

Downside UP

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Immigration Part I: Race, Religion, Restrictions, and Reform

It often seems there are no new issues in American politics and society. The raging controversy surrounding immigration today can only confirm this perception. In a nation of immigrants, newcomers have always challenged established norms set by self-styled "natives" and natives have had diverse, contradictory, and often hostile responses to newcomers.

In the past, up through the first quarter of the 20th century, controversy revolved around jobs, investment, land, race, religion, ethnicity, and politics. Today, land plays little role and race, religion, and ethnicity are subtext rather than text – not so openly spoken of. On the other hand, provision of government services is a new wrinkle which played little role in an era before government provided many services.

Until World War I, only the Chinese were excluded -- and they not until 1882. But after World War I and the 1917 Russian Revolution, fears about political radicalism and foreigners introducing radical ideas into the country tipped the political balance in favor of severe restrictions on all immigration. The perceived benefits to business, land speculators, and politicians were, with the new fear of radicalism, outweighed by long-standing fears of alleged lost jobs and low wages, hostility towards later-arriving peoples from Southern and Eastern Europe, and anti-Catholicism.

Not until the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's changed the nation's cultural assumptions about race, religion, and ethnicity did the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 reestablish an egalitarian system for admission of immigrants. Although this law did not return the country to the unrestricted immigration which prevailed before 1882, it did abolish discrimination according to nationality among Europeans and opened up the country to immigration from Asia and Africa. Most Republicans as well as Democrats voted for the 1965 reform, apparently assuming that it would bring few changes in actual immigration patterns. They were both wrong and right.

The new law immediately reversed the ratio of European to non-European immigrants. But not for another 15 years did immigration reality drown immigration law beneath a wave of illegal as well as legal immigrants entering the country from Central and South America, the Caribbean, and especially Mexico. Over the past 25 years since 1980, overall immigration has exceeded in numbers and almost matched in percentages the patterns of immigration played out just before the Civil War and at the end of the 19th through the beginning of the 20th century. As in those earlier periods there has today been a noisy and highly political backlash to the unexpected turn of events. Critics have focused on blaming the law and those who wrote it, calling for stronger enforcement strategies, and thereby diverting attention from the

problems of economic disruption, revolution, famine, poverty, and the search for freedom which continue to motivate most immigration today as in the past.

Immigrant and Native: A Twisted Tale

It is something of a cliché today for sensitive historians to remind readers and listeners that not only is the United States a nation of immigrants, the first immigrants were here before there were any Europeans. Columbus, who didn't know about an entire "hemisphere" between Europe and "the East" and thought he had discovered the "Indies," called these prior immigrants "Indians" – a term most Indians in the United States still prefer. Many once also called them "natives" even though "native" also came to represent people who, though descendents of immigrants, decided they wanted to keep newer immigrants out. Urbanized Indians off their ancestral lands often call themselves "Native Americans."¹ Canadians now use the term "First Peoples."²

Whatever you call them or they call themselves, Indians apparently started coming to the Americas³ from Asia as much as, or more than, 30,000 years ago by boat along the coasts of Asia and North America as well as across a "land bridge" created by an ice age which sucked water out of the sea into a vast ice cap which covered much of North America. However much a cliché, this reminder of the truly first immigrants to North America is not merely "politically correct" – how I hate that term – but an appropriately sensitive reminder of the lesser place most of my ancestors and most Americans have in immigrant history.⁴

European immigration to most of the English colonies in North America was initially restricted by the terms of the grants given by the English king and the intentions of the "proprietors" (owners) and groups who founded the colonies (e.g. Lord Baltimore and Catholics in Maryland, the Puritans in Massachusetts Bay, William Penn and the Quakers in Pennsylvania). From the beginning, however, ease of entry made restrictions unenforceable. Even if long thereafter still populated predominately by members of the founding group, each colony filled not only with other English but also people from other European countries. From this time forward to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the National Origins Act of 1921/24, immigration to what became the United States was essentially unrestricted. The only exception was

¹ My son-in-law has worked for both the Nez Perce and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla. His insistence confirms my observation that Indians still associated with ancestral territories and reservations call themselves "Indians." It is only those who have moved away to urban areas who call themselves "Native Americans." This appears to be a highly political term designed to appeal to a larger society with its "African Americans" who have similarly borrowed their nomenclature from "Italian Americans" and "Polish Americans." "Native American" is scorned by Indians who have remained on or near their ancestral lands. In many cases ancestral lands may no longer mean lands they lived on when the Pilgrims arrived but lands further west onto which they were pushed by whites.

