Carson’s observation in his immigration plan: “Common sense solutions to [immigration] are regularly branded as racist, xenophobic, and mean spirited” and certainly “outside of the mainstream.”⁶⁹ But of course the only reason they are “outside” is that the guardians of immigration policy’s “conventional wisdom” stifle whatever discussion doesn’t fit their preferred narrative.

And they had been successful in doing so, until this election cycle.

Next: The Collapse of Public Trust and the Chance for Real Immigration Reform

End Notes

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- ⁴⁵ Cf., “But it is immigrants’ success in becoming homeowners — often overlooked in immigration debates — that is the truest mark of their desire to adopt America as home.” See Dowell Myers, [“The Next Immigration Challenge”](#), *The New York Times*, January 12, 2012.
- ⁴⁶ Cf., “Immigrants provide myriad reasons for acquiring U.S. citizenship, including the desire to secure civil and legal rights, to travel on a U.S. passport, to access social benefits or economic opportunities, or to sponsor overseas family members to come to the United States.” Waters and Pineau (eds.), [《The Integration of Immigrants into American Society》](#), Section 4, p. 7. This is almost word-for-word the exact same description that the authors give of the benefits of citizenship in Section 4, p. 5.
- ⁴⁷ [“Modern Immigration Wave brings 59 million to the U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change through 2065: Views of immigrant’s impact on U.S. Society Mixed”](#), Pew Research Center, September 28, 2015, p. 59.
- ⁴⁸ [“Second-Generation Americans: A Portrait of the Adult Children of Immigrants”](#), Pew Research Center, February 7, 2013, p. 7.
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- ⁶³ U.S. Government Accountability Office, [“Illegal Immigration: U.S. Overstay Methods Need Improvement”](#), GAO/PEMD-95-20, September 2015.
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- ⁶⁵ Jessica M. Vaughan and Steven A. Camarota, [“Immigration and Crime: Assessing a Conflicted Issue”](#), Center for Immigration studies, November 2009.
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- ⁶⁸ Alison Smale, [“18 Asylum Seekers Are Tied to Attacks on Women in Germany”](#), *The New York Times*, January 8, 2015.
- ⁶⁹ Dr. Ben Carson, [“Prescription for a Sovereign America”](#), p. 2.