

# Reexamining Congress' Exhaustive Immigration Study

**Book Review by Kevin Lamb**

The unfolding issues in the current immigration crisis are comparable in many respects to those from an earlier period in our nation's history. As grassroots activists demand genuine policy reforms that strengthen U.S. borders, solidify immigration enforcement, and preserve peaceful communities from the destructive consequences of violent immigrant gangs, such as MS-13, the past can offer some guidance in dealing with present-day problems.

In the words of Yogi Berra, "This is like déjà vu all over again."

Some of the same impediments that existed during the early twentieth century now overwhelm many areas a century later. There are few aspects of the current immigration problem that have not already surfaced in the past. One exception to this is the degree of demographic shifts, where a number of states by 2050 will have minority population majorities, largely as a result of uncontrolled immigration. Another exception is the reluctance of Congress to adequately *adopt* and *enforce* acute measures to secure U.S. borders, and arrest, detain, and deport illegal aliens.

As the nation comes to grips with swelling immigration levels and growing community problems

that result from concentrations of unassimilated low or unskilled immigrants, rising public concern about the nation's immigration problems has been a persistent force behind civic participation, whether the Immigration Restrictionist League in the early 1900s or the Minutemen in this century. The combined pressure of public opinion and grassroots activism has

prompted public officials to confront the twin challenges of massive and uncontrolled immigration.

Exactly how did our elected officials resolve immigration challenges in the past?

Between the early 1800s and early 1900s, some 35 million immigrants arrived in the United States. In 1907, the immigration tide peaked at 1.3 million during

Theodore Roosevelt's administration. Public pressure and a growing awareness of the immigration problem in Congress generated a tipping-point that culminated in the sweeping immigration reforms of the early 1920s.

Robert Zeidel, a senior lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, is the author of *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics*, a revealing look at the work of the Dillingham Commission, a panel named after Sen. William P. Dillingham (R.-Vt.) that Congress established in 1907 to examine how American society was being impacted by massive immigration and, in particular, the latest pool of immigrants. According to John M. Lund, writing in the University of Vermont's *Historical Review*, "Dillingham achieved eminence as the leading Progressive-era legislative spokesman for restriction. While not an

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and Exclusion  
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originator of new ideas, his habits of mind, holding rural ways of life, property ownership, literacy, and Anglo-Saxon Protestantism sacrosanct, coalesced with the fear that immigration threatened to transform the republic into a non-Protestant nation of cities breeding disease, poverty, and crime. In the Senate, Dillingham spearheaded restriction as chairman of the Senate Committee on Immigration from 1903 and 1911 and chairman of the Dillingham Commission, a joint House-Senate Immigration Commission from 1907 to 1911. The commission's investigation – the most exhaustive study of immigration in American history – originated in response to calls to curtail immigration from Japan and southern and eastern Europe.”

Zeidel also argues that the work of the Dillingham Commission is an outgrowth of the mindset of progressive-era beliefs in “which Americans made wide-ranging efforts to improve socio-economic conditions.” The Roosevelt era is one that is dominated by progressive reformers who reflected a “quest for social betterment.” He rejects the idea that the Commission acted entirely on irrational concerns often attributed to ardent nativists, such as Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard.

*When policy makers could not agree on a proper answer to the nation's “immigration question,” they set up the expert commission to carry out a detailed investigation. The scope of its inquiry, the breadth [of] its reports, and even its rationale for restrictive recommendations bear witness to the commissioners' concern for thoroughness and objectivity. Conversely, the commission made few negative references to immigrants on the basis of their physical, social, or cultural characteristics.*

Some historians have tried to “spin” the work of the Commission as being driven by unfounded anxieties over immigration matters. In fact the author makes a strong case for the legitimacy of the

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Commission's findings and the seriousness with which the Commission acted to fulfill its responsibility. Commission members traveled extensively throughout parts of Europe collecting information and examining the conditions and areas where a large percentage of émigrés were departing to the U.S.

The nine-member Commission rendered a “full inquiry, examination, and investigation...into the subject of immigration.” The Commission methodically studied the background, skill levels, traits, origins, background, and physical characteristics of these recent arrivals in an attempt to assess the differences of the new immigrants from previous ones. As Commission member Henry Cabot Lodge noted, the Commission's work was “the most exhaustive inquiry into the subject which has ever been made.”

