

Meritocracy Without Borders: Sowell Edition

In recent years, Thomas Sowell has been a staunch advocate of stricter immigration policies. Which is ironic, because this passage from his *Compassion Versus Guilt* has stuck with me for thirty years:

When I travel through California's vast agricultural areas, the people I see working in the fields under the hot sun are usually Mexicans. So are many of the people who clean the hotels. But when I have been approached by a panhandler in San Francisco or Los Angeles, it has never been a Mexican.

Almost invariably, the panhandlers have been young, healthy-looking whites with middle-class accents. These men remind me of the old English expression, "sturdy beggars."

One nicely dressed young woman with a well-modulated voice looked so different from the image of the panhandler that I was already past her before I realized that that was what she was. But I have seen her again. She works one of the better business districts of San Francisco.

All I can do is walk past such people. To give them money would be to say that they are somehow better than the Mexicans who have to earn their living by helping to feed the rest of society and by keeping hotels and offices clean. How these young, middle-class people get the nerve to ask a black man (whose mother was a maid) for money is beyond me.

Many, probably most, of the Mexicans Sowell is talking about would have entered the U.S. illegally. But back in the 1980s, he didn't care about their immigration status. He looked past our oppressive regulations to judge people on their merits. And it wasn't a hard call, either.

I'm just starting my next book, *Poverty: Who To Blame*. But when the book finally comes

out, you should definitely expect Sowell's wise words contained therein.