

We Need New Principles to Guide Immigration Policy

By JOHN VINSON

What kind of immigration policy should the U.S. have? One thing for certain is that it should be far different from the dysfunctional and destructive policy that we have today. The first step is to set forth general principles from which we can derive the specifics of a new policy. The following is a list of proposed guiding principles.

The first principle is to make immigration a policy like other policies, based on national interest and calm reflection, instead of an exercise in utopian sentimentality.

Too often today the guiding notion behind policy is that our country has the duty as well as the capacity to uplift a significant percentage of the world's poor and oppressed by admitting them to the U.S.

Simple statistics reveal the sheer futility of this notion. World population growth in recent years has averaged around 80 million per year, with most of this increase in underdeveloped countries. So the U.S., a country with a current population of 317 million, would have to admit 80 million people, year after year, just to keep the rest of the world as crowded as it is now.

To put this prospect into perspective, for the past two decades we've admitted around one million immigrants per year, the highest sustained level in our history. And this doesn't count the several hundred thousand illegal aliens who have settled permanently each year during that time-frame.

This level of immigration, tiny as it is compared with the world-wide yearly increase, has caused considerable growing pains. According to current projections, our present population will grow to 400 million during the next 36 years, with the overwhelming majority of this growth coming from immigrants and their offspring.

No, we can't even begin to save the world by accepting immigrants. And if our immigration enthusiasts would simply look at the numbers, even the most wild-eyed among them might feel compelled to agree. If we wish to help the world's huddled masses, it would be

better to help them prosper where they are, rather than invite them here.

In truth, our current level of immigration is weakening our national cohesion and the economic well-being of most Americans, thus making it more difficult for America to help people either at home or abroad. The best policy for all concerned is for our country to place its legitimate interests first in setting policy.

The second principle is policy based on the realities of our country today. Foremost of these is that we are no longer an underdeveloped nineteenth century society with vast wide-open spaces of prime land awaiting settlement. We no longer need huge numbers of people to build our country. It's a twenty-first century society, and it's already built.

Those who overly romanticize the "huddled masses" of Emma Lazarus are truly people who live in the past. An immigration policy appropriate to a horse and buggy era is not appropriate today. Some will object, of course, that we are a "nation of immigrants" and that welcoming immigrants is an important national tradition. Be that as it may, traditions must adapt to new conditions. We also have a national tradition of pioneering, but because of that, no one is suggesting that we open our national parks to settlers who want to relive the legacy of Daniel Boone.

Today, we can pioneer in other ways, such as innovation in fields of technology. And with immigration we also can adapt to modern realities. Specifically, why do we need a million immigrants a year to honor the tradition of immigration? Couldn't we do that just as well with a much more reasonable flow of 300,000 per year or less?

The third principle is preserving national cohesion. The high level of immigration today, legal and illegal, is making assimilation increasingly difficult. Today, more than 40 million residents of the U.S. are foreign-born. Constant news reports of ethnic and cultural tension in the U.S. belie the cliché that diversity is always our strength. Without the unity provided by assimilation to a common culture, diversity becomes division. This is a problem for the native-born and immigrants alike. The former lose a homeland which feels like home, and the

John Vinson is president of the American Immigration Control Foundation.

latter lose the kind of country that drew them to come in the first place.

The United States has experienced mass immigration for more than 40 years. Now is the time to take a break for the sake of assimilation. A clear precedent was the legislation in the 1920s that ended the previous wave of immigration, and enabled immigrants of that era to become part of America.

Aside from cutting numbers, it would be helpful to have a flow of immigration that conforms to its existing diversity, rather than one that exacerbates it. When Congress debated the 1965 immigration act, which set the present tide of immigration in motion, one of its leading sponsors, Sen. Edward Kennedy, conceded that it would not be a good idea for one region to dominate immigration. Yet that is precisely what happened, with a vastly disproportionate number coming from Latin America in general and Mexico in particular.

This outcome has hindered assimilation by allowing huge Spanish-speaking enclaves to develop, while giving “La Raza” activists opportunity to practice divisive politics in pursuit of ethnic advantage. One example is Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-IL), the most outspoken advocate of amnesty for illegal aliens in the House. Brazenly, he has declared that “I have only one loyalty, and that’s to the immigrant community.” Thus by his own admission, Gutierrez admits he has no loyalty to his country or its common interests. Immigration policy should stress national harmony, instead of becoming a battleground for groups to contend for power over their fellow citizens.

The fourth principle is maintaining America as a middle-class society where upward mobility is possible. Economic elites falsely claim that mass immigration promotes national prosperity. In fact, it promotes the generally stagnant and falling domestic wage levels our country has witnessed in recent decades, precisely the same interval when mass immigration has soared to the present record level.

That’s hardly surprising. By the economic law of supply and demand, when all other factors are equal, wages go down when the number of workers increases. If immigration truly promotes a strong middle class, we should see this effect in California, the state most heavily impacted by immigration. But in fact, as immigration has risen, California’s once solid middle class has significantly declined.

Some immigration advocates maintain that reduced wages are a good thing for the economy. One was former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, who called for more immigration, saying that the wages of skilled Americans were too high. In most cases, it seems that low-wage advocates are individuals with sufficient position and wealth to be oblivious to the general wage level.

Immigration, however, can stimulate their prosperity even more. As studies by Harvard economics professor George Borjas have shown, immigration — by lowering wages — transfers wealth from wage earners (particularly the poorest of them) to those who make profits from the cheap labor. In this fashion, mass immigration may be called a Robin Hood in reverse policy, by taking from the poor (thus inhibiting their upward mobility) and giving to the rich.

Low wages also discourage technological innovation, which is the key to upgrading productivity and maintain a high-wage economy. One example is agriculture, where low wages inhibit the mechanization of farm work, while allowing growers to keep relying on foreign workers.

As with ethnic hustlers who want a political advantage, immigration policy should not cater to well-off people who want more affluence at the expense of their countrymen. America is not distinctive in being a “nation of immigrants.” Except for the site of human origin, every land was settled by people who came from elsewhere. What has made America distinctive is having a decent standard of living and upward mobility for citizens. Immigration policy should aim to keep that distinction.

From these principles we may draw some specific conclusions for policy. Most definitely immigration should have a yearly numerical limit, one significantly lower than the present level.

To that end, we should eliminate the existing quotas for non-immediate family members of previous immigrants to come to the U.S., and only allow spouses and minor children under the heading of family reunification. Ending extended family quotas, which favors the existing flow of immigration, will encourage a more diverse flow of immigrants.

We should accept skilled immigrants, but only with particularly outstanding skills. If in general we lack workers with lesser skills to do jobs, we should upgrade our educational system to train those workers, while allowing wages in those fields to rise to make them more attractive for job seekers.

Also we can accept a reasonable number of refugees, but only genuine refugees, that is, individuals who face genuine personal threats from the governments of their home countries. Too often today, those classed as refugees are people who are dissatisfied with their countries and/or who want to improve their economic opportunities.

These steps would ensure true “immigration reform,” not the bogus variety promoted by immigration enthusiasts. A sensible immigration policy, geared to modern realities, is essential if we wish to have a nation of united and prosperous Americans. ■