² For this overview and much of the general facts not specifically footnoted, I rely on, in addition to my own head, my favorite American history textbook, Alan Brinkley's *American History: A Survey*, 10th ed., 1999

³ A European term I at least apply correctly to all of the hemisphere not just to one country, the United States, where it has become increasingly fashionable to refer to itself alone as "America" as if the United States were the whole hemisphere.

⁴ My peculiar reference to "most of my ancestors" is in recognition of the fact that everyone whose people have lived for a couple of centuries in the same area with a significant number of another people is related by blood. Anthropologists and biologists agree. The mathematics of ancestry make it certain. My father long told a story of an Indian ancestor but it was told like a joke, not to be ashamed of but hard to believe. Now I believe. The further back racists claim the racial purity of their ancestry the less likely it is!

African Americans who before the Civil War arrived only as slaves and after the Civil War, if not restricted by law, certainly arrived in understandably small numbers.

How well Indians received European immigrants seemed to depend largely upon the strength of the Indians and their knowledge of what had gone before in other places. In the English colonies, early European immigrants were at first accepted as perhaps other migrants among a population which was often itself migratory within a certain territory. The Pilgrims found the land deserted around present-day Plymouth, Massachusetts, because European diseases had already wiped out most of the Indians from Maine to Cape Cod. The settlers' thirst for exclusive ownership of land brought them eventually into conflict with the Indians in New England and almost immediately in the southern colonies where the Indians were more populous and militarily stronger. In Spanish Florida, the Indians may have already known about the Spanish conquests further south and in any case immediately and -- as Indians throughout the Americas surely found out -- wisely tried to kill the Spanish: "shoot first, ask questions later."

For the Indians, the rest is history. Many early Europeans came in search of political, and especially religious, freedom, as well as commercial gain, but those peoples already here were for the Europeans by definition "outsiders" -- or worse. Just not being Puritan was enough to disenfranchise you in early Massachusetts, even if you were English. The story of English colonization was no story of freedom for Indians or Africans, nor was it for women who in some cases had more autonomy but otherwise the same inequalities they had in Europe. A woman was far better off in Spanish Florida (what would become in 1763, the fourteenth English colony) where she could own property even after marriage and was not herself considered the property of her husband. The English modeled their colonization on their conquest of Ireland, whose people the English regarded as sub-human. (I kid you not!) Slaves and farm animals were actually treated better because they had more value; the Irish occupied too much land the English wanted.

The English always wanted land and they were prepared to do anything to get it. This contrasted with the French who, coming in small numbers to what is now Canada, were mainly interested in trade. For that reason, the French came into much less conflict with the Indians and found them willing allies in wars with the English. The Connecticut Puritans in the 1630's attempted to wipe out the Pequots. The remnants of the Pequots eventually founded Foxwoods, the hemisphere's largest and most famous casino, in what I like to think of as the Indians' great revenge for years of exploitation! George Washington helped start the Seven Years/French and Indian War by surveying land in Western Virginia and Ohio. The new United States saw itself as a "rising empire" (George Washington's phrase) on the very model of that from which the new country had gained independence. This "empire" would, and did, sweep across the continent under parallel assumptions about God's Manifest Destiny blessing it and the Indians' sub-human racial status. The Indians were routinely referred to as "savages" for their courageous stands against the taking of their land. The word was still used in some textbooks I know of as late as the 1990's.

