

14. *Immigration*

Immigration has suddenly exploded on the public policy scene as one of the hot-button political issues of the 1990s. In California there is near-hysteria over immigration. The siege mentality in that state contributed to the passage in November of Proposition 187—the controversial anti-illegal immigration ballot measure. Unfortunately, the anti-immigrant hysteria has now invaded Washington, D.C. A national immigration commission has called for a federal computerized registry of work authorization data on all Americans. House Republicans have endorsed a national identification card to combat illegal immigration. And the incoming chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Alan Simpson, wants to restrict not just illegal but *legal* immigration.

Those are all dreadful ideas. The fact that they are being promoted in large part by Republicans raises the troubling prospect of the GOP's becoming a nativist party. That is particularly unfortunate because in the recent past there has been a consensus among growth-oriented Republicans—Dick Armev, Jack Kemp, Newt Gingrich, Phil Gramm, and others—that immigrants are, on balance, economic and cultural assets to the United States. That assessment is confirmed by the vast majority of the evidence. More important, if the recent election elevated the GOP as the party of "more freedom, less government," then concepts such as work authorization cards, which would give vast new police powers to the federal government, must be vigorously rejected by the new congressional majority. They are certainly inconsistent with President Ronald Reagan's view of America as a "shining city on a hill."

The correct immigration policy for the new Congress should revolve around a very simple theme that most Americans would likely embrace: immigrants yes, welfare no. That means that the gates to legal immigrants should be opened wider. But it also means that the foreign born should be made ineligible for nonemergency public assistance benefits for at least their first five years in the United States—in other words, we should return to our historical policy that immigrants not be permitted to become "public charges." Federal assistance programs for refugees—a group whose welfare

usage has surged in the past decade—should be abolished and replaced with private programs to provide transitional assistance.

Specifically, Congress should

- **reject the computer registry of worker authorizations,**
- **resist reductions or caps on legal immigration,**
- **expand legal immigration quotas,**
- **restrict immigrants' eligibility for welfare,**
- **repeal the employer sanctions law.**

The Economic Case for More Immigrants

Why does America need immigrants? Perhaps the answer to that question was most eloquently given by Jeane Kirkpatrick at the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty. "What gives resonance to our republic," said Kirkpatrick, "is its continual renewal by new citizens who bring to us a special sense of the importance of freedom and liberty." Many decades ago prize-winning author Oscar Handlin made the same point somewhat differently: "Once I thought to write a history of immigration. Then I discovered that immigrants *are* American history."

They still are. In the 1980s nearly 7.5 million newcomers (Figure 14.1) came to the United States—some as skill- and family-based legal immigrants, some as refugees fleeing persecution, and some as illegal aliens—almost all of them in search of freedom and economic opportunity. According to the 1990 census, roughly 1 in 12 residents of the United States was born abroad. In some states, such as California, Florida, and Texas, nearly 1 in 5 residents is an immigrant.

Compared with other periods of American history, immigration is low today. Figure 14.2 shows that immigrant arrivals as a share of the population—the most relevant measure of the impact of immigrants on our culture, infrastructure, and labor markets—is less than half the historical average. We can absorb, and have absorbed, far more immigrants than we do today.

The overriding economic impact of immigrants is to raise the standard of living of American citizens. Immigrants are economically advantageous to the United States for several reasons: (1) they are self-selected on the basis of motivation, risk-taking, work ethic, and other attributes that are beneficial to a nation; (2) they tend to come to the United States when

Figure 14.1
Number of Immigrant Arrivals by Decade, 1820–1990

1820–1830	151,824
1831–1840	599,125
1841–1850	1,713,251
1851–1860	2,598,214
1861–1870	2,314,191
1871–1880	2,812,191
1881–1890	5,246,613
1891–1900	13,687,564
1901–1910	8,795,386
1911–1920	5,735,811
1921–1930	4,107,209
1931–1940	528,431
1941–1950	1,035,039
1951–1960	2,515,479
1961–1970	3,321,677
1971–1980	4,493,314
1981–1990	7,338,062

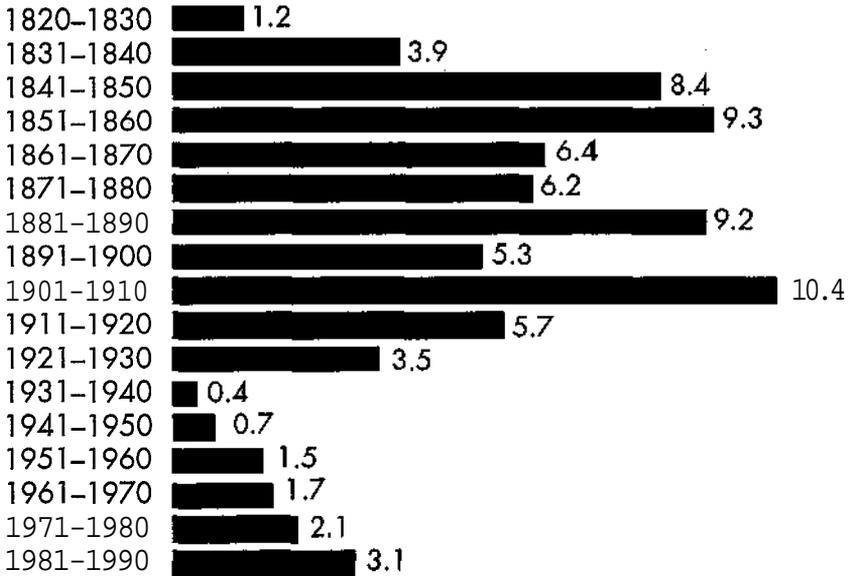
SOURCE: *Strangers at Our Gate: Immigration in the 1990s* (New York: Manhattan Institute, n.d.), p. 102.

they are in their prime working years; (3) they are more likely to start new businesses than are native-born Americans; (4) many arrive with extremely high skill levels that are instrumental to the world leadership of America's high-technology industries in places like Silicon Valley; (5) their children tend to reach very high levels of achievement in the United States; and (6) because they come to the United States when they are young, they make huge net contributions to old age entitlement programs, primarily Social Security.

