

Same Machine, Different Hemisphere

How Thailand and the United States each manufactured a national culture, where the manufacturing failed, and why 2026 looks like an ebb and not an ending

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What this is. A comparative position essay in history, written for the educated general reader. It is labeled a working paper, not peer-reviewed scholarship. The claims are the author's; the argument is stated up front and defended, not discovered pretend-neutrally.

AI disclosure. This paper was produced with substantial AI assistance (research sweeps in English and Thai, independent re-verification of headline figures, drafting, figures, and build tooling), under a documented pipeline in which a human set the question, the stance, and the scope, and owns every claim. Every number in the text, tables, and figures lives in an audited data file (data.py) with its source attached; figures regenerate from that file. Facts that could not be independently pinned down are hedged in the text.

Conflicts. None known. The paper takes no funding and advocates no policy beyond its historical argument.

1. Two countries with nothing in common, except the one thing

Pick two countries at something close to random and you could hardly do better — or worse — than Thailand and the United States. One is a Buddhist monarchy on the Southeast Asian mainland that was never colonized; the other is a secular settler republic that began as someone else's colony and filled itself with strangers. One runs on ritual deference to a sacred center; the other, at least on paper, on the absence of any sacred center at all. They sit very nearly on opposite sides of the planet. And yet, by the middle of the twentieth century, both had accomplished the same improbable feat: each had taken a population of remarkable diversity and convinced most of it — and most outside observers — that it was one people, with one language, one story, and one name.

Thailand's censuses from the 1960s onward described up to 99 percent of the population as "ethnically Thai," in a country whose own linguists would later map 62 distinct ethnolinguistic communities, with the Central Thai of the Bangkok plain amounting to only about a third of the whole. The United States, a country assembled from roughly thirty million European arrivals in one long wave, reached the 1950s with a mass culture so unified that three television networks could command over 95 percent of what the entire nation watched in an evening. Neither homogeneity was a fact of nature. Both were manufactured — deliberately, expensively, and in the same half-century, roughly 1890 to 1940.

This paper makes one claim and wears one hat. The claim: **assimilation capacity is cyclical, not a fixed national trait**. Both countries built deliberate absorption machines — *Thainess* (khwampenthai) as a royal and then military state project, and Americanization backed by the melting-pot creed. Both machines worked spectacularly on the culturally near and the voluntarily arriving; both failed, and turned violent, at the same kind of boundary; and both are visibly

straining in 2026, in ways that look less like the death of either machine than like the ebb phase of a long tide that has ebbed before. The hat: the closing section speculates — labeled as speculation — about where each machine goes next.

The road map. Section 2 assembles the Thai machine from its parts, 1892 to 1942, and shows its masterpiece — the absorption of one of the world's great overseas-Chinese communities — alongside the gap between Thailand's official and measured diversity. Section 3 does the same for the American machine: the intake, the school-flag-factory apparatus, the measured evidence that it worked, and the 1924–65 gate that finished the job. Section 4 lays the two machines side by side and extracts the shared design. Section 5 maps both failure zones — the race line in America, the religion-and-script line in Thailand — and adds the American culture's self-inflicted fragmentation, which no immigration policy caused or can cure. Section 6 reads 2025–26 in both countries as an ebb phase; section 7 answers the four strongest objections; section 8 forecasts, with named falsifiers; section 9 concludes.

A note on method: this is a comparison of *machines*, not a moral audit of two peoples. Both countries' histories contain both hospitality and cruelty at scale. The interesting question is not which country was kinder but why the same engineering problem — many peoples in, one nation out — produced such similar solutions in such different places, and why those solutions share the same failure mode.

2. Siam's machine: from galaxy to geo-body

2.1 The many peoples of the mandala

The kingdom that became Thailand did not begin as a bounded country at all. Scholars describe premodern Siam as a "galactic polity": a bright center — the court — surrounded by tributary lords whose loyalty dimmed with distance, and whose smaller courts could, without contradiction, send tribute to two or three overlords at once. Chiang Mai in the north, the Lao principalities of the Mekong, the Malay sultanates of the peninsula: all orbited Bangkok the way moons orbit a planet that itself orbits something larger. Borders in the modern sense did not exist; sovereignty faded out gradually, like lamplight.

Nor was the center itself ethnically simple. Early Bangkok, founded in 1782, was built substantially by war captives swept in from Laos, Cambodia, Kedah and the Mon country, and a royal legal text of the era matter-of-factly lists the realm's peoples: Malay, Khmer, Lao, Burmese, Mon, Chinese, Cham, Javanese. The city was a mosaic of ethnic quarters — Portuguese and Persian included — and John Bowring, visiting in 1855, guessed the whole kingdom held no more than about five million people. By the early twentieth century, roughly a third of Bangkok's population was Chinese. "Siam," in short, was an empire wearing the clothes of a kingdom — as plural as the Habsburg lands, on a smaller stage.

2.2 Chulalongkorn: building the container (1892–1910)

What changed everything was the arrival, on both flanks, of empires with maps. With British Burma and Malaya on one side and French Indochina on the other, gradual lamplight sovereignty became fatal ambiguity: whatever was not clearly Siamese would be clearly someone else's. The Franco-Siamese crisis of 1893 — French gunboats forcing the mouth of the Chao Phraya — made the lesson explicit, and Siam paid for survival in territory: the left bank of the Mekong in 1893, western Cambodia in 1904–07, four Malay states in 1909. The historian Thongchai Winichakul calls what replaced the mandala the "geo-body": a hard-edged, mapped Siam that had never existed before the surveyors drew it, and which then demanded a single people to fill it.

King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) built the container. In 1892 he replaced the four great traditional ministries with twelve functional ones on the European model; in 1897 the thesaphiban system placed Bangkok-appointed commissioners over provinces that had been hereditary domains. The absorption was not gentle bookkeeping. In 1899 the state simply abolished the word "Lao" from its administrative map — inventing the neutral coinage "Isan" ("northeast") for provinces whose people spoke Lao and considered themselves Lao — and the 1904 census deleted Lao as a category outright, making the kingdom officially 85 percent "Thai" by the stroke of an enumerator's pen. In 1902 the raja of Patani, the Malay-Muslim sultanate annexed in stages since 1786, was deposed and exiled when he refused the new administrative regulations. The periphery noticed: 1901–02 brought simultaneous revolts in Isan (the Holy Man's Rebellion), the north (the Shan rising at Phrae), and Patani. All were put down. The container held.

The Lanna case shows the container-building at its smoothest, and is worth a moment because it is the template the Deep South was supposed to follow and did not. Chiang Mai had been a tributary kingdom with its own dynasty, script and language; Bangkok inserted a royal commissioner in 1875, converted the region into an ordinary administrative circle (Monthon Phayap) in 1899, reduced the local princes to ceremony after 1901, and simply let the princely title lapse when its last holder died in 1939 — a sixty-year absorption conducted almost without gunfire, aided decisively by the fact that the Lanna people were fellow Theravada Buddhists whose language was close kin to Siamese. Where those two conditions held — Isan, Lanna, the Khmer-speaking northeast border — the container closed quietly. Where they did not, it never closed at all.

2.3 Vajiravudh: naming the contents (1910–1925)

Chulalongkorn's son Vajiravudh (Rama VI) supplied what the container still lacked: an identity for what was inside. Educated at Oxford, he imported the forms of European official nationalism and translated them into Siamese: the triad *Nation–Religion–King*, modeled on "God, King and Country," which remains Thailand's civic formula today; a new tricolor flag (1917); paramilitary and scouting movements (1911) to drill the young in it. His Surname Act, promulgated in 1913 and enforced from 1915, required every subject to adopt a heritable family name — at a stroke giving

every resident, whatever their origins, a Thai-form legal identity. (The dating carries a footnote: under the old Siamese calendar the year began on 1 April, so some sources render the promulgation year as 1912.)

Vajiravudh also demonstrated, early, the machine's talent for choosing an internal enemy. In 1914, under a pen name, the king published *The Jews of the East*, an anti-Chinese pamphlet accusing Siam's commercial minority of clannishness and disloyalty in terms borrowed directly from European antisemitism. Benedict Anderson would later cite the episode as a textbook case of official nationalism: a dynasty naturalizing itself by pointing at an alien within. Thongchai puts the same point structurally: Thainess has always been defined negatively — by the un-Thai at the border, and the un-Thai inside.

