

IMMIGRATION CURRENT AFFAIRS
SEPTEMBER 20, 2018

With your permission I would like to take a few minutes to review the history of immigration in the United States and then open up for discussion revolving around 3 questions:

- A. Do we have an immigration problem in the US? Is it possible we don't have enough immigrants?
- B. Are immigrants a national security risk or a net addition to our economy and society?
- C. Should we move to a merit based system for selecting immigrants? What do we mean by merit?

If there is a single foundation document that holds America together it is our Declaration of Independence which promises "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Most Americans know this. Most Americans have also heard or read the words engraved on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." The question that has been debated for the past two hundred years is for whom and for how many are these words applicable. The debates over immigration are not new. Benjamin Franklin in 1753 complained that the colony of Pennsylvania, the most diverse of the colonies, was one third German. Franklin was clear that "these people are generally of the most stupid sort." He complained that they refused to learn English. I would argue that the question of immigration in America is really a question of Who Are We? Who do we want to be?

In my research about immigration I have concluded that the issues today are no different than they were in 1800. They revolve around race, religion and skin color. Moreover, the ebb and flow of immigrants has always depended upon whether we needed cheap labor. When we thought immigrants could help build our railroads and our subways they were welcome. Likewise if they could pick our grapes or program our computers they were welcome. When the need for that labor diminishes, however, they are not welcome. Rather than giving us your tired and your poor what we really wanted was your muscle, or more recently your brains, and your low wage demands.

I said that immigration has always revolved around race, religion and skin color. Our forefathers who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620 were white, anglo saxon protestants. They established the criteria for who would be an acceptable American. The early immigrants from Western Europe (primarily UK, Scandinavia and Germany) pretty well fit the criteria for white and protestant. The language issue Franklin complained about could be dealt with in time. However, it was not until the mid 1800s during the potato famine that a new problem was introduced. The Irish were Catholics. You only have to think back to the election of John F. Kennedy to remember how America felt about placing a Roman Catholic in high office. As we approached the 20th century the flow of immigrants was more from Italy, Spain and Eastern Europe. That meant different skin tones and more Catholics and Jews coming to this country. It wasn't until the 1850s when large numbers of Chinese came to California to work in the gold rush and the

textile factories that America began to openly debate what kind of a country we really wanted to be. The arrival of the Chinese led to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. This is the only time that our government has legislated the exclusion of an entire race regardless of education or job skills. However, the arrival of the Chinese heightened the awareness of the fact that many immigrants were not white and did not speak English. Between 1910 and 1920 the Mexican population tripled in America to 650,000. These immigrants certainly didn't speak English, were largely Catholic and had brown skin. In the popular press they were described at "uneducated, dirty, diseased, criminal and lazy." Where have we heard that recently?

What is the state of immigration today and what is driving our immigration debate? About 45 million (15%) of our population are immigrants. These include those who are full citizens, those here on visas and those here illegally. The percentage of the population 15% is exactly the same percentage as it was 100 years ago. There are some differences, however. More (11 million or 4% of the population) are here illegally than was true in the 19th and early 20th century. Also for the first time we have a muslim immigrant population which adds a new dimension of fear and anxiety, and we are facing the inevitable fact that within the next 30 years the United States will have 25% Hispanic population with the Asians coming in a close second. In fact, based on a NYT front page article last week since 2010 41% of immigrants arriving in the US are Asians and 39% are Hispanic. The Indian population alone has increased from 120,000 in 1960 to 2.6 million today. 50% of all immigrants arriving in the US today have college degrees compared to a third of native born Americans. Demographers are telling us that by 2030 immigration will overtake new births as the main source of population growth. Non Hispanic whites are the only group in decline.

It wasn't until the 1920s that our Congress introduced quota limitations on immigration. The basic formula was that each country could add a fixed percentage (2%) to its already existing immigrant population in the US. So the UK for example could add many more immigrants than Norway. In 1965 Congress changed the approach by putting up quotas for different Hemispheres. This opened Africa to a much larger migration. Likewise Asia. Part of this was born out of the fact that the Western European countries were doing well economically and had less interest in sending people to the US. Nor did Western Europe any longer represent a cheap source of labor. In addition, the 1965 immigration legislation emphasized preference for family members. This became known as chain migration.

We have all been told we need comprehensive immigration reform. What we can't seem to agree on is who and how many that should be. I think what we are really debating is what kind of country we want to be in the next 100 years. What are your thoughts? Do we have an immigration problem?

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