

The National Interest vs Immigration Policy

Excerpted from Otis Graham's new book, Unguarded Gates

by Otis L. Graham, Jr.

Regulation of immigration came slowly [in U.S. policy], because Americans always have been ambivalent about immigration. Between the 1880s and the 1920s a policy decision was finally reached. A system of national regulation of immigration was put in place, based on the national origins of the population of 1920 and aimed at greatly reduced numbers. With the help of external events such as world wars and economic depression worldwide, this system of regulation sharply lowered the incoming numbers and allowed the country to absorb and thus on the whole benefit by the large inflows of the First Great Wave.

Then in the 1960s a Second Great Wave began to surge across national borders, generated by global population growth, lowered transportation costs, and a widespread awareness of the wealth gap between developed and underdeveloped nations. Immigration policymakers, not recognizing this era of expanding immigration pressures, took a step toward expanding legal admissions. A reform of American immigration law and policy in 1965 was intended to bring important ethical improvements in the form of opening equal access to all nationalities, while having little practical effect. But the

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reforms of 1965 brought other, surprising effects of vast importance – a threefold expansion of legal immigrants, augmented by burgeoning numbers of illegal immigrants, and a radical shift in the source countries of American immigration. We are still sorting out the far-reaching impacts of this half-century (to date) experiment in porous borders between America and a world undergoing an unprecedented expansion of human population.

Today, after four decades of Second Great Wave immigration, legal and illegal, the American government's performance in the task of managing immigration is at the top of any list of government failures. This was true well before the deadly September 11, 2001, acts of terrorism by foreigners commandeering American airliners after residing and training in the United States under various mixtures of legal and illegal entry and extended illegal residency. Americans for decades have sensed that we are now in a phase of our national life in which immigration is on balance taking America where it doesn't want to go. All public-opinion polls since large-scale immigration resumed in the 1960s have reported pluralities (in the 1960s) and thereafter majorities (in all ethnic groups) in favor of reducing immigration. These polls are one form of expression of a sustained and tenacious vote of no confidence in the government's gate tending.

And with good reason. The number of legal immigrants has hovered around one million for two decades, augmented by illegal immigration, always estimated by official bodies as lower than subsequently found. An internal population of nine to ten million illegal immigrants is acknowledged by the early years of the twenty-first century. On the legal side, these new Americans are selected by a system placing primary emphasis on kinship, which means family ties to recent immigrants, rather than on national needs.

The costs of this new mass immigration collect

across the ledger. They include labor market competition with native workers, rising social service costs, nurturing of illegal trade in drugs and indentured labor, the immigration contribution (70 percent at the end of the century, and rising) to population growth with all the costs that come attached to it in this era of global ecocrisis, an intensifying intersection of mounting human numbers with an era of erratic global warming and other stresses of a global ecosphere mauled by more than six billion people in the process of expanding to or beyond ten billion. Other costs are more speculative, such as the concerns that the radical shift in immigrants' countries of origin from Europe to Latin America (especially Mexico), Asia and the Middle East may overwhelm the nation's capacity for assimilation. A century later, the national question is being asked again – is our fundamental national cohesion and coherence being lost?

Against this are weighed immigration's benefits – cheap labor for harvest agriculture and urban menial tasks, relatively cheap skilled labor in certain industries, a more culturally diversified cuisine and society, and scattered stories of urban revitalization.

The Jordan Commission

Assessing this complex picture of immigration impacts in the mid-1990s, a national commission led by former congresswoman Barbara Jordan confirmed that immigration patterns were not aligned with the national interest and urged reforms. The numbers coming in legally should be reduced by almost half, and selected with more emphasis on the needs of the American economy. Illegal entry should be firmly combated. By this time that part of the nation's public policy elite knowledgeable about immigration had reversed an earlier complacency and begun to frequently express the alarm long felt by the public. The Brookings Institution in 2000 gathered a panel of historians and political scientists to reflect on the federal government's greatest achievements and failures since World War II, and it ranked controlling immigration as second among the top five failures. In a 2001 review of the literature on immigration's impacts, one of the nation's most respected social scientists, Harvard's Christopher Jencks confirmed this overall negative assessment of the costs imposed by the four-decade run of mass immigration. Alarmed at the environmental and demographic effects from a likely doubling of the U.S. population to 500 million by 2050, a doubling attributable almost entirely to immigration,