Even more ironic than the Pequot reversal of fortune is the fact that Manifest Destiny swept up not only the Indian nations to the west but half of Mexico and the very same people who now make up by far the largest group of immigrants. As a Latin American and American historian and a person who loves Mexico, has lived there, and still visits regularly, the massive immigration of the last 25 years looks to me

like simple justice. President James K. Polk started the war with Mexico by ordering American troops into disputed territory between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers. When Mexico, after at first refusing to take the bait, perhaps sent troops over the Rio Grande into the same disputed territory, Polk called for a declaration of war and blamed it on Mexican aggression. In the treaty ending the war, individual Mexicans were guaranteed their land and full civil rights only to be denied both and banned from voting under the new territorial constitutions.

Early American history is a story of freedom for many of its immigrants, but far from all.

Racism and Restrictions

During the earlier years of the republic, many of the majority English Protestants worried about the alien influence of Catholics and immigrants from other parts of Western Europe, but the new country needed people to settle, build up, and secure its lands against not only ever-hostile European intruders but also the Indians already there. This was especially true after the President Thomas Jefferson's 1803 Louisiana Purchase doubled the territory of the country, taking over Indians lands coveted by Spain, France, and England. Religious toleration was, moreover, built into the idea of who Americans were, at least as regards diversity among Protestants. In modest numbers, immigration was welcomed.

But in the 1840's, immigration changed. In that decade, 1.5 million Europeans emigrated to the United States, three times the number who had emigrated in the 1830's. The overwhelming majority of these immigrants were Irish and German -- and Catholic -- fleeing famine, revolution, and economic disruption. In 1850, almost 10% of the 23 million people in the United States were foreign-born. In the 1850's, 2.5 million more arrived. Employers welcomed the cheap labor. Land speculators and other investors in the West hoped immigrants would bid for land and provide markets for railroads. Political leaders in the urban East and Mid-West, as well as the sparsely-populated West, hoped immigrant votes would increase the leaders' political power.

Others, however, saw the new immigrants as undermining wage labor. Whigs, the other major party of the period, objected to their voting overwhelmingly Democratic -- because it was largely urban Democratic leaders who responded to their economic needs with jobs and handouts. Most of all, many Americans saw these new immigrants as an "alien menace." They were Catholic, socially unfit, and of "inferior stock." This was an era in which "race" was used for ethnic groups as Americans nowadays use the word to distinguish Caucasians, African Americans, Indians, and Asians. Biologists and anthropologists today reject this less than one per cent of the genotype which differentiates people by skin color and facial features, but this was the beginning of a time when the so-called science of "eugenics" would attempt to define intelligence by the shape of heads. The English had long before defined the Irish as an inferior "race" and such racism had by the 1840's also served to justify slavery.

First came the ironically named "Native American Party," and then the "Supreme Order of the Star-Spangled Banner" with its secret password -- "I know nothing" -- for entering its lodges. Called the "Know-Nothings," this group formed the American Party, going on in 1854 to gain large votes in Pennsylvania and New York and win control of state government in Massachusetts. The Northeast experienced anti-immigrant riots in the second quarter of the 19th century, but the hostility against

the Chinese in the West was far worse. In the California Gold Rush of the 1850's, Chinese were forced out of the gold fields and went from there to build (along with Irish immigrants) much of the railroad mileage of the West. With the completion of most of the railroads, the Chinese moved to urban areas where they faced racial violence only exceeded by that inflicted on Indians. Some of the opposition was to their willingness to accept low wages, undercutting white workers trying to form unions, but more broadly they were "inassimilable savages" to be excluded from the country. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned Chinese immigration for ten years and barred those who were already in the country from becoming naturalized citizens. The law was extended in 1892 and made permanent in 1902.

