

## In defense of “Community Organizers”

Like many of you, I squeezed watching the Olympics the last few weeks into my schedule. I was thrilled by the accomplishments of the athletes. Their beauty, grace, determination, disciplines and talent was easy to admire.

I have to admit, that as an American, while I can still admire the accomplishments of other countries’ athletes, I ended up rooting for the United States Olympians, athletes in every sport imaginable.

What struck me – and I’m sure what the rest of the world was able to see – was that America’s teams looked like the rest of the world.

While other countries had homogeneous populations, I was so proud to see we had Chinese, Mexicans, Russians, Africans, Japanese, Brits, Swiss and just about every nationality in the world competing for the Red, White & Blue.

In a tremendously symbolic gesture, Lopez Lomong, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan and a 1,500-meter runner carried the American flag in the opening ceremonies only 13 months after becoming a U.S. citizen.

The Olympics provides a portrait of America for the rest of the world. Nations and their people might disagree with the President’s foreign policies, they cannot deny that America and the dreams and opportunities it offers is a powerful lure to every free thinking individual from anywhere in the world.

In more ways than one, our Olympic team represents the future of our country. America is becoming more and more diverse according to recent U.S. Census projections.

In another generation, ethnic and racial minorities will comprise a majority of the nation’s population. Despite the current economic downturn, this transformation is occurring faster than anticipated just a few years ago.

The U.S. Census projects that by 2042, Americans who identify themselves as Hispanic, Black, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander will together outnumber non-Hispanic whites. Just a few years ago, it was predicted this would occur, but not until 2050.

In other words, minorities, which currently make up about one-third of the U.S. population, are expected to become a majority by 2042. By 2050, those ethnic and racial minorities will be 54 percent of U.S. residents.

This demographic shift is something that is we are experiencing in East County right now. Whites (those of European descent) make up less than half of Pittsburg and Bay Point. In Antioch, East County’s largest city, the percentage of whites is declining and at the time of this writing, may already be less than half of the population.

The transformation of our population has already occurred in most of the Bay Area. California is following the same trend.

Demographers attribute this acceleration due to a higher birthrate among first and second generation immigrants and the influx of newcomers from other countries.

“No other country has experienced such rapid racial and ethnic change,” said Mark Mather, a demographer with the Population Reference Bureau, a research organization in Washington.

The United States has experienced population shifts before and the reaction of Americans has not always been welcoming. Benjamin Franklin warned of the “Germanization” of Pennsylvania. Before there were immigration “quotas,” waves of immigrants came from Ireland and southern Europe. Like today’s immigrants, they were met with fear and ignorance. Laws against Chinese and Japanese were passed to restrict the numbers coming from those countries.

Today’s immigrants are packing the English as a Second Language classes in our adult schools. Every one of the ESL classes are filled with a mini-United Nations eager to learn English, which for all practical purposes is the country’s official language. Studies show that by the second generation, English is the dominant language in the homes.

Pizza, tacos and hamburgers are part of our culinary landscape and chow suey is as American as ... well, French fries.

Just as many of our kids play that “foreign” sport of soccer as those who compete in Little League.

I bring your attention to these migration patterns and population trends with the sincere hope that readers do not view them as alarmist.

The terms “minority” and “majority,” “mainstream” or “dominant” – as well as “melting pot” are becoming outdated.

Go to any sporting event in the Bay Area, whether it is the Warriors, Raiders, 49er, A’s or Giants and you will hear a babel of languages. However, when the National Anthem is played, everyone stands.

No other country in the world has the diversity we see represented on our Olympic team. For that, America deserves a gold medal.

The latest census numbers on income and health insurance feel like a family photo album. There we are on a sunny day, fit and happy. The sky was so blue, the weather warm. What a day it was.

But close the book (or online photo Web site) and a different reality returns. That's the way the pleasing financial portrait should be taken: That was then, and this is now.

Each August, the Census Bureau releases figures that profile the nation's income categories, including the numbers of Americans without health insurance. It barely needs mentioning that this year these red-hot topics land in the last year of the two-term Bush presidency and in closing months of a presidential campaign.

The first-blush totals sound good. Those without coverage declined by more than one million, the first such drop since the Bush team took office. The poverty level held steady at 12.5 percent of the country, and the median income actually rose to \$50,233, a slight increase of \$665 from the previous year. These are crowd-pleasing totals.

But these figures come with an asterisk. They're from 2007, just before the country began its economic slow-fade. The jobless rate, housing market, oil prices, and banking system have all soured. Layoffs and trimmed benefits such as health coverage have followed. The census computer tracked a financially fatter world.

These figures call for interpretation and context. The downward track of uninsured may be due to more people seeking out government health care such as Medicare or coverage for children. Also, the total of 45.7 million uninsured is still higher than the 39.8 million without coverage when the Bush administration assumed power.

The same is true with the poverty figure. Yes, it's good when the needle sticks for two years running at 12.5 percent. But it was at 11.9 percent in the 1990's.

There are other historical measures to toss into this sea of numbers. Though the economy generally bloomed from 2000 until this year, the adjusted income of most workers didn't budge.

The rich-poor gap also widened with the nation's top one percent now collecting 23 percent of total income, the biggest disparity since 1928, according to the Economic Policy Institute. One side statistic supplied by the IRS: there are now 47,000 Americans worth \$20 million or more, an all-time high.

From top to bottom, these are punishing numbers: a nation of great wealth with yawning economic disparities. At the least, Congress should try again to expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program, which was extended only through March of 2009, after President Bush vetoed enlarging it.

Both John McCain and Barack Obama were quick to react to the census data, focusing on the economic slowdown that has overtaken the year-old census numbers. McCain offered tax cuts and policy tweaks to allow more people to buy health coverage. Obama has plans for a broader promise of government help with insurance. Voters should listen carefully to see which candidate has ideas that will make a genuine improvement.