Zeidel cites the fact that much of the focus of the Commission's work was devoted to rational economic considerations, such as the skill levels and literacy of recent arrivals. He summarizes and describes the contents of the 41 volumes and notes that the “full, unabridged volumes hold a treasure trove of historical information about American immigration...” The reports offer a wealth of data which served as the basis of the Commission's recommendations.

The Dillingham Commission noted that:

*The immediate incentive of the great bulk of present-day immigration is the letters of persons in this country to relatives or friends at home. ... A large number of immigrants are induced to come by quasi labor agents. ... Another important agency in promoting emigration from Europe to the United States are the many thousands of steamship-ticket agents and subagents operating in the emigrant-furnishing districts of southern and eastern Europe.... While, unfortunately, the present law, from the difficulty in securing proof, is largely ineffectual in preventing the coming of criminals and other moral delinquents, it does effectively debar paupers and the physically unsound and generally the*

*mentally unsound.... No adequate means have been adopted for preventing the immigration of criminals, prostitutes, and other morally undesirable aliens.... The coming of criminals and persons of criminal tendencies constitutes one of the serious social effects of the immigration movement. The present immigration law is not adequate to prevent the immigration of criminals, nor is it sufficiently effective as regards the deportation of alien criminals who are in this country.*

The Commission stressed that “care should be taken” so that the quality and quantity of immigrants do not compromise the process of assimilation. Considering the arguments for unrestricted immigration on the part of business interests, the Commission warned:

*The development of business may be brought about by means which lower the standard of living of the wage earners. A slow expansion of industry which would permit the adaptation and assimilation of the incoming labor supply is preferable to a very rapid industrial expansion which results in immigration of laborers of low standards and efficiency, who imperil the American standard of wages and conditions of employment.*

Two major reforms resulted from the work of the Dillingham Commission: literacy testing and national quotas. It recommended a number of practical reforms, including that “aliens convicted of serious crimes within a period of five years after admission should be deported.... Any alien who becomes a public charge within three years after his arrival in this country should be subject to deportation in the discretion of the Secretary of Commerce and Labor.”

In terms of restricting immigration, the Commission suggested:

1. The exclusion of those unable to read or write in some language.
2. The limitation of the number of each race arriving each year to a certain percentage of the average of that race arriving during a given period of years.
3. The exclusion of unskilled laborers unaccompanied by wives or families.
4. The limitation of the number of immigrants arriving annually at any port.
5. The material increase in the amount of money required to be in the possession of the immigrant at the port of arrival.
6. The material increase in the head tax.
7. The levy of the head tax so as to make a marked discrimination in favor of men with families.

Although Zeidel’s treatment of the Commission’s work is reasonably fair and accurate, it isn’t without its flaws. Perhaps the biggest weakness in Zeidel’s analysis is the treatment of the widely heralded study by Franz Boas, often referred to as the “father of American anthropology,” undertaken in 1908 as a study of immigrant assimilation as a project of the work of the Dillingham Commission.

In his preliminary report, Boas tried to show that “the change in environment from Europe to America has a decided effect on the bodily form of the immigrants, and that the same surroundings are not equally favorable to different European groups.” Boas continued to expand his work and in a 573-page study, *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants*, argued that the “adaptability of the immigrant seems to be very much greater” than originally considered on the outset of his investigation. Boas’s findings have provided what egalitarians and multiculturalists view as empirical evidence of racial equality in dispelling the idea that “racial type” determined physiology.

However, the data set that Boas relied upon in his study has been subjected to further scrutiny by two physical anthropologists, Dr. Corey S. Sparks of Pennsylvania State University, and Dr. Richard L. Jantz of the University of Tennessee. Sparks and Jantz published their findings in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in November 2002. Sparks and Jantz conclude that “Results point to very small and insignificant differences between European- and American-born offspring, and no effect of exposure to the American environment on the cranial index in children. These results contradict Boas’ original findings and demonstrate that they may no longer be used to support arguments of plasticity in

cranial morphology.”

For one reason or another, Zeidel has overlooked the findings of Sparks and Jantz, which certainly warrant at least some reference considering the importance placed on Boas’ study and the thoroughness of Sparks and Jantz’s reanalysis. Despite this shortcoming, Zeidel offers an otherwise penetrating and objective assessment of the work of the Dillingham Commission. ■