2.4 Phibun: the machine at full throttle (1938–1944)

The absolute monarchy fell in 1932; the machine survived the change of drivers and accelerated. Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram issued twelve *ratthaniyom* — "state mandates" or cultural mandates — between June 1939 and January 1942. Mandate No. 1 renamed Siam "Thailand": the land, for the first time, named for the ethnicity. Mandate No. 3 abolished regional and ethnic self-designations: no more northern Thai, Isan, or Malay-Thai — only Thai. Mandate No. 9 made the Thai language the mark of the nation; No. 10 prescribed "civilized" dress. Compulsory Thai-language schooling, in force since 1921, carried the mandates into every village. The pressure on the Chinese minority became explicit policy: of 271 Chinese schools operating at their 1933 peak, 242 were forced shut between 1938 and 1940, with every Chinese school in Bangkok closed by 1940, and most Chinese-language newspapers closed with them.

The mandates did not die with the war. A National Culture Act followed in 1942 to give the new conscience statutory form, and when the defeated Phibun's restrictions briefly lapsed, the rebound revealed how much demand the machine had been suppressing: some 430 Chinese schools reopened in 1946 alone — before a 1948 quota recapped them at 152, where the squeeze resumed. Meanwhile the Cold War handed the machine a new argument: with China communist after 1949 and immigration effectively ended, the remaining Chinese of Thailand faced a simple menu — assimilate into Thainess, or be suspect. Most chose the first, and the state, to its credit and its advantage, kept the door open for them.

2.5 The Chinese absorption: the machine's masterpiece

Here is the astonishing part: it worked — at least on the Chinese. The Chinese share of Siam's population stood near 10 percent in 1909 and never rose much above an eighth. G. William Skinner, in the classic 1957 study, predicted near-total assimilation within four generations, and the broad outline held: Chinese men married Thai women in great numbers, took Thai-form surnames (the Surname Act quietly serving as an assimilation funnel), sent their children to Thai schools, and moved — this is the crucial difference from every neighboring country — all the way

to the top. Thais of Chinese descent, today perhaps 11–14 percent of the population, dominate commerce, fill parliaments, and have supplied prime ministers; by the late 1950s roughly 70 percent of Bangkok's businesses were Chinese-owned, and the distinction between Sino-Thai and Thai elite has since blurred toward invisibility.

Why did assimilation succeed in Bangkok while Chinese minorities in Malaysia and Indonesia remained separate, resented, and periodically brutalized? Three differences recur in the comparative literature. First, Siam was never colonized: there was no colonial legal caste system, like the Dutch East Indies' "Foreign Orientals" category, to freeze the Chinese into a separate and resented middle layer. Second, the prestige culture was open at the top: becoming Thai carried real rewards, up to and including nobility, and Theravada Buddhism raised a far lower barrier to intermarriage than Islam did in Malaya or Java. Third, the machine offered a door, not just a wall: schools, surnames, and citizenship were available to anyone willing to walk through, even as pressure mounted on those who would not. Assimilation-by-invitation, backed by assimilation-by-coercion, absorbed one of the largest overseas-Chinese communities on earth into the very identity that had been invented, in part, against it. The caveat matters too: later scholarship shows the absorption was never as total as Skinner forecast — hybrid Sino-Thai identity persists, quietly — but as state projects go, this one came as close to complete as the twentieth century offers.

2.6 The official story and the measured one

By the 1960s the machine was confident enough to declare victory in its statistics: Thai censuses began describing up to 99 percent of the population as ethnically Thai, and the figure was repeated in schoolbooks and tourist brochures until it became common knowledge, inside the country and out, that Thailand was among the most homogeneous nations on earth. The claim was an artifact of the machine itself — the census counted what the 1904 enumerators had been instructed to count, Thai citizens as Thai people. When linguists at Mahidol University actually mapped the country's mother tongues in the 1990s, they found Central Thai — the standard language of Bangkok, the schools and the state — was the home language of only about 34 percent of the population. Lao-speaking Isan accounted for another quarter; northern Kham Mueang and southern Pak Tai roughly a sixth together; and beyond the Tai family lay Khmer, Malay, Chinese, Mon, Karen, Hmong and dozens more — 62 ethnolinguistic communities in the government's own 2011 report to the United Nations. None of this means Thainess failed: most of those 62 communities' members carry Thai identity cards, salute the same flag, and would tell a pollster they are Thai. It means Thainess is a civic-cultural achievement wearing an ethnic costume — a distinction that matters enormously for what the machine can and cannot digest, as section 5 will show.

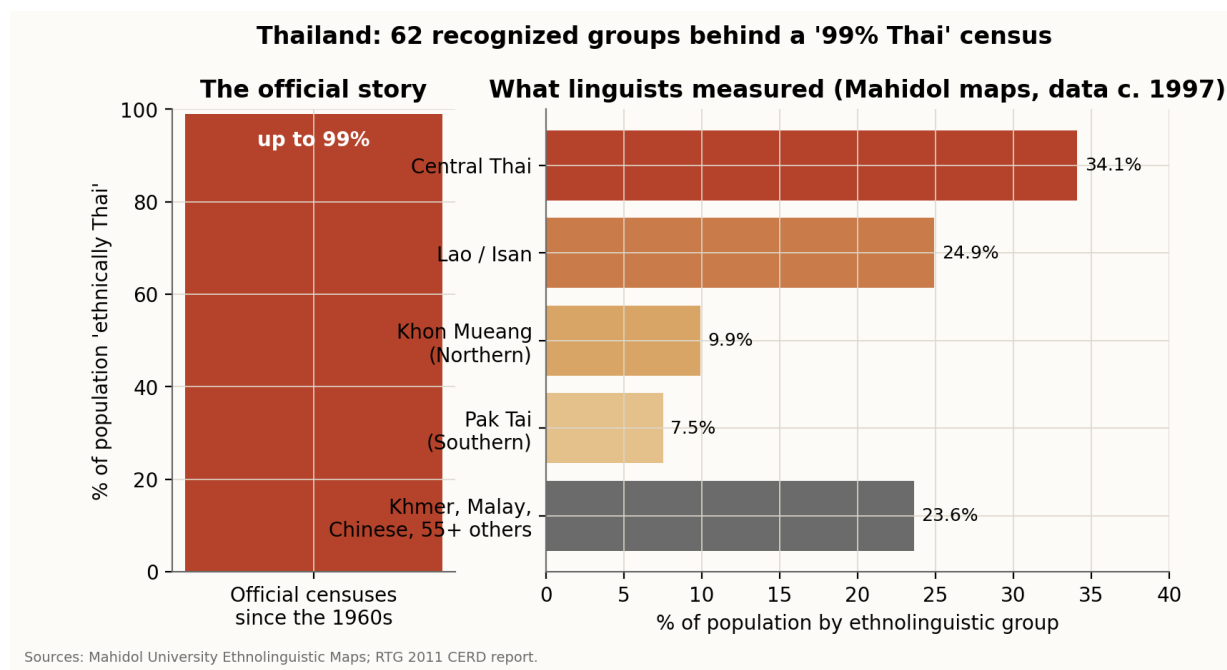


Figure 1. Thailand's official homogeneity versus its measured diversity. Left: the census claim. Right: the Mahidol ethnolinguistic mapping (data c. 1997). Sources in data.py.

One more Siamese peculiarity deserves its own paragraph, because it explains the machine's distinctive cruelty and its distinctive confidence at once. Because Siam was never colonized, its elite performed colonization's cultural work on itself — the project Thongchai calls the quest for *siwilai*, from the English word "civilized." Bangkok aristocrats toured their own hinterlands with the eyes of European ethnographers, classifying hill peoples and Lao peasants as backward others to be uplifted into Thainess — an internal colonialism run by an indigenous court. The United States, a colony that became an empire, arrived at the same posture from the opposite direction. Both machines, in other words, were staffed by elites who believed they were performing a civilizing mission on their own territory — which is why both could pursue absorption with missionary confidence and meet refusal with punitive bewilderment.