Immigration: Myths and Reality

There are very few issues on which myth and reality are as distantly separated as on immigration. Opponents of immigration maintain that immigrants impose large economic costs on the United States and are "contaminating our culture." Yet research shows that almost all of the major objections to continued immigration are exaggerated. In fact, a careful review of the evidence on the impact of immigration leads to the following conclusions:

Figure 14.2
Rate of Immigration by Decade, 1820–1990
(number of immigrants per 1,000 U.S. residents)



SOURCE: *Strangers at Our Gate: Immigration in the 1990s* (New York: Manhattan Institute, n.d.), p. 103.

1. Immigrants use welfare and other social services at about the same rate that U.S.-born citizens do. The taxes paid by immigrants typically cover the cost of the public services they use.
2. There is no evidence to support the claim that immigrants in the long term cause unemployment or depress wages of U.S. citizens. Immigrants create at least as many jobs as they take by expanding the economy.
3. Immigrants are not eroding American culture. A recent report by the Manhattan Institute, entitled “The Index of Leading Immigration Indicators,” reveals that immigrants share our common values. Compared with the native born, immigrants are more likely to have intact families, more likely to have college degrees, more likely to be working, and no more likely to commit crimes.
4. Recent immigrants are not less skilled or educated than previous ones. In fact, the Asian immigrants who have come to the United States in large numbers over the past two decades have been, according to a study by the RAND Corporation, “one of the most skilled

groups ever to come to the United States." Asian incomes are well above the U.S. median.

5. Illegal immigration is not "out of control." Today there are an estimated 3 million to 4 million illegal immigrants residing in the United States, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That is far fewer than the 6 million to 8 million figure commonly cited in the media. Moreover, in a nation of 260 million Americans, only about 1.5 percent of the population are illegals.

That is not to say that immigrants do not impose some costs on the rest of us, that *all* immigrants who come are beneficial, or that our current immigration policy could not be improved. In the short term, immigrants do cause more crowding on the highways, in our hospitals, and in our schools. There is also troubling evidence that welfare use among immigrants—particularly refugees—is on the rise. But there is certainly no immigration crisis.

Immigration Reform: What Not to Do

It is an iron rule of politics that whenever there is a perceived "crisis" in Washington, Congress responds by passing bad laws. Those laws invariably expand the powers of government. That is a very real current danger in the area of immigration reform. Almost all of the recent immigration reform ideas are misguided. Two ideas in particular should be rejected.

1. The computer registry of worker authorizations. The national identification card-worker registry system recommended by the National Immigration Commission would be a major new police power for the federal government. The worker authorization card for all American workers has no redeeming feature: it would be an invasion of basic civil liberties; it would put in place a technology that could be easily expanded for other purposes, such as the Hillary Clinton health care security card; it would increase discrimination against Latino and Asian populations; it would carry a price tag in the billions of dollars; it would be fraught with errors and fraud; and most important, it would not deter illegal immigration. At a time when we routinely see the Internal Revenue Service; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; the Environmental Protection Agency; the Occupational Safety and Health Administration; and other federal bureaucracies abusing their powers, Congress should be very skeptical of the idea of giving government vast new authority.

2. Reductions in or caps on legal immigration. Most Americans agree that *legal* immigrants are not the **problem**—and indeed, that they are assets. Yet there are a number of prominent proposals before Congress to dramatically reduce and cap legal immigrant visas. They should be rejected.

Real Immigration Reform: Immigrants Yes, Welfare No

There are several positive reforms that Congress should make to America's immigration laws.

1. Expand legal immigration quotas. Currently, America's legal immigration policies are overly restrictive. Far more immigrants should be permitted to come to the United States and share the American idea of liberty and opportunity. Some visas could be reserved for those with exceptional skills, some for refugees fleeing tyranny, and some distributed through a lottery or auction. Regardless of how the additional slots are allocated, the quota for legal immigrants should be at least doubled.
2. Restrict immigrants' welfare eligibility. Many Americans worry that the United States' generous welfare policies may serve as a magnet to immigrants. Although that is not true for most newcomers, it may be true for some. Legal immigrants should be denied all public assistance benefits for at least their first five years in the United States. That would be consistent with a policy of immigration yes, welfare no. There would be no shortage of hard-working immigrants under those conditions.
3. Repeal the employer sanctions law. The law that created sanctions against employers for hiring illegal immigrants has been a costly failure. Every credible study—by the General Accounting Office and private research groups—**confirms** that the sanctions have caused "widespread employment discrimination" against minorities. Meanwhile, sanctions have not deterred illegal immigration. Businesses should never have been made the policemen of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. If the GOP is seeking to **eliminate** costly mandates on business that have no positive impact, employer sanctions ought to be at the top of the list.

Conclusion

Immigrants built America. They still do, from the second-floor apparel firms of New York's Chinatown to the software designers of Silicon

Valley. We should not let our concerns about welfare spending, slow economic growth, and coercive **multiculturalism** be diverted into an ugly nativist reaction to immigrants. We should deal with the real problems, not make scapegoats of innocent people.

Suggested Readings

Briggs, Vernon, and Stephen Moore. *Still an Open Door? U.S. Immigration Policy and the American Economy*. Washington: American University Press, 1994.

Handlin, Oscar. *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People*. New York: Little Brown, 1973.

Simon, Julian L. *The Economic Consequences of Immigration*. Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

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