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From 200 to 300 million, how we've changed

U.S. adds 100 million people in just 39 years; what's different?

By Mike Taibbi

COYOTE SPRINGS, Nev. — 300 million: That's the population milestone the Census Bureau says we reached Tuesday morning.

It took the new nation called America 139 years to reach the 100 million mark, and it was 52 more years before President Lyndon B. Johnson marked the next milestone.

"We have success in America beyond our wildest dreams," said Johnson in 1967.

Thirty-nine years later, we hit 300 million. So we're growing faster, unlike shrinking industrialized nations from Japan to Russia to Europe.

It's a different America than the 1967 version. Now, 56.6 percent of the population is white. In 1967, more than three-quarters of the country (76.6 percent) was white.

Now, on any given day, 11,000 newborns and 3,000 immigrants add another soul on American soil every 11 seconds.

Demographer Sam Preston says there's room.

"The Netherlands has 15 times the density — people per square mile — that the United States has," says Preston.

But the Irish, Italians and Germans who arrived to build and populate our big cities have been largely supplanted by blacks, Asians and, in huge numbers, Hispanics. And collectively we're moving those cities and our coastlines to the South and West.

Yet, in a lot of the parts of this country described as the "fastest growing," like Clark County, Nev., you can look around you as far as you can see, in any direction, and not see any people! Not yet.

But just as Warren Beatty as the mobster Bugsy Siegel first imagined Las Vegas — "I got it! I got it! It came to me like a vision!" said Beatty-as-Siegel in the 1991 movie "Bugsy" — Nevada developer Harvey Whittemore had his own Bugsy Siegel moment about a decade ago.

He plans to build 159,000 homes — with golf courses, schools, shops and roads — a whole new city 56 miles from Las Vegas.

"People said, 'you're crazy,'" recalls Whittemore. "Well, the next step is, 'you're a visionary,' and the step after 'you're a visionary' is 'you're lucky.'"

And Nevada, like Arizona and other booming states, is betting it'll stay lucky by relocating the American dream.

"We're going to build to the natural limits of what's available," says Whittemore.

Conservationists like Scott Rutledge do have their worries.

"I wonder where we're going to get the water," he says.

But young families like Mark and Gail Hunt and their four kids are deciding uprooting is worth it. They moved from California to Nevada just last month for better jobs, shorter commutes, and lower prices all around.

"We're telling our California family and friends they ought to consider moving here," says Gail.

And thousands are, to more of the places a still-growing America is ready to call, home.

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