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# The Immigration We Have Brought on Ourselves

By George E. Immerwahr

Many of us are deeply concerned over the present high level of immigration and the domestic problems which are exacerbated by immigration, but are we equally aware of the extent to which immigration has been heightened by U.S. policies in which we ourselves may have acquiesced?

Legal immigration is now averaging close to one million a year, and annual illegal immigration, net of return migration, may run as high as another 400,000. Immigrant women often have much higher fertility than white Americans, and Mexican-born immigrant women have a total fertility rate<sup>1</sup> (TFR) double that of non-Hispanic white women and possibly higher even than that of Mexican women living in Mexico.

Because of the high level of immigration and high immigrant fertility, it is now feared that total U.S. population may reach and surpass 500 million during the 21st century, whereas it was once thought that the population would peak out at about 300 million and then slowly decline.

About 90 percent of recent legal immigrants and virtually all illegal immigrants are persons born in the less-developed countries (LDCs) of Latin America, Asia and Africa, and these are the countries in which population is growing most rapidly and where fertility rates are relatively high. Europe, which was the main source of immigrants before 1950, now has very low fertility and practically no population growth other than immigration from the LDCs.

It is commonly recognized that poverty and the pressures arising from LDC population growth, and an LDC labor force growth much more rapid than their ability to create jobs, are the main forces driving people into the more-developed countries (MDCs) of North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and now also into Japan. But we should add to this that modern communication has heightened overseas awareness of the MDCs' higher living standards, and that modern international transportation has facilitated the movement of people into the MDCs.

Mexico is just one of the many LDCs in which population has skyrocketed during this century. Mexico is believed to have had only 14 million people in 1900. Today it has 90 million, but this number does not include many additional millions of persons now in our country who — or whose forbears — were living in

Mexico earlier in the century. Counting them, it may be said that Mexico has had a seven-fold population growth over the last 95 years. Until about 1970, Mexico's TFR was about 7. It has now declined substantially, but because there are so many Mexican women now at childbearing ages due to the high fertility of the past, Mexico's population will continue its rapid growth for several decades to come, even if more millions emigrate.

Add to all this the current political and civil turmoil and conflict prevalent in so much of the world, particularly in the LDCs. One example is the violence which erupted in 1994 in Rwanda, and which may now be spreading into neighboring Burundi. Another example is Haiti (where internal conflict is far from settled), another the continuing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, still another the oppression of the Kurds by both Turkey and Iraq, not to mention the many less-publicized conflicts and unrest in a host of other LDCs.<sup>2</sup>

Several of the conflicts just mentioned are in regions where fertility rates and population growth rates are high, and where population density is much higher than ever before. There can be little doubt that population growth and overcrowding have greatly contributed to the troubles of Haiti, Rwanda and Burundi, and also of the Palestinian people. The West Bank has a population density of 700 people per square mile, the Gaza strip several thousand per square mile. Rwanda, before the mass killings in 1994, had a density over 800 per square mile even though there were no large cities; its population had grown about six-fold just during this century.

Not only do we find population growth, poverty and conflict leading people to flee their homelands, but also that countries which years ago were so uncrowded that they might have offered possible refuge are now so crowded that their own inhabitants are trying to flee.

The United States is viewed by people of many LDCs as not only the richest country in the world but also as the most powerful, and therefore the safest place of refuge.

During the 1960s and 1970s, our country took the lead in providing development assistance to most of the LDCs, including programs intended to reduce the rate of population growth. More recently, some other MDCs' efforts have exceeded ours, and some LDCs now accuse

us of contributing to their poverty.

Let's look at two factors which definitely have increased our recent immigration, namely, our desire for cheap labor and our long fixation on world-communism.

## **Cheap Labor**

In world history, the procurement of people for cheap labor is one of the most important factors explaining international movement of peoples. Millions of Indians who have never seen India are the descendants of indentured workers whom the British transported into their other former colonies around the world, to work in the production of tea, rubber and many other export products. Our own colonial forbears, and the white colonizers of Latin America, are responsible for an even greater and a far crueller procurement of cheap labor by the import of African slaves. One can only speculate how different U.S. history might have been had those of British ancestry who dominated our South been willing to do their own work or to pay a fair wage to have it done. Our own agricultural, economic and political development would have been immensely different from what it turned out to be. Think how different the history of African peoples would have been.

After our Civil War came a new importation of people whom we wanted as cheap labor, namely, the Chinese who were brought in to build the railroads in the western part of our country. The Chinese were so unwanted as human beings that when we no longer needed them, we drove many out and closed down all further entry. Later we closed down Japanese entry as well.

But Mexico has been our chief source of cheap labor during this century. During both World War I and II, we negotiated treaties with the Mexican government for the import of temporary agricultural workers under what were called the "bracero" programs. At least during World War II, our manpower situation was such that the need for these workers was genuine.