Many progressives and members of the Progressive Party (Progressives with a capital "P"), whom I have lauded for many of their other domestic policies, joined worker groups in supporting restrictions on immigration. This reality would be ironic if it were not for the fact that this kind of hatred pervaded American culture of the time at all levels of society. It justified American imperialism in the Caribbean and the Philippines. People like Teddy Roosevelt were flaming anti-Indian bigots, and Woodrow Wilson re-segregated the federal government and the U.S. military – so that Harry Truman had to go through "Hell" un-segregating it after World War II. Most Americans believed that people of different races, and sometimes different religions, were "inassimilable," and, as many still do, that most foreigners are inferior people with inferior, less generous and tolerant, cultures – however much this perception is belied by behavior.

Up until World War I, worries about cheap labor on the part of workers and nativist sentiment in general failed to garner enough support for a general restriction on all immigration. After the war, however, a wave of anti-radical hysteria combined with a long-standing fear of foreigners as social and political radicals to tip the balance against unrestricted immigration. In 1921 Congress passed an "emergency" immigration act establishing quotas on immigration equal to 3% of a nationality's population in the United States in 1910. This cut immigration from 800,000 to 300,000 in one year. Then the National Origins Act of 1924 banned all immigration from Asia – meaning primarily the Japanese since the Chinese were already banned – and cut European immigration from 3% to 2% of nationalities. On top of that, the quotas were set to the 1890 census in which there were far fewer southern and eastern Europeans – as opposed to favored "Nordic" and "Teutonic" stock. Finally, in 1926, a limit of 150,000 was set on total immigration. In ensuing years, immigration officials rarely allowed immigration to surpass 75,000.

Immigration Reform and the Watershed 1980's

One of the greatest reforms of the 1960's, little noticed at the time, was yet another hallmark of Lyndon Johnson's tearing down the structure of racism which had marred progressivism and still marred the country: the Immigration Reform Act of 1965. This law retained a strict limit on the number of immigrants who could enter the country – 170,000 – but eliminated the "national origins" system of quotas.

That's the bare bones description of the law. If they presume to know anything about immigration law, most Americans presume that the wave of immigrants hitting the country today is the product of loosened standards established in laws like the 1965 reform. But this presumption is more false than true. It depends on hindsight, on knowing what could not have been known at the time: that immigration would skyrocket into the 1990's and 2000's, much of it would be illegal, and most of it would come from Latin America.

The fact is, while the 1965 reform opened the doors to a broad cross-section of Europeans, Asians, and Africans, it actually set, for the first time, a limit of 120,000 per year on Western Hemisphere immigration.⁵ Prior to 1965, immigration was wide open for Latin Americans--but they were not coming to the United States in numbers that either liberals or conservatives apparently perceived as a problem. The bill was passed overwhelmingly by a Congress which did not think the change would have a major impact on immigration -- not on total numbers, not even on distribution by nationality. The new Western Hemisphere restriction was part of the overall egalitarian effort to treat all peoples of the world equally, at least as regards race, religion, and ethnicity. There was no expectation that Latin Americans would come pouring into the country as they have over the past 25 years.

Indeed, there were no untoward increases over the next 15 years leading up to 1980. In 2005, the total of all Mexican-born immigrants in the United States who arrived before 1980 was less than the number of those arriving in any succeeding decade and less than half the number of those arriving in the 1990's alone.⁶ That the mass of US immigration is now coming from Latin America, half of it is illegal, and it has expanded way beyond what was imagined in 1965 is not to me evidence that the writers of the law were naïve or disingenuous. That is reading cause and motive backwards into history.

I agree that initial changes in immigration coincided with changes in rules for legal immigration. Prior to 1965, 90% of immigrants to the United States came from Europe; soon afterwards the percentages reversed to 10% from Europe. I agree as well that the 1965 reform opened the door in a different way to unrestricted immigration. On the one hand, in an effort to shift the basis for admission towards skills and knowledge instead of ethnicity and nationality, it established a seven-category preference system for persons with special occupational skills. At the same time, however, it overlaid this system on another one for relatives of US citizens and permanent resident "aliens" and added an unrestricted category for immediate relatives -- parents, spouses, and children -- of US citizens. This was the "family reunification" section of the law. It changed immigration but it did not drive it.

