

# Neil Diamond, America

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This song should be the USA's national anthem.

It is the only song about the United States of America that doesn't just make me cynical. The current anthem is something about watching a battle over Baltimore's Fort McHenry, which is not something many of us can really relate to. Other songs that are more direct and just keep saying things like "at least I know I'm free" just remind me of the eternal vigilance that is the price of that freedom, and how many little flaws that freedom has today.

I once heard an ad executive on the radio, talking about how the USA can sell itself to the parts of the world that dislike it. [Sorry, I'm not going to be able to find you a proper reference.] He said that if you gave his agency a million bucks, it wouldn't be able to come up with a better tag line than *the land of opportunity*. It's a moniker that says nothing but optimism, hope, and prosperity.

So that's why I love Neil Diamond's *America*. Despite an occasional jump to third person, it's from the perspective of the people who still have that optimism that things will be better in the USA, and feel that it's worth giving up everything for that optimism. It has impact because there really are people like that, and we all recognize that expressing your optimism about a country by leaving behind friends, family, and everything you know means a lot more than expressing love of a country with a bumper sticker.

[When I was a kid, by the way, this was one of only two or three English-language albums that we had in our collection (being that I'm an immigrant myself; see prior column). So part of my affection for the song is that I heard it a few hundred times. I always thought the cover of *Hot August Night* looked smarmy, though, and perhaps it's why I still dislike jeans jackets.]

Of course, it'll never become our national anthem, because it's about immigration, from the first person perspective. It's about a naïve optimism about the Land of Opportunity.

Here is a snippet from a New York Times article about a pair of anti-immigration politicians:

[The anti-immigrant politicians'] main arguments for ridding the town of illegal immigrants come down to this: their presence has led to both rising crime and overcrowded schools. As it turns out, however, the crime rate in Carpentersville has actually been cut in half over the past 10 years; and while the schools were, indeed, overcrowded four to five years ago..., class sizes have now been reduced although it did require the passage of a tax

referendum. [From “Our Town”, by Alex Kotlowitz Published: August 5, 2007]

It is much like a dozen comparable anecdotes from all over the country (e.g., here<sup>1</sup>).

Opponents of immigration present a standard syllogism for why the USA must bar the door: (1) the USA is fast going downhill, (2) it is going downhill because of immigrants, and (therefore) we must bar the door to immigrants. Without premise (1), the conclusion loses its power. Without premise (1), immigration opponents are left with abstract economic arguments about how things are OK now, but will all fall apart any minute now—and even that is only plausible when there is some tangible present evidence that opportunities are only barely forthcoming.

In short, opposing immigration requires manufacturing a perception of scarcity.  
More next time.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/17/AR2007081702426.html?nav=rss\\_metro](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/17/AR2007081702426.html?nav=rss_metro)