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US Americans Are Not the Only Americans



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The migrant caravan that originated in Honduras is currently making its way northward through Mexico towards the US border. Who are these people who have fled their homeland in a desperate search for a better life? If we are to believe President Donald Trump, many of them are “hardened criminals.” But the men, women and children in the migrant caravan are not hardened criminals as President Trump would have us believe. They are people fleeing from economic hardship and violence that has resulted in part from the foreign policy of the US government. Furthermore, they are Americans.

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In 2009, the Obama administration supported the military coup that overthrew the democratically-elected government of President Manuel Zelaya. Even since the coup, the country has suffered from rampant violence as well as neoliberal economic reforms that have impoverished millions of Hondurans. In response, tens of thousands of Hondurans, including those currently travelling in the migrant caravan, have fled their homeland. These people are not only Hondurans, they are also Americans whose lives have been impacted by US government policies.

But how can they be American if they are not US citizens? For most people in the English-speaking world, particularly in the United States, Canada and Britain, an ‘American’ is a citizen of the United States of America. And this is true. But it also not true, by omission. Because people throughout Latin America also consider themselves to be Americans, with many believing it to be presumptuous and arrogant for citizens of the United States to monopolize the label ‘American.’ Therefore, like many political people who have engaged regularly with Latin America, I am not comfortable calling citizens of the United States ‘Americans.’ But what can we call them instead? After all, ‘people from the United States’ is far too unwieldy. And so, after years of struggling with this issue, I have finally settled on a solution: US Americans.

From the early years of independence in Spanish America, now known collectively as Latin America, the term ‘America’ referred to all of the Americas. There are many examples throughout history of famous Latin Americans referring to Latin America as ‘America’ and the people as ‘Americans.’ In the early 1800s, South American liberator Simón Bolívar wrote, “The United States appear to be destined by Providence to plague America with misery in the name of liberty.” Clearly, his reference to America meant all of the Americas, particularly Latin America. Furthermore, Bolívar’s words represented an early warning about the US imperialism that continues to plague Latin America today, as evidenced by the migrant caravan.

And on his death bed, the liberator declared, “Our America will fall into the hands of vulgar tyrants.” Given that Bolívar was born in present-day Venezuela, it is evident that “Our America” refers to Latin America, or at least to part of it. And most of the “vulgar tyrants” who have ruled much of Latin America over the past two hundred years were backed by Washington.

Similarly, Cuban poet José Martí wrote an essay in 1892 titled “Our America” in which he stated, “And let the vanquished pedant hold his tongue, for there are no lands in which a man may take greater pride than in our long-suffering American republics.” By referring



to American republics in plural, he clearly was not referring to the United States but to the republics throughout Latin America. And much of that “suffering” has resulted from US intervention in the region. Martí was again referring to Latin America when he wrote, “America began to suffer, and still suffers, from the tiresome task of reconciling the hostile and discordant elements it inherited from the despotic and perverse colonizer ...”

In contrast, citizens of the United States tend to think of themselves, even if unconsciously, as the only Americans. And, in recent decades, every US president has ended speeches from the Oval Office in the White House with the phrase “God bless America.” Unlike Bolívar and Martí, none of these presidents, from Nixon, Reagan and the Bush’s to Clinton and Obama and now Trump, were referring to all of the Americas when they asked God to bless America, they were only talking about the United States of America. We even have a song called “God Bless America,” composed by Irving Berlin in 1918, which also reduces America to the United States.

Another explanation for the Latin American perspective is the way that geography is taught in the region. In contrast to the United States and Canada, schools in Latin America (and most of world for that matter) teach that there are only six continents in the world: Africa, Antarctica, America, Asia, Australia and Europe (and some parts of the world believe there are only five continents with Europe and Asia being combined into one: Eurasia). It is primarily only the United States, Canada and Britain that consider the world to consist of seven continents with North America and South America being separate.

Consequently, Latin Americans consider all of the Americas (North, South, Central and the Caribbean) to be America and everyone living in these regions to be Americans. Therefore, the label ‘American’ refers to anyone from the Americas, while a person’s

nationality is drawn from the name of the country of which they are a citizen. For example, Mexicans are Americans who are citizens of Mexico. Colombians are Americans who are citizens of Colombia. Canadians are Americans who are citizens of Canada, and so on.

But this labelling structure poses a problem when referring to the nationality of people from the United States of America, because this nation has incorporated the word 'America' into its name. At least it poses a problem for English speakers. In Spanish, there is a word that is widely used throughout Latin America to refer to US citizens and that word is "estadounidenses," which translates into English as "unitedstatesians" (united-states-ians). But it is a very clumsy word in English, therefore not a practical alternative for us English speakers.

My solution is to use the term 'US Americans.' It rolls off the tongue relatively easily and recognizes that people from the United States are Americans. But, most importantly, it shows respect and sensitivity to our Latin American neighbors by also acknowledging the fact that we are not the only Americans. All of us living in the Americas are Americans, and the nationalistic rhetoric and policies of President Trump cannot change this reality. So let's open our arms, our hearts and our border to welcome the thousands of our fellow Americans who are desperately attempting to escape US-backed oppression in their homeland.