Jencks joined many other end-of-century writers in questioning whether such a "vast social experiment" had been authorized by the American people or was in their best interest. The nation's policy-studies elite had finally caught up with the American public which had been expressing the same convictions to pollsters since the early 1970s. On the one occasion when voters were allowed a direct vote on the immigration status quo – at least, on the illegal part of it – Californians by a wide

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margin in 1992 endorsed Proposition 187, which withheld social services from illegal immigrants. A broadly negative perception of the American immigration policy regime faced no serious intellectual challenge at the end of the century. Apologists for the mass immigration status quo were few and fell back on historical analogy, arguing that similar waves of mass immigration of a century earlier had also been met by objections but the nation had nonetheless prospered.

Yet U.S. policymakers ignored this critical appraisal of the immigration regime, and in the first year of the 21st century drifted toward further dismantling of controls. President George W. Bush in 2001 proposed a virtual open border with Mexico, and, incredibly, congressional policymakers seemed receptive.

This presents us with an enormous puzzle. The vast social experiment in the form of mass immigration rushes on, entering its fifth decade. It is a product of policymaking in the world's foremost democracy, yet it has from the first been unpopular with the public and viewed with increasing skepticism by policy analysts. The costs of America's porous borders were piled to even more stunning heights on the morning of September 11, 2001. That day's terrorist attacks harshly illuminated a defect that had not formerly been high on the list of flaws

in immigration policy, that our porous borders and governmental abandonment of virtually all interior immigration controls allowed terrorists to glide easily in and out of the country, illegally and legally, for periods of their choosing, as they contemptuously trained and prepared for mass murder in this affable and wide-open society.

Perhaps the events of that day and the threat of more foreign-based terrorism will force a reconsideration of U.S. immigration policy, even one that goes beyond new antiterrorist filters to address the core flaws that the Jordan commission has already identified, and result in a turn toward lower numbers and selection criteria that advance national needs rather than kinship relations. But the sustaining forces that lie behind a national policy of virtually open borders are formidable, and two years after September 11 brought little real movement toward substantial reform of immigration policy, beyond the bureaucratic repositioning of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. If substantial immigration policy reform toward lower numbers and stricter enforcement eventually comes from the heightened concern over terrorism, then the “vast social experiment” in mass immigration to the United States will have lasted four decades. If not, the expansionist policy will extend into the future, taking America where the public, if not the elites, does not want to go.

A Puzzling Disconnect

Either way, the puzzle remains: How could this have happened? How could the United States for almost half a century have been steering into a future of intensifying environmental constraints with a population-expanding immigration policy that does not have public support?

There was confirmation of this disconnect in a national poll of the public and a sample of four hundred opinion leaders taken by the Chicago Council of Foreign Relations after the September 11 attacks. “The gap between the opinions of the American people on immigration and those of their leaders is enormous,” reported the Center for Immigration Studies in an analysis of the Chicago poll. Sixty percent of the public regard the present level of immigration to be “a critical threat to the vital interests of the United States,” but only fourteen percent of the leadership did. On no other foreign policy-related issue was the gap wider, and it had widened since 1998, when the percentages on the “critical threat” question were fifty-five versus eighteen,

respectively. In ranking large public problems in the foreign policy area, the public ranked illegal immigration sixth, opinion leaders twenty-sixth. Here the theory of elite disconnect finds grounding in data. And while opinion leaders ought perhaps to be written opinion “leaders,” the fact that the latter made policy strongly against the grain of public opinion, at least in some areas for long periods of time, was one explanation for the shape of immigration policy.

Labeling the Reformers

Another explanation for this remarkably long run of a dysfunctional immigration system may be found in the history books. An open immigration era inherited from the birth of the republic was brought to an end early in this century after restrictionist reformers had struggled for decades to push such a large change through the American political system. As we have seen, the results were broadly favorable and the system popular. But beginning in the 1950s historians and other intellectuals who shape the national understanding and discourse mounted a severe attack on the restrictionist enterprise. Caught up in the Civil Rights Movement and rightly determined to indict racism not only in contemporary Mississippi and South Boston but down the full sweep and side eddies of the American past, some of them found ripe targets among the immigration restrictionists. Historians, then journalists and film makers and others, pulled into contemporary view some of the working assumptions and language of some of the immigration reformers, found racism and ethnic stereotyping there, and consigned that complex social movement for restriction of immigration to the bad, far-rightist tradition in American history. There are no U.S. history textbooks at the college level today that do not reflect this interpretation, not as a part of what we should know about this aspect of our past but as the deplorable essence of it.