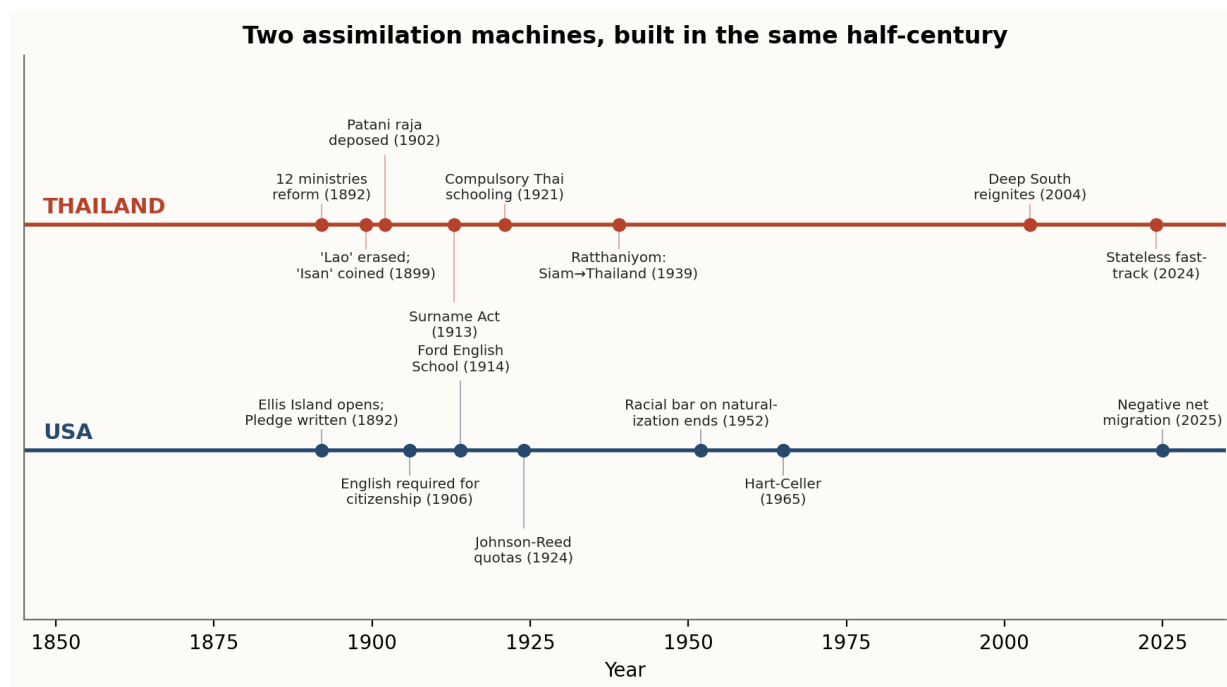


Figure 2. Two assimilation machines, built in the same half-century. Milestone dates from the sources listed in data.py.

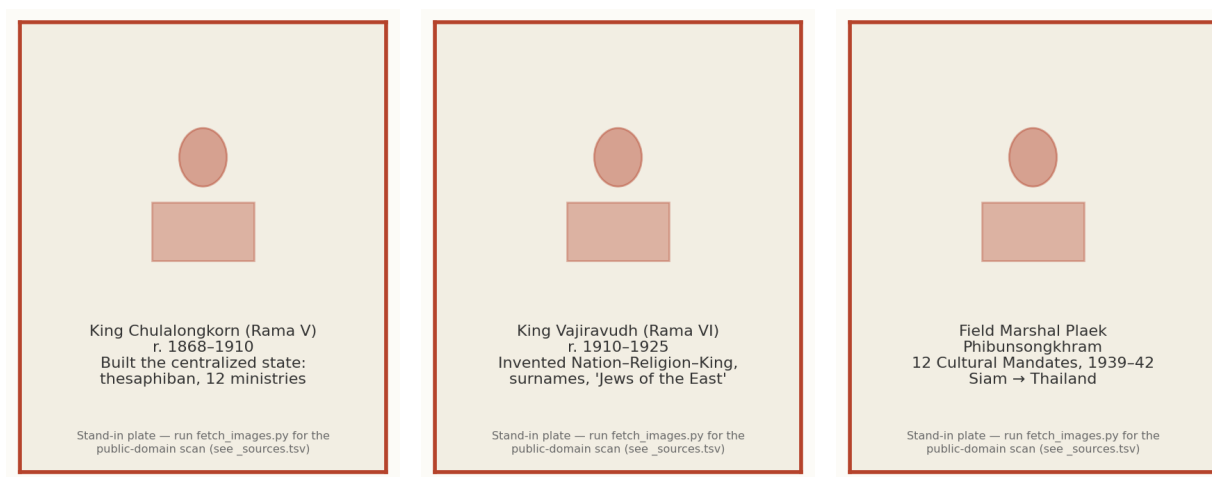


Plate A. Chulalongkorn (Rama V).

Plate B. Vajiravudh (Rama VI).

Plate C. Phibunsongkhram.

3. America's machine: the melting pot as infrastructure

3.1 The scale of the intake

The American problem was the mirror image of the Siamese one. Siam had to make one people out of populations it had conquered in place; the United States had to make one people out of populations that kept arriving. And arrive they did: roughly 30 million Europeans between 1850 and 1913, the largest voluntary migration in recorded history to that point. Ireland alone sent some 4.5 million people between 1820 and 1930, driven first by famine; nearly a million Germans

landed in the 1850s; more than four million Italians came between 1880 and 1924, and over two and a half million Eastern European Jews between 1881 and 1924. Ellis Island processed more than 12 million people between 1892 and 1954 — over a million in the peak year of 1907 alone. By 1890 the foreign-born were 14.8 percent of the population, a share that would stand as the record for 135 years.

3.2 School, flag, factory

Like Siam, America built its machine mostly between 1890 and 1940, and built it of the same three materials: schools, symbols, and pressure. The common-school movement — Horace Mann's "great equalizer" — had aimed since the 1830s at forging shared civic identity; compulsory attendance laws spread state by state from Massachusetts (1852) to Mississippi (1918), so that universal schooling arrived precisely on top of peak immigration. The Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 explicitly as a flag ritual for schoolchildren, millions of whom recited it in unison that October; states passed laws requiring flags over schoolhouses. In 1906 the federal government made English ability a condition of naturalization. By the early 1920s, twenty-two states had gone further and restricted teaching in foreign languages outright, until the Supreme Court struck the laws down in *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923).

The factory joined the school. Henry Ford's English School (founded 1914) required immigrant workers to attend English and civics classes, and its graduation ceremony staged the national metaphor literally: men in Old World costume descended into a giant stage cauldron labeled MELTING POT, teachers stirred with outsized ladles, and the graduates emerged in identical American suits, waving small flags. The metaphor itself had premiered six years earlier in Israel Zangwill's 1908 play *The Melting Pot* — with Theodore Roosevelt in the audience. Roosevelt supplied the machine's sharpest slogan in 1915: "There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism." It is worth pausing on the parallel: within two years of each other, the King of Siam was assigning surnames to make Thais, and the leading American ex-president was demanding the deletion of hyphens to make Americans.



Plate D. Ellis Island, c. 1902.

Plate E. The Ford melting-pot pageant.

Below the state and the factory ran a third layer, voluntary and often gentler: the settlement houses. Jane Addams opened Hull House in a Chicago immigrant ward in 1889, and by 1910 roughly four hundred such houses were teaching English, civics, cooking and citizenship in the tenement districts of every major city — Americanization as neighborly uplift rather than decree. The gentleness had a wartime expiry date. When the United States entered the First World War, "100 percent Americanism" campaigns turned on the largest and best-organized foreign-language community in the country: German-Americans saw their language banned from schools and pulpits in dozens of states, their newspapers boycotted, sauerkraut renamed, and in the worst cases their neighbors lynched. It is the closest American analogue to Phibun's squeeze on the Chinese schools — the machine dropping the invitation and keeping only the pressure — and it worked the same way: the German-American public sphere, the one that had sustained eight hundred publications, never recovered.

3.3 Did it work? The measurable answer is yes

Modern economic history has put numbers on what the pageantry claimed. Using millions of census records from 1900–1930, Abramitzky, Boustan and Eriksson found that immigrants closed half of the "name foreignness" gap with natives within 20 years of arrival — the Giuseppes becoming Joes at a measurable, steady rate — and that name Americanization carried a real payoff: at least a 14 percent gain in occupation-based earnings in one careful study. Language followed the classic three-generation grinder, and still does: among US Hispanics today, the immigrant generation is 61 percent Spanish-dominant, while the third generation is 69 percent English-dominant and essentially none remain Spanish-dominant — the same curve the Germans and Italians rode a century earlier. The German case is the cleanest natural experiment: about 800 German-language publications existed in 1894; World War I nationalism and language bans cut the count to roughly 230 by 1920, and the largest non-English public sphere in American history simply dissolved into English.

