

Question 33
Benchmark C
Spring 2003

Speech to the New Americans

[NOTE: The author’s name (Andrei Codrescu) is pronounced along the lines of “An.” The “Iron Curtain” (paragraph 3) was the political barrier that existed between the countries of the Soviet Union bloc and Western Europe from 1945 to 1990. Romania was allied with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, a member of the Soviet bloc, and was thus spoken of as “behind the Iron Curtain.”]

1 HELLO, NEW AMERICANS!

2 Ladies and gentlemen, friends, and fellow citizens, I’m Andrei Codrescu from Romania, and this country has been very very good to me.

3 Romania was a Communist country when I was growing up (remember the Iron Curtain?). In school they told us that America was a bad place where the rich laughed in the face of the poor who went about begging in the streets. That America was a country where crime and racism made it dangerous to walk outside.

4 My grandmother, on the other hand, whispered to me that in America “dogs walk around with pretzels on their tails.” Fat, healthy dogs. Big, hot pretzels. She also whispered that in America the “roads are paved with gold.” That wasn’t as good as the dogs with the pretzels—but she had to whisper because in Romania you could not say such things out loud.

5 I myself imagined America as the place where I could be a very famous writer who could say out loud all the things that would land me in jail in Romania.

6 When I came to America I found that the school and my grandmother were both wrong.

7 And yes, in America some dogs not only walked around with pretzels on their tails but got their own burial plots in Hollywood. Some dogs inherited fortunes and were tended by human servants.

8 But the roads were not paved with gold. In fact, in 1992, certain roads are not paved at all because there isn’t enough money to pave them with.

9 Yes, there are beggars and poor people and very rich people in America. But mostly there are in-between people, people who are neither rich nor poor, people who have nice houses or apartments with a little garden or a balcony, people who treat their dogs very nicely if they have dogs, people who (for the most part) let each other talk, laugh, and vote however they please. People who do not have to whisper. And the roads, whether in good shape or not, can take you somewhere else if you do not like where you are. America is a big country and you can move anywhere you want in it without having to

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show your passport. 10 Almost ten years ago I sat where you sit now and listened to a judge welcome me to America. “You are now Americans,” the judge said. “You can keep your native customs, you can keep your wonderful cooking and your churches, but you are not Chinese, Haitians, Russians, or Romanians any longer. You cannot hold the interests of your old countries above those of your new country. You are now Americans.”

11 The judge spoke the truth. But the judge did not mention how hard it is to keep your customs, your cooking, and your language alive. The judge did not mention the loneliness of having left friends and family behind. He did not mention the embarrassment of different manners, the trauma of simple exchanges and transactions. He did not mention the heartbreak of watching your children forget where they came from.

12 For me, this was all good. I came here when I was nineteen years old. My loneliness became a time to dream ambitious dreams, dreams of revenge and conquest, dreams of showing everyone that I was more than the skinny little foreigner with holes in his shoes who could not speak very good English.

13 I also used my embarrassment so as not to take myself so seriously. One time, in Detroit, I asked a bus driver: “Can I buy this bus?” I meant to say, “Can I ride this bus?” He pushed me away and said: “Go buy the next bus!”

14 I haven’t bought that bus yet—but I just bought a car.

15 And as for the heartbreak of your children becoming American, that is inevitable. I was only a child myself when I came here but now I have children of my own. They are very American. They like to read books but they also play sports. In Romania you either read books or played sports. You couldn’t do both. And my children, as American as they are, are very interested in where they come from. They are proud of it, in fact, because it makes them different.

16 And so—I would modify what the judge said to me ten years ago in this way:

17 “You must make an effort to keep your old customs and to make others admire them, you must use your native cooking to make new friends and to bring your community together, you must make an effort to support the community life of your fellow immigrants. You are still Chinese, Haitians, Russians, and Romanians, but you are also American, which means that you can be better Chinese, better Haitians and Russians and Romanians—better because you are living together with all of these other people and you can enrich each other through your differences. You are American now, which means that you must forget the hatreds and prejudices of your own past . . . that if you are a Croatian American you cannot fight your Serbian American neighbor because that’s what is going on in the old country. You cannot pass on to your children the prejudices and hatreds of the old country. You must always remember *why* you left your countries in the first place: because you were persecuted for your political beliefs, for your religious beliefs, or simply because you wanted to live a better material life

No matter. All those reasons are precisely why you must heal the wounds of the past. America is the place where you must deliberately forgo revenge if you are to go forward. You can be born again here, but like a baby you must cancel the pain that brought you here.