As a result, when the new restrictionism arose in the 1970s the debate it wished to have over the real impacts of mass immigration was choked off, and policy options greatly narrowed, by labeling the reformers nativists and worse. It made no dent in this habit that prominent historians of American immigration like John Higham and David Bennett, who knew very well what nativism was and had frequently condemned it, pointed out that nativism had disappeared from America by mid-century and that questions about mass immigration should be

treated as legitimate concerns for inquiry and policy redirection. But the media liked the drama conveyed by the immigration Expansionists' accusatory labels, and portrayed the new restrictionism as an eruption within America of the nativist xenophobic anti-immigrant impulse that historians had indeed found, and some of them often exaggerated, in the complex intellectual and emotional currents of a century ago. The

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communicating what they are for.

Here I do not have in mind the spelling out of the mechanics of policy improvement. A considerable amount of thought has gone into reforms of the machinery, as we have seen, and the core elements of a better system have emerged. A substantial curbing of illegal immigration should come through a system of identification and tracking of immigrants and visa holders; a national identification system for Americans, enhancing travel and identity security; and substantial penalties for conviction of illegal entry,

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including a bar against future U.S. citizenship. On the legal side, lower numbers, tailored to national population goals, achieved by real ceilings on both immigrant (including in the ceiling asylum seekers) and nonimmigrant visas; a general shift toward a skills-based system initiated by repeal of preferences for brothers and sisters; and overall selection by criteria matched to the nation's needs rather than foreigners' desires to move kinfolk to the United States.

These and other reforms have been vetted many times, and a good basket of them is the several reports of the Jordan commission. They aim us at a small-immigration future, and the terrorist threat inevitably gives the idea of such reforms a new urgency. It also gives them a defensive cast.

alignment of the restrictionist project with protection of American workers' earnings and autonomy, with the ideals of civic republicanism and the rule of law, with environmental and resource conservation were all overlooked or dismissed as rationalizations disguising antiforeign prejudice. An essential national project in this era of human population surge – devising controls over the nation's demographic – has been caricatured and stifled.

Beyond the Negative

Finally, some share of the responsibility for the astounding persistence of bad public policy could be said to belong to the restrictionists themselves. They are against large-scale legal and any scale of illegal immigration and have communicated the manifold reasons. But they could be charged with inadequately

What is less clear is the vision of the American (and global) future in which to anchor, emotionally as well as intellectually, the rationale for a return to a small-immigration regime in the United States and other societies. In the short run, this may not be necessary. Smaller, more manageable numbers, screened and selected from the point of view of national priorities, may possibly move through the American political system in response to national security concerns after September 11 – especially if (when) hostile foreigners cross our borders again to bring more violence. But what are the intellectual and moral resources and arguments for going

beyond national self-defense and connecting a small-immigration policy to a vision of a sustainable society?

Some have said that the immigration reform movement shares a shortcoming with its sibling, the environmental movement – that it has been strong on what it opposes and thin on where it would take us. The wide-minded economist Kenneth Boulding was asked as he came out of a lecture on overpopulation by the biologist Garrett Hardin what Boulding thought of the event. He replied that Hardin gave an impressive sermon on hellfire, but one came out of the church wishing more had been said about heaven.

That critical observation certainly seems apt for the immigration reform movement of a century ago. When runaway immigration was finally curbed in the aftermath of World War I, the emphasis of the reformers, in justifying this historic change in national policy, was heavily on the harms to be minimized – to American workers' wages and standards, to national cohesion, to republican political institutions, and even, to some, to national biological quality. The closest thing to a positive national goal that also pointed the country down the new restrictionist road was, perhaps, President Calvin Coolidge's terse phrase, "America must be kept American." This is sometimes quoted as a good example of the vacuous thought of the ruling class in the 1920s, but the few words in front of this phrase give it the semblance of a positive argument, however sparse: "American institutions rest solely on good citizenship. They were created by people who had a background of self-government. New arrivals should be limited by our capacity to absorb them into the ranks of good citizenship." Coolidge himself endorsed a reformed immigration system in order to prevent many harms that unregulated immigration had permitted, but in his remarks in 1923 he also seems to have been attempting to link the new system to a large, positive national goal. We were still making new Americans here, and this fine objective required a more moderate pace.