Marriage, the deepest measure, moved the same way. A famous New Haven study found ethnic in-marriage collapsing by 1940 into a "triple melting pot" of Protestant, Catholic and Jew; by the 1980 census, intermarriage among European-descended Americans was so pervasive that scholars declared white ethnicity "symbolic" — a matter of grandma's recipes, not of marriage markets or job ladders. And the pot kept melting across lines once thought uncrossable: newlywed marriages across racial or ethnic lines rose from 3 percent in 1967, the year the Supreme Court struck down intermarriage bans, to 17 percent in 2015.

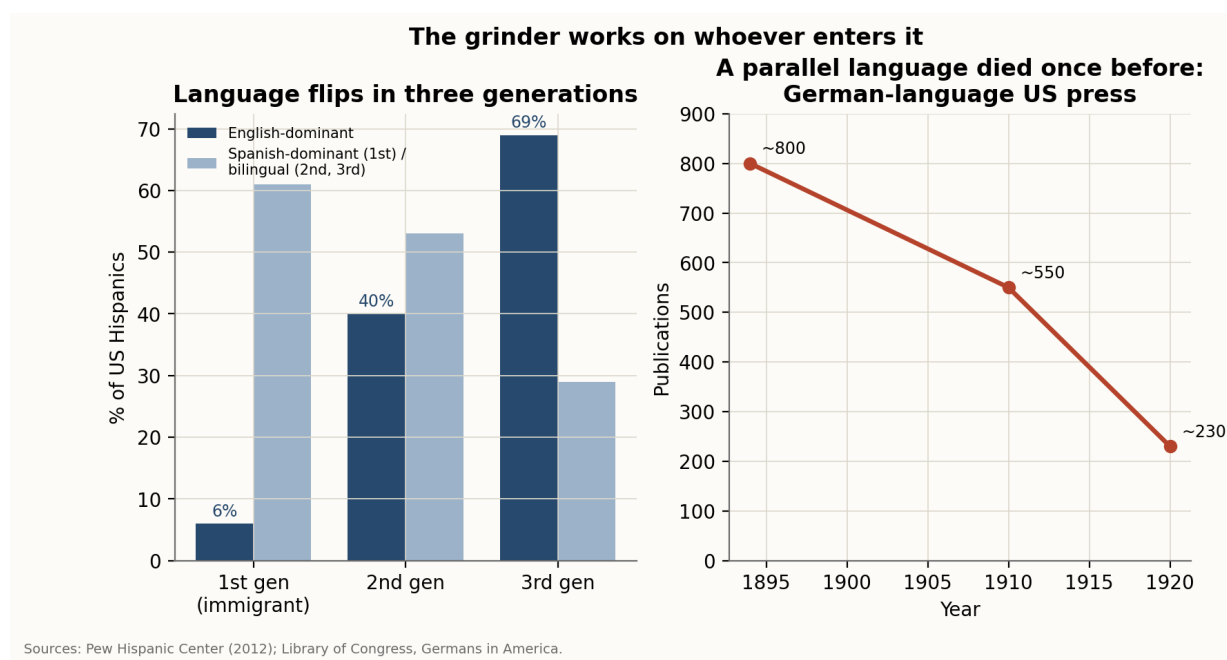


Figure 3. The grinder works on whoever enters it. Left: language dominance of US Hispanics by generation (Pew, 2012). Right: the German-language press, 1894-1920 (Library of Congress).

3.4 The quiet component: the gate (1924–1965)

The machine's least advertised component was a gate. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 cut immigration quotas to 2 percent of each nationality's presence in the 1890 census — a base year chosen deliberately to predate the Italian and Jewish waves — capping total quota immigration at roughly 165,000 a year (about 150,000 under the national-origins formula that followed in 1927–29), and barring Asians outright. Admissions fell off a cliff, from over 700,000 in fiscal 1924 to under 300,000 in 1925. Italy's allowance dropped to under four thousand a year, from over 200,000 arrivals in a single pre-quota year.

Demographers of the "pause" school — Hirschman most explicitly, Alba and Nee in their reconstruction of how the mainstream absorbed the white ethnics — argue that the ensuing forty years did real assimilative work: with replenishment cut off, ethnic neighborhoods, presses and marriage markets thinned out, and the second and third generations consolidated into a single "white American" category. By 1960, 84 percent of a much-shrunk foreign-born population was

of European or Canadian origin, and the foreign-born share was falling toward its 1970 trough of 4.7 percent. The mid-century homogeneity that Americans over fifty remember as normal — three networks with 95 percent of prime time, a civil religion with "under God" (1954) and "In God We Trust" (1956) stamped into it, 16.1 million WWII veterans as a shared cohort — was, like Thailand's 99 percent censuses, the output of a machine: wave, then gate, then grind.

The 1965 Hart-Celler Act reopened the gate and reversed the mix: 59 million immigrants arrived between 1965 and 2015, about half from Latin America and a quarter from Asia. The machine was asked, for the first time at scale, to do its work across the very color line it had spent its first century enforcing — a test still running, and the subject of section 5.

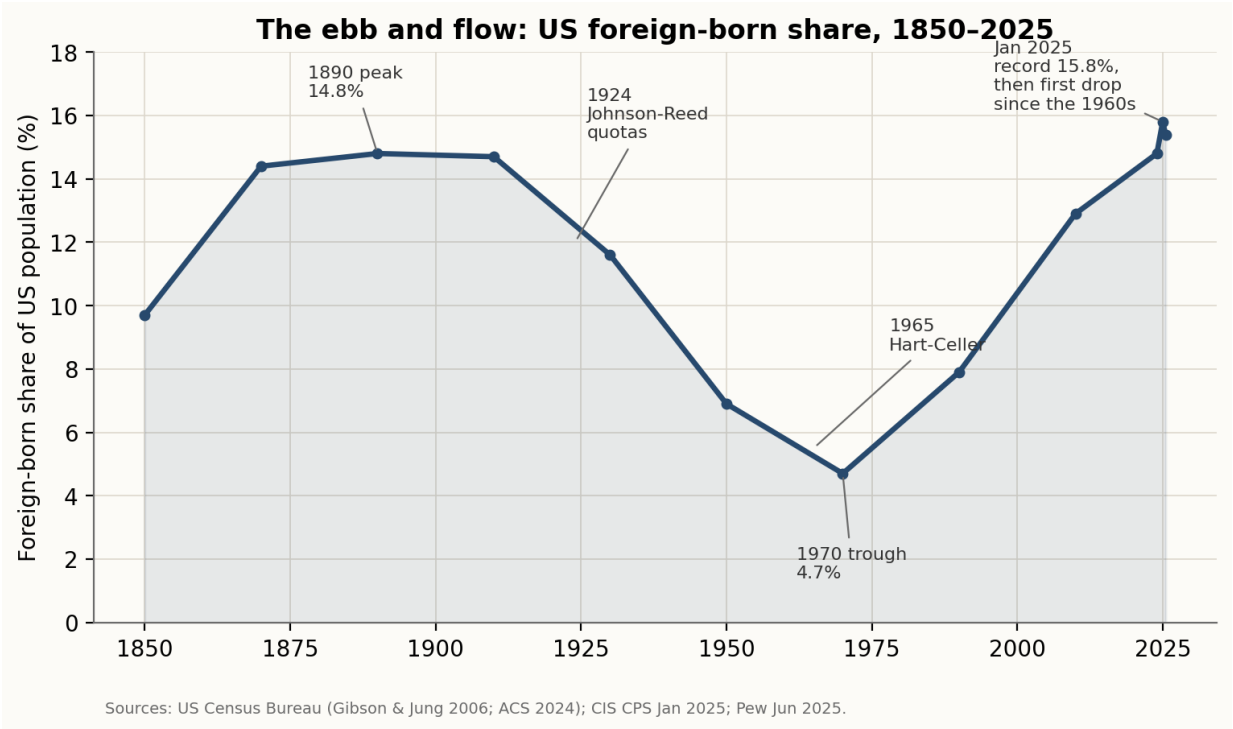


Figure 4. The ebb and flow: US foreign-born population share, 1850-2025. The 2025 record (15.8 percent, January) was followed by the first sustained decline since the 1960s. Sources in data.py.

4. What both machines got right

Strip away the flags and the two machines are the same device, assembled from the same five parts — a fact worth displaying in one table before examining where the two diverged.