18 America was set up as a place to get away from the murderous sentimentalities of the old worlds—which does not mean that you must abandon or forget the beauties of your cultures. On the contrary. The greater and prouder the cultural difference you bring here the greater your success. America changes with every single new citizen. America in 1992 is not the America I came into in 1966. Today, Spanish is spoken almost as much as English, and millions of people from Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific have come since then, changing the flavor and look of the place, making America more colorful, spicier, more exciting.

19 The American poet Walt Whitman wrote in 1855:

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

20 And so it is. Today's song may be a bit darker and more difficult but it's still there.

21 America is an idea in our minds. Every generation of new immigrants remakes America in the shape of what they imagine it to be.

22 It's your turn.

From ROAD SCHOLAR: Coast to Coast Late in the Century by Andrei Codrescu.
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33. Choose one of the following ideas for a graphic to accompany this passage. Give two reasons or examples from the text to support your choice.

- a photo of Andrei Codrescu speaking to an audience
- a photo of a group of new Americans standing together
- a picture of the flag of the United States

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Hope Is the Thing with Feathers

[Note: The last documented sighting of a wild Passenger Pigeon in the USA was near Sargents, in Pike County, Ohio. It was spotted sometime between March 12 – 24, 1900, by 14-year-old Press Clay Southworth. For many years, the stuffed and mounted Passenger Pigeon was on view at The Ohio Historical Museum, in Columbus, Ohio.]

1 In a volume of his *American Ornithology*, pioneering naturalist Alexander Wilson described a flock of Passenger Pigeons that he had witnessed in the early 1800s as the birds flew between Kentucky and Indiana. The flock, Wilson estimated, numbered 2,230,272,000 birds. “An almost inconceivable multitude,” he wrote, “and yet probably far below the actual amount.” The multitude spanned a mile wide and extended for some 240 miles, consisting of no fewer than three pigeons per cubic yard of sky.

2 Mathematicians and physicists perhaps can visualize the number, but for years struggled. Just what was a flock of more than 2.2 billion pigeons like? I needed metaphor. I needed to make the swarm linear. My pocket calculator—good for figuring gas mileage—fritzed as I attempted the equations. So I called on two friends with better calculators. What I wanted to know was this: If the birds had flown single file, beak to tail, how long would the line have stretched?

3 Assuming each pigeon was about 16 inches long, a line of 2,230,272,000 Passenger Pigeons would have equaled 35 billion inches, or 3 billion feet. That’s 563,200 miles of Passenger Pigeons. In other words, if Wilson’s flock had flown beak to tail in a single file the birds would have stretched around the earth’s equatorial circumference 22.6 times.

4 Not to be confused with message-bearing “carrier pigeons”—those trained, domesticated birds so useful in war—Passenger Pigeons were wild creatures, prodigious and unequalled. This species once comprised 25 to 40 percent of the total land-bird population of what would become the United States. Historians and biologists have estimated that 3 to 5 billion Passenger Pigeons populated eastern and central North America at the time of the European conquest. The Passenger Pigeon was the most abundant bird on the planet. The next time you see an American Robin, imagine 50 Passenger Pigeons in its stead; that was the ratio between the two during colonial times.

5 Jacques Cartier, the first European to write about the pigeons, did so on July 1, 1534, having seen flocks on what is now Prince Edward Island. Champlain saw them at Kennebunkport, Maine, in 1605. De Soto. Marquette. Sir Walter Raleigh. William Strachey. The pigeons awed them all. “So thicke that even they have shadowed the Skie from us,” marveled one early account. “What it portends I know not,” mused Thomas Dudley of Salem, Massachusetts, on March 28, 1631, after having witnessed a tenebrific flight of pigeons.

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6 Flying as low as a few feet off the ground or as high as a quarter-mile, Passenger Pigeons moved in vast congregations that observers compared to squall lines, oval clouds, thick arms, and waterfalls. Wilson saw how his flock flew in the shape of a river, then, suddenly, the birds moved into “an immense front.” Flocks could contain pigeons on only a single level or be stacked in layers, with the birds flying loosely scattered or packed wing tip to wing tip. When bright sky showed through those multitudes, it must have glittered like a lantern signaling a frantic code, a frenzied semaphore.

7 With their powerful chests and long, quick-snapping wings, the pigeons flew an average of 60 miles per hour, for hours at a time. Sometimes the swift and seemingly endless flocks stretched across the entire dome of the sky, so that wherever one looked, horizon or zenith or somewhere between, there flew the pigeons. They closed over the sky like an eyelid.

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39. If the author had included some type of graphic (e.g., photo, graph, map, etc.) with the passage, what type of graphic would be appropriate for the author’s purpose? Explain how that type of graphic would promote or support the author’s purpose. (2 points)
