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## *Of Time and Immigration*

There is a certain tyranny to the 24-hour news cycle, a certain grip on human awareness and attention. We have been rightly consumed by the Trump administration's policy of separating migrant parents from their children, and the media have been filled with pictures and stories of anguished families, along with voices of critics from across the political spectrum. Yet though President Trump has retreated on the issue, he has still successfully used the powers of his office to dominate the media. He and his staff have been able to manipulate the 24-hour news cycle to frame ongoing debates about immigration, limiting the possibilities of what can and can't be discussed, and what can and can't be considered politically viable.

Consider, for example, the caravan of asylum seekers that wended its way north this past March from Mexico's border with Guatemala. When learning about the caravan, the President seized on the news to convey an ominous picture of a looming threat at our borders, tweeting such sentiments as, "Getting more dangerous. 'Caravans' coming'." The news cycle began filling up with stories about the asylum seekers, inspiring protests, counter-protests, and endless commentary. When the caravan finally arrived in Tijuana, and when the drama of a border confrontation began dissipating in detentions and paperwork, the news cycle tornado moved on to other issues. What was left was debris: a residue of fear about borders and those seeking to cross them.

A similar pattern was evident in Trump's decision last September to rescind DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), the Obama-era program that protected the status of the "Dreamers," young people brought here as children. As the March termination date

drew closer, and as the Dreamers' status grew more precarious, the media were filled with stories of an intensifying crisis. Then a federal judge blocked the administration's plans, issuing an injunction that prevented termination until pending DACA-related lawsuits against the administration were resolved. The immediate crisis receded, and what remained, as with the caravan crisis of this past spring, was a political atmosphere charged with anger and anxiety.

Living inside the 24-hour news cycle can make reflection exceedingly difficult. Stories, images, words, and emotions can fill our minds, crowding out capacities for imagination and non-reactive observation. Yet if we expand the horizon of time, perhaps we'll have a greater chance of discerning at least some meaningful patterns. If we set the horizon at a year and half, for example, we can get a pretty good idea of the Trump communication strategy on immigration: manufacture a crisis, provoke intense pro and con reactions to dominate the news cycle for a period of time, and then, as the crisis is either temporarily resolved or deferred, move on. Memory and perspective are adversaries to be suppressed at all costs.

But what if we set the time horizon much further back? What if we move it back to encompass all of American history? Recently, for example, PBS aired, as part of its "American Experience" series, a Ric Burns/Li-Shun Yu documentary on the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The documentary explored the economic uncertainties, racism, and demagoguery that helped lead to the passage of the only piece of national legislation ever to exclude the people of a specific nationality from entering the U.S. and from achieving naturalized citizenship. It revealed striking parallels to contemporary immigration discourse, including the claim that the immigrant population is "unassimilable," unable to adapt to American culture and an American way of life.

But more significantly, it showed the resilience and tenacity of Chinese-American activists who persisted in the face of fear, prejudice, and violence. Working through court cases, editorials, and other forms of civic discourse, these activists continued to appeal to the highest values associated with the American democratic experiment: equal protection under the law, human dignity, an inclusive diversity. (One such court case was that of Wong Kim Ark, for whom the Supreme Court affirmed in 1898 citizenship by birthright). In essence, it took outsiders, immigrants, to mirror back to America its own highest values, and though it took decades to overturn the exclusion act, these activists kept the long view, reminding America today of what it still can be.