Component	Siam / Thailand	United States
A prestige center worth joining	Court culture, Buddhism, royal honors; becoming Thai opened ranks to the top	Wage ladder, land, citizenship; becoming American paid (>=14% name premium)
Schools as the engine	Compulsory Thai-language schooling (1921); Chinese schools closed (1938-40)	Common schools; compulsory laws 1852-1918; English for citizenship (1906)

Names and symbols	Surname Act (1913); flag (1917); Nation-Religion-King	Pledge (1892); melting-pot creed (1908); 'no hyphens' (1915)
An enemy to define the edge	'Jews of the East' (1914); the un-Thai within	Nativist cycles: Know-Nothings, APA, quota lobby
A gate (timing/volume control)	Immigration effectively closed after 1949; no naturalization path for laborers	1924-1965 pause; quotas as consolidation window

Table 1. The shared toolkit. Sources for each cell in data.py and research notes.

4.1 What the theorists add

The scholarly vocabulary for all this was built on the American case, and it transfers to the Thai one with almost embarrassing ease. Milton Gordon's classic 1964 taxonomy distinguished cultural assimilation — food, language, manners — from *structural* assimilation: entry into the receiving society's clubs, marriages and elites. His rule was that structure is the keystone: once a group enters the primary institutions, everything else follows within a generation or two. The Sino-Thai case is Gordon's rule running at full speed — commerce, then parliaments, then palaces — while the Deep South is its contrapositive: a century of cultural pressure with the structural doors (religion, marriage, elite entry) never opened, producing exactly nothing. Alba and Nee's more recent reformulation — assimilation as the decay of an ethnic distinction's everyday salience, a two-way process in which the mainstream itself expands — describes what actually happened in both countries better than any image of minorities dissolving into a fixed majority: "American" stretched to absorb the Irish and the Jews, as "Thai" stretched to absorb the lukjin, and both categories were changed by what they swallowed. Portes and Zhou's warning about *segmented* assimilation — that the second generation can assimilate downward into poverty, or ride an ethnic enclave upward, rather than marching into the middle class — names the live risk in both countries now: Thailand's Burmese and America's post-1965 arrivals face receiving societies with colder ladders than the ones the success stories climbed.

Three lessons stand out from the successes. First, **assimilation ran on invitation backed by pressure, never on pressure alone**. The Chinese in Siam and the Italians in America were squeezed — schools closed, languages banned, names mocked — but they were simultaneously offered something scarce: a real ladder. Where the ladder was withheld (Patani; Black Americans), the same pressure produced not absorption but permanent, organized refusal. Second, **both machines used time as a component**. America's 1924–65 gate and Siam's effective closure of Chinese immigration after 1949 each gave the grinder a stationary target; the three-generation curve needs the generations. Third, **both machines told a story bigger than ethnicity that arrivals could join without ancestry**. Nation-Religion-King is not a bloodline; neither is the Constitution-and-flag civil religion. A Chinese grandson could revere the Thai king; a Sicilian grandson could revere the founders. The successful cores of both projects were, in the strict sense, creedal.

5. Where the machines broke, and how alike the breakage is

5.1 Thailand's limit: the Deep South, and the uninvited

The Thai machine's hard limit runs along religion and script. The same toolkit that absorbed Lao-speaking Buddhists and Teochew-speaking migrants failed against Malay-speaking Muslims in the far south — the provinces of the old Patani sultanate, annexed in 1902 and locked in by the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909. Forced assimilation was tried in earnest: the Phibun-era mandates reached the south as bans on Malay dress and language in official life; the reformist cleric Haji Sulong, who petitioned in 1947 for autonomy, language rights and Islamic law, was arrested and later disappeared, presumed murdered, in 1954; at Dusun Nyor in 1948 a rising ended with roughly four hundred Malays dead. The insurgency that reignited in January 2004 has killed, by the independent Deep South Watch count, about 7,837 people in twenty-two years — the official compensation-based count is 5,999 — including 85 protesters who died at Tak Bai in 2004, a case that reached its statute of limitations in 2024 with no one ever tried. Some 1.5 million Malay Muslims remain, by every cultural measure, unassimilated after twelve decades: more than 70 percent of the three provinces, poorer than the rest of the country, and increasingly assertive — recent Malay-identity gatherings have drawn tens of thousands. Language distance alone does not explain it; Isan's Lao speakers were farther from Central Thai than many Malays are from their Thai-speaking neighbors. The wall is religion and script — the two doors the prestige center never really opened.

The second Thai failure is quieter: the people the machine simply declines to process. Thailand hosts one of the world's largest registered stateless populations — over 570,000 at the end of 2022, mostly hill peoples whose families have lived inside the border for generations — for whom citizenship applications average four and a half years and often, by rights monitors' accounts, a bribe. And it hosts more than four million Myanmar nationals, roughly three-quarters of its 3-4 million registered migrant workers, who keep Thai factories, fisheries and kitchens running under a policy treadmill of temporary cards and cabinet-resolution extensions, with no path to citizenship at all: Thai nationality law runs on blood, and a child born in Bangkok to two Burmese workers is Burmese. Even Isan, the machine's showcase, shows the pattern scholars call integration without inclusion: a third of the population producing a ninth of the GDP. The machine made them Thai; it did not make them equal.

5.2 America's limit: the race line

Begin with the dates, because the dates carry the argument. The Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott* (1857) that Black people, free or enslaved, were not and could never be citizens — judicial exclusion from the civic nation itself. Chinese exclusion, enacted 1882, was made permanent in 1902 and repealed only in 1943, as a wartime courtesy to an ally, with a token quota of 105 Chinese per year. And 1924 — the year the gate closed on southern and eastern Europeans — was

also the year Congress finally granted Native Americans blanket citizenship, an irony worth sitting with: the machine extended membership to the continent's first peoples in the same season it perfected the science of ranking everyone else's blood.

America's machine had its boundary written into its founding statute. The very first naturalization law, in 1790, opened citizenship to "any alien, being a free white person" — and the racial bar took 162 years to remove fully (1952). Inside that line, the machine melted Irishmen, Jews, and Sicilians into a single "white" category. At the line, it did something else entirely. Black Americans were held out of the pot by slavery, then by nine decades of legal segregation. Chinese laborers were excluded by name in 1882 — the first US immigration ban aimed at a race. In 1922 and 1923 the Supreme Court told two model assimilators, one Japanese and one Indian, that no amount of English, Christianity or patriotism made them "white" within the meaning of the statute: whiteness, not assimilation, was the gate. In 1942 the machine's verdict on its own Japanese-American graduates was internment — about 120,000 people, two-thirds of them citizens.

And for Native Americans the machine ran in reverse gear, as coercion without invitation: allotment stripped tribal land from 138 million acres in 1887 to 48 million by 1934, while a system of 417 federal boarding schools, operating from 1819 to 1969 under the motto "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man," separated generations of children from their languages; the government's own 2024 investigation documented at least 973 children who died in them. The comparison with the Deep South is uncomfortably exact: in both countries, where the prestige center offered membership it got assimilation, and where it offered only obedience it got graves, and a grievance that outlived the policy by a century.

