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If You Hate America, Why Come Here?

Mahmoud Khalil is an extreme example, but many immigrants seem to revile the U.S.



A demonstrator protests the arrest of Mahmoud Khalil in New York, March 11. PHOTO: JIMIN KIM/ZUMA PRESS

*The arrest and threatened deportation of the pro-Hamas Columbia agitator Mahmoud Khalil has exposed an often-overlooked nuance of the immigration debate: **Not all the hungry, poor, huddled masses who come to this country yearn to breathe free. Some come to mess with us.***

*Americans have a hard time accepting that we are hated. In certain corners of the world—Russia, North Korea, Iran—anti-Americanism is in the water. The feeling is mostly mutual. **But Americans struggle with the idea that immigrants who come here from places like Ireland and France seem to loathe us as well.***

*It isn't partisan. They hate Democrats and Republicans with equal fervor. **It isn't our foreign policy or economic system. It's personal. They hate the way we talk, eat and dress.** They hate what they see as our ignorance and arrogance. They think we're wasteful, selfish and cruel. And you should hear how they talk about us when we visit their countries.*

If America is so racist and imperial and bad, why do so many of them come here? Why don't they stay where they are? That's a fair question and you aren't a bigot for wondering.

*The answer: They couldn't stay. Some were driven to emigrate by persecution or poverty. Most left for the simple reason that America is irresistible. They longed to live in freedom, which is the secret desire of every human heart. **They wanted what we have—opportunity, prosperity and big cars, the things they profess to hate about us. They probably hate themselves for that.***

*Many of the most anti-American immigrants are here to study at our colleges and universities. Some marry U.S. citizens. All make full use of America's unique freedoms while running down the country every chance they get. **Mr. Khalil checks all the boxes: perpetual student, preppy wardrobe, revolutionary zealot, American wife.** As a graduate-student organizer during the campus anti-Israel protests last year, he enjoyed far more freedom of speech than he could have dreamed of in Syria, where he was apparently born, or in Lebanon, where he apparently got his undergraduate degree.*

*Not much is known about Mr. Khalil's background. **We can presume nobody forced him to come to the U.S. If he didn't love it, why didn't he leave it? The world is big. It has many elite universities.***

*The question for us is whether Americans should tolerate immigrants who don't appreciate how lucky they are to be here. Gratitude isn't required, but it isn't unwelcome either. **When you're a guest, it's more than bad manners to cheer the slaughter of your host's friends. It's abhorrent.***

We tend to think of immigrants as strivers—the bold and the brave who struck out in search of better lives. Most Americans are descended from such stock. We revere the pioneering immigrants in our families. I can't tell you how grateful I am to have been born in New Jersey and not in County Sligo.

The hard reality is that not all immigrants are strivers, and not all are happy to be here. Some are moochers, even criminals, though most probably are that way for reasons unrelated to their immigration status. A fair number are downright bastards looking to hurt their adopted country. I'm OK with seeing them go. Most Americans are.

History doesn't provide many examples of countries as generous and inviting as the U.S. I'm fond of our reputation as a haven for the world's oppressed. *Emma Lazarus's poem describes the Statue of Liberty, on which it is engraved, as the "Mother of Exiles."* That's a nice image. It's good for countries to have nice images of themselves.

We can afford to be a little forgiving of the radical passions of our campus revolutionaries. Then again, the law is the law, and it has no obligation to forgive. *If Mr. Khalil has behaved as alleged in support of terrorism, then I can see a case that he should be shipped home, wherever that is.*

If it can be further proved that Mr. Khalil violated the civil rights of Jewish students on Columbia's campus, he can go in the cargo hold as far as I'm concerned. If the door happens to hit him on the way out, so much the better.

With all that in mind, what's the big rush? The man's wife is evidently eight months pregnant. The humane thing to do is to wait until the facts get sorted out. At that point, if it's warranted, give him the boot. Maybe he can be persuaded to go voluntarily. A little forbearance would reflect well on us as a country. Even if Mr. Khalil doesn't deserve it and even if the America haters will never give us credit.

Mr. Hennessey is the Journal's deputy editorial features editor.