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Although the last bracero program was officially terminated in 1966, it set in motion a continuing desire on the part of poor Mexicans to come here for jobs and also our continuing preference to hire them as cheap labor. Many of us like to think only of the urge of Mexicans to come here, but according to many observers, the desire of American employers to hire them is at least as great. Bustamante (1992) and others<sup>3</sup>

write of the ease with which illegal immigrants find jobs and allude to the pressure which employers exert to maintain the flow of immigrant labor. Bustamante tells how, as a U.S. senator, Pete Wilson demanded the relaxation of border control in order to ease the entry of undocumented migrants, and how, once he put on the hat of California governor, Wilson became an anti-immigration firebrand.

Bustamante and others insist not only that the United States cannot maintain its living standard without importing foreign labor but also that the U.S. need for immigrant labor will increase. One of their points is that we are an aging society, that the birth rate decline that followed the 1946-64 baby-boom will have greatly reduced the supply of Anglo entrants into the labor market.

I am far from convinced of the need for foreign labor which Bustamante describes. Unlike the situation during World War II, we may have enough slack in today's domestic labor market to fill with Americans the jobs now held by Mexican and Central American illegal immigrants. The claim that these are jobs which Americans will not take is questionable. What is much more likely is that Americans will not accept these jobs with the poor wages and working conditions provided for the immigrants. Further, it is reasonable to expect that more and more of the routine services now performed by immigrants will become automated.

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Admittedly, to attract American workers by paying more would not be a simple solution. For one thing, it would increase what we as consumers would have to pay for food and for services in retail stores, hotels, hospitals, and so on. And the higher pay would make crossing our borders even more attractive to outsiders than it is now.

European countries also brought in outside labor after World War II. Britain invited workers from its colonies and dominions, and so many came and brought their families that eventually there was a strong movement to shut the door and even to send people back. West Germany had the same experience, largely with workers from Turkey. East Germany was more prudent: when it imported labor from communist satellite countries, it admitted only male and female workers, no children; and women who became pregnant were sent back to their home countries.

## **Anti-communism**

The very thought of communism and communists

has tormented many Americans during much of this century. We can agree that communism is an economic theory which, wherever tried, has failed to improve human welfare, and we may note as well that governments which have proclaimed communism as economic salvation have dealt tyrannically with their own subjects in trying to implement it. We also had good reason for fearing the Soviet Union as a military threat to our security. But to fear communism as an ideology which would be accepted by our own people, as many of our politicians feared, was an insult to our intelligence. Yet this fear of communism has led us into many tragic situations.

The Vietnam War was one of these. It will probably be recorded as the greatest folly in U.S. history, extremely tragic, and completely lacking in any moral justification. This lack of justification was apparent to millions of Americans from the very start, and now at last one of those most responsible for the war, Robert S. McNamara, has confessed that, "We were wrong, terribly wrong."

The unsuccessful end of the Vietnam War obligated us to admit as refugees large numbers of South Vietnamese who had collaborated with us in the war and who were therefore presumably endangered when our own forces had to leave Vietnam. Together with family members, along with some Cambodians and Laotians and their families, we took in almost one million Indo-Chinese refugees. Even today, 20 years after the war, Vietnamese commandos who aided our military are still claiming refugee status here (see *The New York Times*, April 14, 1995, p.1).

Even had we won the war, we might have taken in hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, because we had formed political links with them. We had formed similar links with Filipinos as the result of our having occupied the Philippines for half a century, and we now have over a million Filipinos in our country. We do not have corresponding numbers of Malaysians, Indonesians or Thais here, since we did not form such links with them.

During the 1980s, the Reagan Administration set out to crush communism in Central America with the same fervor and with the same "domino theory" fear that took us into Vietnam. In Central America, our main foes were the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the peasant rebels in El Salvador. To crush them, we armed the "contras" in the former country and the "death squads" in the latter. Between the two campaigns, we may have spent as much as \$10 billion.

Largely due to the El Salvador death squads, over half a million Salvadoran refugees fled here, and in fact, they are still with us. The number of Nicaraguans who came was much smaller, as the Sandinistas had much more support from the Nicaraguan people than the Salvadoran government had from its people. Moreover, our CIA's support of "anti-communists" in Guatemala did drive many Guatemalans here as refugees. It is paradoxical that the refugees from Central America were

mostly on the side of the forces we were fighting against, whereas the Vietnamese refugees were those on our side.

Even though he has provided the Cuban people better health care and education than any other Latin Americans have enjoyed, Fidel Castro will likely not go down in history as a benevolent ruler. Our treatment of him certainly has not been beneficial to the Cuban people. Even though the dictator Batista, whom Castro overthrew, had had our support, Castro did come to Washington to seek our friendship, only to be rebuffed as a communist by both Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon. True, Castro was a Marxist, but he defended his rule as "not communist but humanist." When Kennedy came to office he continued to treat Castro as a communist enemy, welcoming as refugees as many Cubans as wanted to come, embargoing most trade and then embarking on the Bay of Pigs venture. All this led to Cuba's solid alliance with the Soviet Union and the 1962 missile crisis.