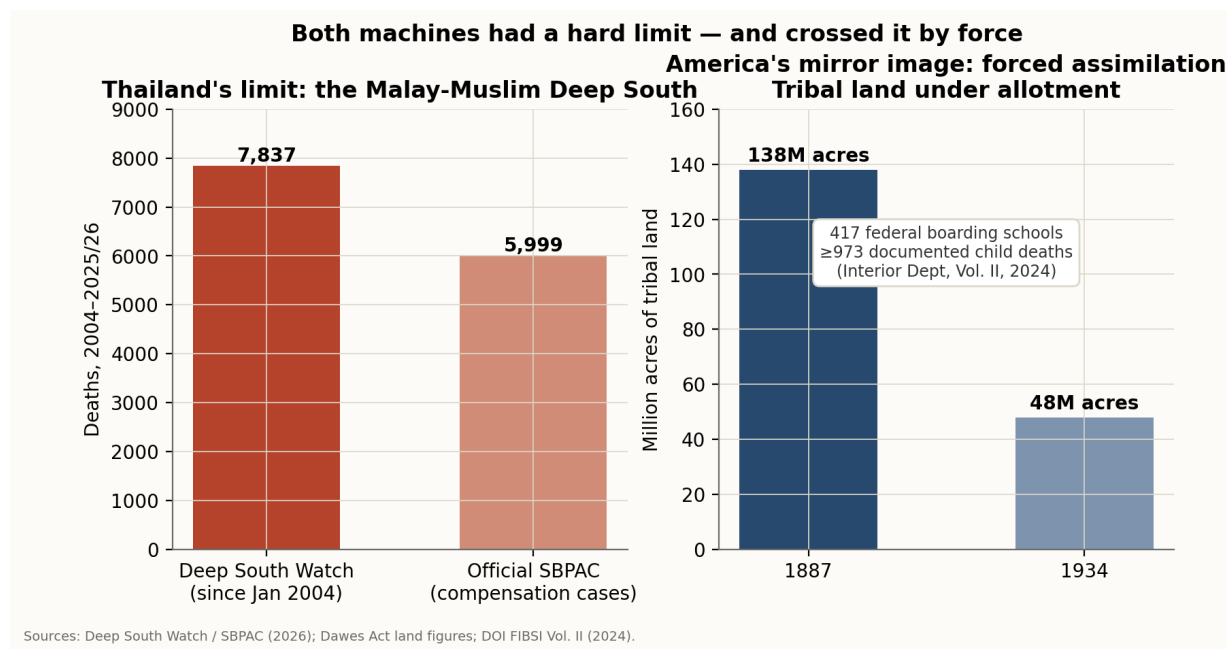


Figure 5. Both machines had a hard limit - and crossed it by force. Left: Deep South insurgency death counts (two tallies). Right: tribal land under US allotment, with the boarding-school system's toll.

Two Thai footnotes complete the ledger. The hill peoples' statelessness has a specific legal genealogy — a 1972 decree stripped citizenship from children of "aliens," and though a 2008 amendment partially repaired the law, the machinery of proof (documents most hill families never had, officials with discretion to demand payment) kept hundreds of thousands of the native-born officially foreign in their own country; between October 2020 and September 2021, a typical year before the recent reform, exactly 2,740 stateless people were granted citizenship — at which rate the queue would take two centuries. And Isan's absorption, the machine's largest single success, carries its own asterisk: the state that erased the word "Lao" in 1899 acknowledged a Lao identity to the United Nations only in 2011, and its 2015 ethnic master plan still declines to recognize "Isan" as an ethnicity at all. Twenty-two million people were made Thai; the categories that might have described what they were before remain, a century later, administratively unspeakable.

5.3 The recurring weather: nativist cycles

The American record adds one more structural fact, crucial to this paper's thesis: hostility to newcomers arrives in cycles, and always has. The Alien and Sedition Acts (1798); the convent-burnings of the 1830s-40s; the Know-Nothing Party, which claimed a million members and took 21.5 percent of the presidential vote in 1856; the American Protective Association's millions in the 1890s; the 1924 quotas; Operation Wetback's million claimed apprehensions in 1954; Proposition 187 in 1994; the post-9/11 registries — each surge recycled, as the historian Peter Schrag documents, nearly identical arguments (unassimilability, disease, crime, wages) against whichever group was newest, beginning with Benjamin Franklin's alarm at the Germans in 1751. John Higham's classic study tied the surges to periods of national anxiety and the recessions to periods of confidence. The point for what follows: the United States has been here before, repeatedly, and each previous ebb was followed by a flow — usually while the country was busy insisting it had closed the door for good.

It is worth lingering on the first great cycle, because its shape is the shape of all of them. The Irish Catholics of the 1830s-50s were, to the Protestant republic receiving them, everything later nativists would say about later groups: impoverished, diseased, criminal, fertile, and loyal to a foreign potentate — the Pope then playing the role assigned in other eras to the Kaiser, the Comintern, or the cartels. A mob burned the Ursuline convent outside Boston in 1834; the Philadelphia Bible Riots of 1844 killed about twenty people and burned two churches; Samuel Morse — the telegraph's Morse — wrote the era's bestselling conspiracy tract. The panic elected governors and nearly elected a president. And then, over two generations, it simply dissolved: the Irish captured the cities' police forces and political machines, the Church built a parallel school system that Americanized as efficiently as the public one, and by 1960 the grandson of famine emigrants was president and anti-Catholicism a curiosity. Nothing in the record says a panic's intensity predicts the target's fate; the machine's door, not the mob's temperature, decides.

Two details underline how literal the recurrence is. The Know-Nothings at their 1854 peak did not merely poll well — they swept Massachusetts whole: the governorship, the entire congressional delegation, every state senate seat. The republic survived, absorbed the Irish the movement existed to exclude, and within two generations was electing their grandchildren. And the oldest tool in the kit never left the toolbox: the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, the surviving fragment of the first great nativist panic, was invoked again in March 2025 — a 227-year-old statute doing 2026's work, which is about as concise a demonstration of the cycle as the archive offers.

5.4 The homogeneity that faded on its own: America's cultural unraveling

One thread of the American story has no Thai parallel, and it matters for reading 2026 honestly: the mid-century homogeneity did not merely come under pressure from new arrivals — much of it dissolved from within, among the already-assimilated, for reasons that had little to do with immigration. The shared information commons went first. The three networks that held over 95 percent of prime time in the 1950s and 60s gave way to cable, then to streaming, which in May 2025 passed broadcast and cable *combined* for the first time; there is no longer any single thing most Americans watch. Trust followed the fragmentation down: confidence in mass media fell from 72 percent in 1976 to a record-low 28 percent in 2025; trust in the federal government from 77 percent in 1964 to roughly 22 percent; average confidence across fourteen major institutions stood at 27 percent in mid-2026, against 48 percent in 1979. Putnam documented the associational collapse a generation ago — league bowling down 40 percent while bowling itself grew; club meetings down 58 percent — and partisan mutual loathing has more than doubled since the 1990s. The relevance to this paper is double-edged. On one hand it cautions against romanticizing the machine: some of what looked like assimilation's triumph was simply the mid-century's unusual institutional gravity — the draft, the networks, the churches — which pulled on natives and newcomers alike, and which no immigration policy can restore. On the other hand it clarifies the 2026 anxiety: Americans experiencing the loss of a shared culture are not wrong about the loss; they are wrong, on the evidence above, about its principal cause.

6. 2025–26: watching the ebb phase in real time

6.1 The United States: from record flow to negative net migration

The present American moment is best read against Figure 4. In January 2025 the foreign-born population hit an all-time record — 53.3 million people, 15.8 percent of the country, finally surpassing the 1890 share after 135 years — at the end of a decade of high inflows. What followed was the sharpest policy reversal since 1924. Removals reached 442,637 in fiscal 2025 by ICE's own accounting (independent analysts put calendar-2025 removals lower, around 310–315 thousand, and note the deeper change was collapsed *entries*); southwest border encounters fell to 237,538 for the entire fiscal year — the lowest since 1970, and fewer than the single month of

December 2023; the refugee ceiling was cut to 7,500, the lowest in the program's history; and by Brookings' January 2026 estimate the United States experienced negative net international migration in 2025 — somewhere between minus 295 and minus 10 thousand — for the first time in at least half a century. The foreign-born population began falling within months, the first sustained decline since the 1960s.

The enforcement wave's texture belongs in the record alongside its totals. Active-duty Marines and federalized National Guard were deployed to Los Angeles in June 2025, then to Washington, Memphis, Portland, Chicago and New Orleans — roughly half a billion dollars of domestic troop deployments in 2025 by the Congressional Budget Office's accounting, with courts blocking two of them. The administration claimed by May 2026 that more than three million unauthorized immigrants had left the country, including two million "self-deportations"; independent demographers found the claim unsupported, but even the cautious estimates agree the unauthorized population — about 14 million people in 2023, over a quarter of all US immigrants — has begun shrinking for the first time in years. The refugee program's fate compressed the era into a single statistic with a twist: a ceiling of 7,500, the lowest ever, with the slots primarily reserved for white South African Afrikaners — an admissions policy that would have been legible, in every detail, to the drafters of the 1924 national-origins formula.

