

Preface

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Most Americans do not realize how rapidly the racial and ethnic makeup of the country is changing or what this holds for the future. The 2012 election heralded a new political reality. But the far-reaching implications for the nation's economic growth and security have not been fully explored.

America's diversity turns out to be an extraordinary asset in an increasingly competitive global economy. As author Richard Florida has observed, "[t]he evidence is mounting that geographical openness and cultural diversity and tolerance are not by-products but key drivers of economic progress."¹ For instance, economic historians who study why some societies experienced rapid economic development over the past two centuries while others grew more slowly have discovered that greater cultural diversity has "beneficial effects ... on the advancement of ... knowledge-intensive industrial technology."² Indeed, the more we learn about how innovation develops through the mix of different ideas, cultures, and attitudes, the clearer it

becomes that America's diversity will help ensure that the U.S. economy remains cutting edge in the 21st century. Simply put, our diversity is our strength.

Yet too many people of color are being left out and left behind. Longstanding inequities have resulted in significant gaps in education, employment, health, and wealth among the fastest-growing population groups—the very communities the nation depends on to provide the workforce, innovators, entrepreneurs, and business leaders of tomorrow. For instance, from 2007 to 2010 black family wealth fell 31 percent, while Hispanic family wealth fell 44 percent. By contrast, white families only lost 11 percent of their wealth over this period. These disproportionate drops exacerbated pre-existing disparities. Whereas before the recession, nonwhite families were a quarter as wealthy as white families, by 2010 they were only one-sixth as wealthy. Closing these gaps, improving the life chances for all to reach their full potential, is good for both those lagging behind and for the entire nation.

The equity agenda—just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can fully participate and prosper—is the best approach to secure a bright American future. It also has become a matter of urgency.

Today, most babies born in the United States are children of color. Within three decades, America will have no clear racial or ethnic majority and more than half the population will be people of color. We are on our way to becoming what has been called a “world nation.” But if the racial disparities plaguing the country today hold constant as the United States becomes majority people of color, it will mean lower growth for our nation, lower wages for our people, as well as a lower standard of living. In short, we simply cannot maintain the American way of life we all believe in and cherish while at the same time leaving half the country behind. That is why we all have a stake in an economy that works better for everyone.

This remarkable demographic shift here at home is converging with a new global economic order. Information, ideas, products, and capital are dispersing across the world, creating vast entrepreneurial opportunities.

Globalization also challenges the United States as never before to build an economy that works for everyone, not just the wealthy few. Growing diversity offers us boundless potential to meet the challenge if we adopt a growth model grounded in the American ideals of fairness, equity, and opportunity for all.

Meeting the challenge means creating jobs and businesses that build the capabilities of all people to participate and benefit, while bolstering long-term competitiveness. It also means removing the barriers to success for low-income people and people of color, especially those that keep so many children from realizing their dreams and potential. Equity-driven growth requires that we expand the opportunities that have always defined the American Dream: opportunities to start businesses, to live in healthy communities, to attend good schools from pre-kindergarten to college. While the private sector must take the lead in producing inclusive growth, government must establish the right framework of policies, investments, and strategies to guide that growth. In short, we need a strategy that ensures that we grow together, not apart.

In crafting this strategy, it is critical that we draw from the vast knowledge and experience of local communities and civic leaders. We find inspiration from stories of community renewal such as the rebuilding of the South Bronx in New York City in the 1980s led by the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program; the revitalization of Boston’s Roxbury/North Dorchester neighborhood spearheaded by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in the 1990s; and the sustainability planning for the Lakota Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota led by the Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation in this decade. Underlying this work is the energy, creativity, sweat, and often tears of the local residents, leaders, and staff of community-based organizations, businesses,



Kately Vo, right, plays handball with her friends after a weekly worship service at Cao Dai Temple of California in Garden Grove, Calif., Sunday, Jan. 31, 2010.

AP PHOTO/JAE C. HONG

foundations, and institutions. Looking forward, as our nation seeks to leverage the demographic transformation to realize a deeper democracy and a more vibrant economy, our approach must be directly informed and closely tied to the innovation and wisdom of local leadership.

As two women of color, we cannot help but marvel as we reflect on this moment. From the scars of history, America has emerged with the very resources it needs to thrive and prosper: a workforce that can be unrivaled in breadth and depth of talent; youth hungry for opportunity and very much at home in an interconnected world; and engaged communities that can renew and strengthen our democracy in a landscape of racial difference and political complexity. Indeed, the United States, with all of its diversity and resilience, is poised to ensure that America remains the world's preeminent economic power.

This is not to minimize what it will take. On every measure of well-being or distress—economic security, academic achievement, access to health care and fresh food, incarceration—communities of color suffer disproportionately. In this book, Michelle Alexander points to the almost unfathomable fact that more African Americans are under correctional control today than were enslaved in 1850.

All-In Nation squarely addresses the challenges, but the essays and policy solutions presented here move the national conversation beyond a focus on what's wrong to illuminate what works. Leading thinkers and trailblazing activists explore how to capitalize

on our demographic destiny and why it is in our collective best interest to do so.

Ai-Jen Poo, who spearheaded the National Domestic Workers Alliance, reminds us that Americans are interdependent not only economically but also through our caring relationships—and that comprehensive immigration reform is needed to fortify these connections across the lines of race, class, and generation. Former Pennsylvania Gov. Edward Rendell reflects on how the Interstate Highway System fueled the growth of the middle class in the 1950s, and he calls for big thinking and bold investments again to ensure prosperity for generations to come. Lawrence Summers argues that rectifying racial disparities and providing opportunity for all Americans is critical for the country's future economic prosperity. Equally crucial is the recognition that every child can learn—a lesson 30 years of work in Harlem have taught Geoffrey Canada—and that education policy can improve the odds for poor children at the scale needed for the nation to succeed.

The contributors to these pages work across the spectrum of issues and settings—from the streets to the halls of government and philanthropy to the ivory tower. Together they tap a full range of wisdom, experience, and perspective that can lead to a stronger America.

And we hope they will be both a cause for optimism and a stir to action to ensure our country lives up to its most basic principle: opportunity for all. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Richard Florida, "How Diversity Leads to Economic Growth," *The Atlantic Cities*, December 12, 2011, available at <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/jobs-and-economy/2011/12/diversity-leads-to-economic-growth/687/>.
- 2 Quamrul Ashraf and Oded Galor, "Cultural Diversity, Geographical Isolation, and the Origin of the Wealth of Nations." Working Paper 17640 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2011), available at <http://www.aeaweb.org/aea/2013conference/program/retrieve.php?pdfid=34>.