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For years, we have encouraged Cubans to come here as refugees and provided that all those who managed to reach our shores could stay. Once a large number of Cubans had arrived as refugees, we then admitted great numbers of their relatives and friends, and our Cuban-American population far exceeds one million. I wonder what might have happened if the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations had modified their anti-communist political stance enough to listen to what Castro wanted to say.

Our generous treatment of Cubans as so-called refugees from communism subjected us to much activism on behalf of Haitians, whose sufferings from the Duvaliers and their followers — in the form of murder, torture and rape — far exceeded the sufferings of Cubans. Had we been "softer" on Castro and much "harder" on the Duvaliers, we might have escaped both refugees and activism.

Today it is our trade embargo which is gravely hurting the Cuban people by depriving them of many needed food and medical items. Rather than hurting Castro, the embargo has given him an additional propaganda tool against us. But the misery it has caused the Cuban people has also greatly increased their desire to immigrate here. We may be able to keep most of them out, but it will not be easy. The embargo has been denounced both by the U.N. General Assembly and the Organization of American States. Today, instead of urging relaxation of the embargo, conservative elements in Congress are pushing for its tightening by threatening

other nations that trade with Cuba.

We also have been unduly generous to Russians claiming asylum from communism. It often seemed that our eagerness to give asylum here to anyone seeking to defect from the USSR was less a matter of compassion for the defector than an occasion to show to the world that our system was better than that of the Soviet.

## The Population Problem

Do we really wish to combat the forces of LDC population growth, poverty and violence already described, which have led hundreds of millions — or perhaps billions — of desperate LDC people to believe that their only salvation is to come here or to other affluent countries? Or would we rather pretend that these forces do not exist and hope that we can save ourselves from more immigration just by building strong police-state walls and employing harsh police-state measures?

We will very likely need to use both the walls and overseas measures, but these may not be enough. Every year in the immediate future we can expect at least an 85 million natural increase of population in the LDCs (i.e., an 85 million excess of births over deaths), and each year's natural increase will be much harder for the LDCs to absorb than the previous year's.

The recent make-over of Congress does not bring prospects of a solution. The American people have brought on themselves a Congress which seems determined to abandon whatever efforts have already been made to reduce the rate of population growth. There will very likely be less commitment than before to provide economic aid to the LDCs, and the new Senate seems very much opposed to spending money for population programs, especially for the benefit of countries approving abortion.

As world population grows, the conflicts which drive people to flee from their homelands are almost certain to multiply. We and other MDCs have not been immune from the pressure to take in people from troubled lands as refugees. We ourselves took in many refugees from far away Ethiopia. What will we do in the face of more Ethiopias, more Haitis, Bosnias, Rwandas?

Will we be willing to use armed peacemakers, where necessary, to quell these conflicts? If unwilling to act on our own, will we agree to join the UN in its efforts as peacemakers and peacekeepers? The previous Senate was critical of Clinton's use of the military in Haiti, even though without military action we almost certainly would have had to cope with great numbers of Haitian refugees. All indications are that the present Senate will be even more unwilling to undertake foreign intervention and may adhere to a policy of non-intervention regardless of the potential for refugee generation. It will not merely refuse to join UN peacekeeping efforts but may even oppose them.

As one who has lived and worked among LDC people, I have long sensed their desperation, a

desperation that often takes the form of anger. Even from thousands of miles away, we can sense this anger when we see the mass demonstrations that are currently taking place. The desperation and anger are the more acute when many thousands of people are packed into a tiny place like the Gaza strip. We may not agree (and I for one certainly do not agree) that the blame for their poverty and overcrowding is largely ours, but that does not mean that we are safe from an invasion by these angry people.

My main contention is that there is a desperate and angry world out there, and unless we take steps to curb the desperation of angry people, and the proliferation of their numbers, we may be unable to hold back their invasion regardless of how we may try. ■

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A total fertility rate represents the mean number of live births that women will have, assuming that women survive to the end of their reproductive years and assuming also that fertility continues at present levels. Abernethy (1993) states that immigrant Mexican women had a TFR of 3.90 in 1990; that of U.S. non-Hispanic white women was 1.85 in that year. (Virginia Abernethy, *Population Politics*, p. 207, Plenum Press, New York).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, "The Coming Anarchy" by Robert Kaplan in the February 1994 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

<sup>3</sup> U.S.-Mexican Relations: Labor Market Dependence," (Jorge A. Bustamante et al, ed., 1992, Stanford University Press, Stanford. See also Alexander Monto, "The Roots of Mexican Labor Migration: The Social Process of International Migration from Western Mexico," 1994, Praeger, Westport, CT; and Massey, D. S. et al, "Return to Aztlan," 1987, University of California Press, Berkeley.