Two details complicate the simple story, and both matter to the thesis. First, public opinion did not follow the enforcement wave — it ran against it. Gallup's long-running series shows the share calling immigration "a good thing" hitting a record 79 percent in June 2025, up fifteen points in a year, with the share wanting less immigration collapsing from 55 to 30 percent; by mid-2026 the numbers had settled only slightly, to 73 and 29. Americans, it turns out, rediscover their affection for immigration precisely when the flow ebbs — exactly as the cyclical model predicts, and exactly as happened after 1924. Second, the country's institutions held a line the 1920s never tested: in June 2026 the Supreme Court ruled 5–4 in *Trump v. Barbara* that the executive order stripping birthright citizenship was unconstitutional, reaffirming the Fourteenth Amendment rule that soil, not blood, makes Americans. The gate closed; the definition of membership did not narrow. That distinction is the hinge of section 7.

6.2 Thailand: millions outside a gate that barely opens

Thailand's 2025–26 strain is the inverse shape. Where America's problem is a machine throttling a flow it long invited, Thailand's is a machine that never built an intake at all, pressed against by the largest migration in its history. More than four million Myanmar nationals now live in the kingdom — refugees from the 2021 coup, the civil war, and the 2024 conscription law, on top of decades of labor migration — with roughly 1.7 million undocumented. Policy has been a treadmill of registration windows and cabinet-resolution extensions covering hundreds of thousands of workers at a time, punctuated by mass deportation drives (some 144,000 Myanmar nationals in one three-month stretch from August 2024) and, for those handed back to the junta, forced

conscription. The nine border camps holding over 107,000 refugees lost most of their international support to US aid cuts in 2025. Meanwhile an actual shooting war opened on the Cambodian border in July 2025 — at least 35 dead and over 300,000 displaced in five days, a ceasefire, then renewed airstrikes in December — driving nationalist temperature higher still.

Against that backdrop, the one genuine widening of the gate looks both historic and fragile. In October 2024 the cabinet approved fast-tracked status for 483,626 long-term residents and their Thailand-born children — potentially, in UNHCR's words, the most dramatic reduction of statelessness the world has ever seen. Implementation then stalled for months under nationalist backlash branding it a "Thai nationality giveaway"; by April 2026, 113,274 people had actually received status, with the enabling notification set to expire and its future uncertain under a new government. The pattern is Thai to the core: the machine can absorb — it is arguably better at absorption than any state in Southeast Asia — but its default setting, hardened in the era when Thainess was invented, is that membership is inherited, not earned. Blood law with a narrow, revocable side door.

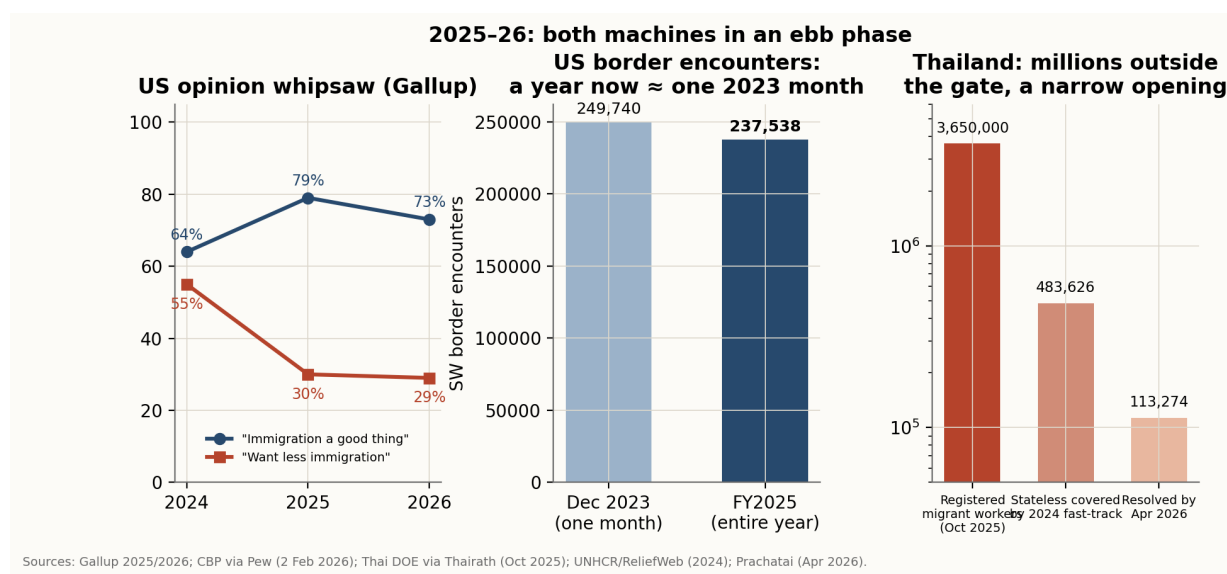


Figure 6. 2025-26: both machines in an ebb phase. Left: Gallup's opinion whipsaw. Center: the US flow collapse. Right: Thailand's outsiders and the narrow opening. Sources in data.py.

The border's criminal economy sharpened everything. In February 2025 Thailand cut electricity, fuel and internet to the Myanmar border zones hosting industrial-scale online-scam compounds — within weeks more than seven thousand trafficked workers released from the Myawaddy compounds were stranded awaiting repatriation through Thai territory. The episode matters here for what it did to the politics: it fused, in Thai public discourse, the categories of migrant, victim and criminal into a single border menace, at precisely the moment the stateless fast-track needed public patience. Machines idle fastest when the gate acquires a smell of danger; 1919 America and 2025 Thailand would understand each other perfectly.

6.3 The same ebb, two mechanisms

	United States, 2025-26	Thailand, 2025-26
The stock at peak	53.3M foreign-born = 15.8% (Jan 2025, all-time record)	>4M Myanmar nationals; ~3-4M registered migrant workers; 570k+ stateless
The policy turn	442,637 ICE removals FY2025; refugee cap 7,500; negative net migration	~144k deported in one 3-month stretch; renewal treadmill (no naturalization)
Force at the edge	Troops in six cities (~\$496M in 2025); courts blocked two deployments	Cambodia border war: 35+ dead, 300k+ displaced (Jul 2025); resumed Dec
The membership rule	Jus soli challenged by EO 14160 - struck down 5-4 (Trump v. Barbara, 2026)	Jus sanguinis intact; fast-track for 483,626 -> 113,274 resolved by Apr 2026
Opinion	Pro-immigration record high during crackdown (79% 'good thing', 2025)	Nationalist backlash branded reform a 'nationality giveaway'
Demography beneath	Under-18 already majority-minority; workforce shrinks without migrants	0.42% growth, lowest ever; civil registry shrinking

Table 2. The two 2026 crises, side by side. All figures from data.py with sources.

Set side by side, the two 2026 crises rhyme in structure while differing in mechanism. Both countries are richer, older and lower-fertility than their machines' design era — Thailand's 2025 census growth rate, 0.42 percent, is the lowest ever recorded there, and the US working-age population now shrinks without immigrants. Both face inflows more culturally distant, in the receiving society's eyes, than the flows their machines mastered: Burmese Buddhists are nearer to Thainess than Malay Muslims ever were, yet arrive stateless by law; post-1965 American arrivals cross the old color line by definition. Both are experiencing nativist surges championed from the top of the political system, and in both the surge coexists with broad evidence that the grinder still works — third-generation language shift in America is as fast as it was in 1910, and second-generation Burmese children in Thai schools speak Thai. The difference: America is choking a working intake; Thailand never built one. Ebb, in one case, of flow; in the other, of an absorption the law refuses to begin.

7. Objections, taken seriously

A comparison this convenient should be distrusted on sight, so here are the four strongest objections the author can construct, with replies.

Objection 1: Thailand's homogeneity is suppression wearing assimilation's clothes. The 99 percent census, this objection runs, measured not absorption but the state's refusal to count difference — and the Deep South, the stateless hill peoples, and the unspeakability of "Isan" as a category prove the whole project was coercion. Reply: partly conceded, and the paper's own Figure 1 is the concession. But the objection cannot explain the Sino-Thai case, where the measure of assimilation is not the census but behavior no state can fake at scale: intermarriage, language shift, and the voluntary self-identification of a commercial elite that had every resource to remain separate. Nor can it explain Isan's political loyalty through two centuries in which secession was

geographically thinkable. The honest summary is that Thainess ran two programs — absorption where it opened doors, suppression where it did not — and the paper's argument depends precisely on keeping both in view.

Objection 2: the American machine never worked either — it only ever melted white people.