This sufficed as a positive policy goal for the 1920s and for several decades after. Perhaps one of the reasons that Americans have not reined in the leaky system of post-1965, in addition to those mentioned, is that while the cumulating negatives coming with mass immigration have been counted and publicized there has not emerged, or at least has not been successfully communicated to the public (and to the governing elites),

a positive as well as a defensive rationale for what a reformed, small-immigration policy will lead us toward.

The Impact of Population Growth

Nearly three decades ago, Dr. John Tanton, who would go on to organize FAIR and a cluster of other educational and lobbying immigration reform (and environmental) groups, submitted his essay, "International Migration," to the 1975 Mitchell Prize contest. It gained some brief attention when it won third place and was subsequently published in *The Ecologist*. The central argument was that, given global population growth, mass migrations "will have to be stringently controlled, or no region will be able to stabilize ahead of another. ... A more hopeful scenario calls for some regions stabilizing at an early date and then helping others to do so." Then, "in the world of a stationary state" for all societies, "international migration could become free and unfettered, because there would be little incentive to move. Contentment with conditions at home ... would serve to keep most people in place." This was a long-range vision indeed, if short on details of this future America "in balance with ... [the] environment," except that Americans in the post-migration epoch would do their own menial labor and be the better for it. Kenneth Boulding might say that the immigration reform movement, necessarily engaged in a critique of the status quo and its implications, would have been wise to pay more attention to constructing plausible scenarios of an American society, and the larger world, after the growth binge was over.

"Can either Europe or the U.S. stem the migrant tide?" Huntington asked, with considerable doubt revealed in his tone.

Unlike the First Great Wave that sent the full component of the excess populations of Europe spilling into the population-thin neo-Europes, the 20th-21st-century Second Great Wave out of Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa will not solve the problems of the people-exporting societies. Contemporary migratory flows amount to only one to two percent of the world's annual *increase* of population. There is no relief from population pressures here. Whether remittances from First World wages are a beneficial form of foreign aid to people-exporting countries is a contested issue, and even if helpful, they were matched or overmatched by the drain from the developing world of scarce

professional and technical talent that decides to abandon the struggling homeland. The first of these modern mass migrations moved the surplus populations of Europe to regions with space. The second cannot similarly ease the epochal human crowding that is ahead for humanity but can only insure that all spaces fully share it.

Thus as we move deeper into this testing time when the human population finishes the surge through six billion to ten, and recalling Rostow's language about "a global crisis of Malthusian consequences," it is clear that migration pressures will be an increasingly central issue in the West.

In answer to Huntington's question, most Western elites continue to urge the wealthy West not to "stem the migrant tide" but to absorb our global brothers and sisters until the horrid ordeal has been endured and shared by all, ten billion humans packed onto an ecologically devastated planet. In this vision of human solidarity, immigration will have equally overpopulated and culturally altered every society. One result may well be the end of mass migration to the United States, because in that crowded place it will be risky to drink the water. Or perhaps it will be the former United States, its power for global mischief fragmented into successor regions in a post-nationalist, post-American future.

Or perhaps not. What are we to make of the signs that, whether or not this open-border instinct is wise advice, events may not quite stay on the track that Christian-sharing ethics or left-wing internationalism or corporate cheap-labor appetites prefer? Mass immigration seems in these times to meet with the approval of American and European elites, but it tends to have disruptive political effects among ordinary citizens in receiving societies. Already in Europe and in Australia at the hinge of centuries, the inability of established governments to limit immigration has produced fast-growing restrictionist factions or new parties. The swirl of Western politics is complex and much more is involved than immigration. But uncontrolled immigration has in the past been a reliable formula for generating a populist-nationalist politics.

Many have wondered how long the United States, the nation receiving more immigrants than all of Europe together, can avoid this pattern of populist churning and new leaders and parties combining mass migration backlash with other complaints against ossified and unresponsive governments. •

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