Not until the 1980's did the really massive changes in immigration begin. The huge increase in numbers combined with the shift of ethnicity in a more conservative (Reagan) era to drive the first major change in the 1965 law. In 1986 the law was revised to control illegal immigration through sanctions on employers, to legalize most illegals who had resided in the country since 1982, and to create a new classification of seasonal agricultural worker. A 1990 revision increased legal immigration by "roughly" 60% through an overall "flexible cap" of 675,000. This cap consisted of 480,000 family-sponsored, 140,000 employment-based, and 55,000 "diversity lottery" immigrants. The last of these was to make up for the fact that "family reunification" rules had enabled certain developing countries to squeeze out immigrants from other countries. The 1990 law was intended to deter illegal immigration with better border protection and removal of illegal aliens.

⁵ See Federation for American Immigration Reform for the following description of immigration laws (www.fairus.org). The Federation is generally anti-immigrant but its facts seems accurately presented. (They assume their case is obvious.)

⁶ See Center for Immigration Studies, www.cis.org, for this and much of the other immigration statistics below. CIS is anti-immigrant but its data comes from the Census Bureau.

Clearly, neither the current furor nor the proposed solutions are new. But the reasons for both are equally clear. Legal immigration to the United States grew from some 300,000 per year in the 1960's to about a million by the mid-2000's. Between January, 2000, and March, 2005, 7.9 million immigrants settled in the United States, nearly half of them, 3.7 million, illegal. Immigrants, legal and illegal, account for 12.1% of the total population today, close to the 14.7% reached in 1910, though still lower than pre-Civil War percentages. Out of the 35 million immigrants living in the United States in 2005, 10.8 million, or 31%, came from Mexico, and another 23% from Central/South America and the Caribbean. Some 6 million more, or 18%, came from East Asia and 13% from Europe. Mexican immigration grew from 2.2 million in the 80's to 3.8 million in the 90's and added another 2.8 million just between January, 2000, and March, 2005.

It is no wonder that many Americans perceive immigration, and especially illegal immigration, as out of control. But ignorance is no excuse for bad policy and no good policy will ever come from bad analysis of causes. The immediacy and dimensions of recent immigration since 1980 have diverted attention from the real causes – and thus from the best solutions. Immigration is not just a problem of law and enforcement strategies. That focus can only lead, as it is already leading, to criminalizing immigration and building a wall 2,000 miles across the Mexican border, patrolling it with guns, and shooting people who try to cross it. What's missing is a sound analysis of the economics of immigration, not only its long-standing causes – famine, poverty, revolution, economic disruption, the search for freedom – which have driven immigrants in the past, but also its consequences for jobs, wages, economic investment, and government expenditures. A sound analysis requires an examination of what else was happening in the world to explain the rapid and extraordinary bump-up in immigration after 1980.

In Part II of this article on immigration, I will argue two primary points. The first is that the economic consequences of immigration are nowhere near as traumatic as critics assume, and the second is that the elephant in the living room, ignored in everything I have read about immigration, is "globalization": the so-named transformation, over the past three decades, of the world's economic order. Driven by the major industrial powers, this system has destroyed jobs in some places while creating them in others, forced general wage levels down, and distributed worldwide wealth more and more unevenly. It is no coincidence that massive immigration out of Africa and Asia to Europe, and out of Latin American and Asia to the United States, has occurred at the same time as globalization. Far from an unrelated event, massive immigration is the logical result of, and a major balancing factor in, the new world economic order.

Web Site: Downside Up has had a web site, and will have one again, but since I changed internet service providers, I have not set up a web site on the new server. When set up, once again all previous articles will be there and can be read and printed out with a few clicks of your computer. In the meantime, if you need a back issue, email me at downsideup2@bellsouth.net.

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Ronald Woodbury is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous. The web spinner's name is also best left anonymous.

Woodbury has a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history and economics from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL, where he continues to be active in church and community. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.