Reply: as a description of 1790–1965, largely conceded; section 5.2 is built on it. But the claim has a testable modern form, and the tests keep failing to confirm it. Post-1965 immigrants and their children — mostly Latin American and Asian, mostly outside the old whiteness — show name-giving convergence as fast as the Italians', three-generation language shift as complete as the Germans', and intermarriage rising steadily across the very line the machine once enforced. The race line was the machine's shame, but it has proven to be a policy, not a law of nature — which is exactly why its partial dismantling after 1965 changed the machine's outputs.

Objection 3: 2026 is not an ebb but a rupture — this time is different. The strongest version points to features 1924 lacked: mass deportation of settled residents rather than mere exclusion at the border, troops in cities, an attempt (defeated) to redefine birthright membership itself. Reply: the differences are real and the paper does not minimize them; an ebb that deports is crueler than an ebb that merely excludes. But the cyclical claim is about direction and duration, not gentleness, and on those the structural evidence — opinion moving against the crackdown while it runs, the membership rule surviving its direct challenge, the economy's deepening labor dependence — matches the profile of every previous ebb's final years, not of a new permanent settlement. The falsifiers in section 8 state what evidence would prove this reply wrong.

Objection 4: the comparison itself is apples and oranges — a 70-million kingdom that absorbed neighbors is nothing like a 340-million republic built on oceanic immigration.

Reply: the difference in intake is conceded and doing work throughout — it is why Thailand's 2026 crisis is about a missing gate and America's about a closed one. What the comparison rests on is not similarity of circumstance but convergence of design: five components, independently invented, same decades, same failure mode. When two unrelated engineers build the same machine for the same problem, the machine — not the engineers' nationality — is the interesting object. That is the sense in which this paper compares.

8. The genius-history hat: a forecast, labeled as such

Everything to this point has been history with sources. This section is explicitly speculative — pattern-matching from the record above, stated falsifiably where possible.

Claim 1. The United States is running the 1924 playbook, and the consolidation effect will partly repeat — but the pause will be shorter. The structural rhyme with 1924 is strong: record foreign-born share, restriction, falling inflow. If the pause holds even a decade, expect measurable consolidation among the post-1965 second and third generations — accelerating English dominance, rising intermarriage, the softening of "Hispanic" into something like the "symbolic

ethnicity" of the white ethnics by mid-century. The forces that broke the 1924 consensus, though, are already present at the start rather than emerging at the end: fertility far below replacement, an aging workforce, sectors openly dependent on migrant labor, and — the genuinely new fact — public opinion that turned pro-immigration during the crackdown, not after it. The 1924 gate lasted 41 years. This one, I would guess, lasts less than ten before economics reopens it; the Gallup whipsaw suggests the political demand for reopening is already forming. Falsifier: if by the early 2030s net migration remains negative and opinion has followed policy restrictionist, the cyclical model is wrong about the American case.

Claim 2. Thailand will widen Thainess — reluctantly, incrementally, and first for those already inside. Thailand's demographic arithmetic is harsher than America's: lowest-ever recorded growth, a shrinking labor force, and an economy that already runs on three to four million foreign workers the law treats as permanently temporary. The path of least resistance, visible in the 2024 stateless resolution, is to regularize the long-present and native-born first — hill peoples, then perhaps the Thailand-born children of migrants — while keeping the Burmese labor force itself on the treadmill. Expect no *jus soli*, no mass naturalization, and continued nationalist eruptions against each step; but expect the steps to continue, because the alternative is demographic contraction without relief. The Deep South, tragically, changes least: nothing in the machine's history suggests it can absorb a community whose religion and script it never made room for, and nothing in current politics suggests it will try inclusion-by-invitation at the scale required. Falsifier: if the stateless fast-track dies entirely and no successor program appears by 2030, the "reluctant widening" model is wrong.

The demography beneath both claims. The 2020 US census counted the non-Hispanic White share at 57.8 percent, down six points in a decade, with the under-18 population already majority-minority; the Census Bureau's 2018-vintage projections put the overall crossover around 2045, a date the current negative net migration will push later but not cancel, since the under-18 numbers are already born. Thailand's census tells the mirror story: 70.3 million people growing at 0.42 percent, the slowest rate ever recorded there, in a country whose civil registry has begun shrinking outright. Both nostalgic self-images — a whiter America, a more purely Tai Thailand — are demographically unrecoverable by any policy short of the catastrophic, which is precisely why this paper expects both machines to be restarted rather than mothballed: the only alternative supply of compatriots is the one at the gate.

Claim 3. Neither machine is dying; both are idling. The deeper reading of 2026 is not that assimilation has failed in either country but that both societies have, for the moment, stopped asking their machines to run — America by throttling the intake, Thailand by refusing to install one. The machinery itself — schools, prestige ladders, national creeds open to joiners — remains in place and demonstrably functional in both. Putnam's finding is the right frame for the era: diversity depresses trust in the short run, and societies respond, in the long run, by building larger

identities that re-encompass the strangers. Both countries have done exactly that before, each within living memory of someone's grandmother. The wager of this paper is that the tide turns again — in America because the economy and the electorate will demand it, in Thailand because the birth rate will leave no choice. Ebb and flow; and before the USA was, at the least, more uniformly white in self-image, and Thailand more purely Tai in self-image, than either in fact ever was — the homogeneity each is nostalgic for was itself the product of the last flow.

9. Conclusion

Two countries on opposite sides of the earth, with opposite founding stories, solved the same problem with the same machine: a prestige center worth joining, schools to carry it, names and symbols to seal it, an enemy to define its edge, and a gate to control its intake. Both machines produced spectacular successes — the Sino-Thai absorption, the white-ethnic melting pot — and both failed identically at the boundary where membership was withheld: the race line in America, the religion-and-script line in Thailand, each failure enforced by violence and each still unhealed. Both official homogeneities were manufactured and both are currently strained, America's by a closed gate and Thailand's by a gate never built. The record of both countries says the strain is a phase of the cycle, not the end of the story. The machines are idling, not broken — and the demographic arithmetic of both countries is already leaning on the lever.

End on the two images that anchor the argument. Detroit, July 4, 1917: grown men in the costumes of a dozen countries climb into a painted cauldron and climb out American, waving flags, while their employer's cameras roll — absurd, coercive, sincere, and effective, all at once. Bangkok, 1915: clerks across the kingdom register family names newly required by royal decree, names that within two generations will make grandchildren of Teochew shopkeepers indistinguishable, on paper and increasingly in fact, from the descendants of Ayutthaya. Neither scene shows a natural process. Both show a machine, staffed by people who believed in it, offering strangers a deal — dignity's price paid in difference surrendered — that millions, given a real ladder, chose to take. The deal is out of fashion in both capitals in 2026. The record assembled here says: not for the first time, and not for long.

Appendix: provenance and method

This paper was produced under a documented human-AI pipeline (PROCESS.md in the project folder): (0) question, stance and scope fixed in writing before research; (1) research sweeps in English and Thai — Thai-language sources were searched first for the Thai side, including Silpa Wathanatham, Matichon, Thai Wikipedia/Wikisource primary texts, Thairath, Thai PBS and Deep South Watch reporting; (2) an independent AI re-verification pass on 22 headline numbers against primary or near-primary sources, which corrected two figures before drafting (the federal boarding-school count, 408 to 417, and the Thai registered-migrant-worker total, 4.08M to ~3.65M) and hedged three others; (3) every number moved into data.py with source and verification status before any prose was written; (4) figures generated by script from the same file; (5) this document built by script (build_paper_v1.py), so that the whole paper rebuilds from source in two commands. Public-domain historical images are fetched by script from Wikimedia Commons with a license log (_sources.tsv); where downloads are unavailable the build substitutes labeled stand-in plates, as in this draft. An

adversarial review (attack-defense-verdict) follows this draft and its outcomes will be reflected in v2.

Principal sources are cited inline throughout `data.py` and `research_notes.md`; key works relied on include Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped* (1994) and "The Quest for Siwilai" (2000); Tambiah (1976); Vella, *Chaiyo!* (1978); Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand* (1957); Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983); Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (1955); Zolberg, *A Nation by Design* (2006); Tichenor, *Dividing Lines* (2002); Gordon (1964); Alba and Nee (2003); Portes and Zhou (1993); Abramitzky, Boustan and Eriksson (2016, 2020); Putnam (2000, 2007); and, for 2025-26 events, Gallup, Pew, Brookings, CBP, ICE, the Federal Register, the US Supreme Court's slip opinion in *Trump v. Barbara*, Deep South Watch, SBPAC, UNHCR, HRW, Prachatai and the Thai Department of Employment.