

For our "What's past is prologue" department we remind readers that the Immigration Act of 1965 was the first revision of US immigration policy since 1924, and that the impetus for it came mostly from a policy statement found in a little-remembered book by John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1958). Ira Mehlman, a freelance writer in Washington DC, explores the connections between the book and the subsequent legislation.

## JOHN F. KENNEDY AND IMMIGRATION REFORM

By Ira Mehlman

In the history of publishing it would be hard to find a book, published by a relatively small press and with almost no public notice, containing ideas that have had a greater and more long-lasting impact on public policy than John F. Kennedy's 1958 treatise, *A Nation of Immigrants*. The ideas expressed in *A Nation of Immigrants* (though Kennedy was certainly not the only one expressing them) ultimately became the basis for the immigration reforms of 1965 which, to this day, stand as the foundation of US im-migration policy.

As has become the custom of aspiring presidential candidates, Senator Kennedy in 1958 was seeking to get his public policy ideas and visions in print and in the public record. In the Anti-Defamation League, Kennedy found a willing and powerful outlet for his views on immigration policy; in the issue of immigration reform, Kennedy and the ADL—a division of B'nai Brith, the most prominent Jewish organization in the United States—found a commonality of interests.

Kennedy, a scion of Irish Catholic immigrants, was seeking the Democratic presidential nomination not only against a field of other candidates, but also against conventional wisdom and long-standing prejudices. It is not hard to detect a degree of bitterness in the writings of a man whose ethnic origins and religion were seen as obstacles to his reaching the White House. Kennedy caustically suggests a few additions to Emma Lazarus' poem *A New Colossus* which welcomes the world's tired and poor to America's shores: "As long as they come from Northern Europe, are not too tired or too poor or slightly ill, never stole a loaf of bread, never joined a questionable organization, and can document their activities for the past two years." Later, after his assassination, *Newsweek* magazine observed that "Mr. Kennedy felt the issue with a special depth of immediacy—and rage."<sup>1</sup>

In the American Jewish community, Kennedy found a natural ally on the issue of immigration reform. The shame and guilt of American Jews about their failure to do more to save European Jewry from the Holocaust still lingers today, and was all the more palpable so soon after the event. To

this day, there is a strong feeling that, had it not been for the highly restrictive immigration policies of the US (and other countries), many of Europe's Jews could have been saved. Thus, it is not surprising that in 1958 the ADL not only endorsed, but published Kennedy's calls for a more liberal US immigration policy.

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Like so many of Kennedy's ideas, his views on immigration were not fulfilled in his lifetime, but rather became part of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society." And, like so many of the well-intended programs of the Great Society, the immigration reforms Kennedy called for went well beyond their original intent and produced many unforeseen consequences.

Looking back from our current vantage point in 1991, few would argue against the basic premises of Kennedy's ideas for reforming America's immigration policies. First and foremost, he argued passionately for an end to the national origin immigration quotas that had been part of our laws since 1924. These quotas, which were intended to perpetuate immigrant flows from Northern and Western Europe and exclude most other immigrants, were an anathema to Kennedy and many others. Few people today could find fault with Kennedy's advocacy of a US immigration policy that is color- and ethnicity-blind.

In place of the national origin quota system Kennedy, first in his book, and later as President,<sup>2</sup> called for the institution of an immigration policy that judges all applicants on an equal footing. He suggested three basic criteria for admission of immigrants to the United States: 1) the skill of the individual immigrant, 2) the reunification of families, and 3) priority of registration: first come, first served.

What Kennedy clearly did not call for was a massive increase in the *number* of immigrants being admitted to the United States. He suggested a modest

increase in the annual immigration quota that then stood at 156,700.<sup>3</sup> "There is, of course, a legitimate argument for some limitation upon immigration," wrote Kennedy. "We no longer need settlers for virgin lands, and our economy is expanding more slowly than in the 19th and early 20th centuries."

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Because *A Nation of Immigrants* was not published by a major publishing company when it was first issued in 1958, it was not reviewed in the press. Even when it was reissued posthumously, this time by Harper & Row in 1964, it received only a moderate amount of attention. The few reviews that were written were more tributes to a slain president than deep analyses of his ideas about immigration policy and the consequences of implementing these ideas. Typical of the reviews in 1964 is one which appeared in *Newsweek*:

*Oceans of empty rhetoric have been spilled in ineffectual tribute since November 22. But such monuments as President Kennedy would have wished remain for the most part to be created—as, for example, the enactment of the kind of immigration policy he fought for, and here pleads for. Like marble, laws make lasting memorials.*<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the only way to really gauge critical reaction to *A Nation of Immigrants*, either in 1958 or 1964, is to look at what was being said about the issues raised in Kennedy's book, rather than by reaction to the book itself. The 1958 edition was largely ignored, and the 1964 edition could not be assessed dispassionately.

Historical context is important as to how the ideas in *A Nation of Immigrants* were received. The late-1950s and early-1960s was the period in which the United States (with the exception of the Deep South) could no longer rationalize the incongruities between our professed commitment to the principle that "all men are created equal," and our failure to apply that principle to significant portions of our population. Likewise, during this period of national soul-searching, we began to examine the underpinnings of our immigration laws which were implicitly and explicitly discriminatory. Just as by 1958 (and certainly 1964) the days of Jim Crow were clearly numbered, so too was an immigration policy that was based on a national origins quota system that limited immigration to a few countries in Northern and Western Europe and explicitly excluded others. The question was not whether these policies would

change, but rather when and how much.

Support for scrapping the national origins quota system was already being voiced without reservation by the political left around the time of the book's first publication, and with some caution by the political mainstream. By far, the most forceful advocates of dropping racial and national origins bars and expanding quotas were, for lack of a better description, the religious left wing.

*The Christian Century*, self-described as "an undenominational journal of religion," argued often and vehemently for such changes in our immigration laws. With an all-star line-up of regular contributors that included the likes of Reinhold Niebuhr, Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin E. Marty and Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Christian Century* saw immigration reform as an essential component of the fledgling civil rights movement. A 1957 editorial opined that, "We are in danger of preaching freedom and reveling in it ourselves but denying it to those who knock on our doors....The denial borders on blasphemy at Bethlehem. Fling wide the gates and let some glory in."<sup>5</sup>

Judgments about ideas are often influenced as much by those who oppose them as by those who advocate them. One cannot help but note that some of the most disreputable folks in America were taking the opposite view. For example, the *American Mercury* (where one would turn if one cared to read the views of someone like Lincoln Rockwell) argued just as often and vehemently against proposed changes in immigration policy. In assessing the suggestions from Kennedy and others that immigration opportunities be made available to nontraditional sources, the *American Mercury* immediately detected a communist plot. "There is no subject to which more thought is given by international communism, under orders from Moscow, than immigration. For the greatest force of communism...is in infiltration."<sup>6</sup>

Around the time of the first publication of *A Nation of Immigrants*, there was very little discussion in the mainstream press of the issue of the national origins quota system. In the late 1950s the popular media reported immigration news, but largely refrained from analysis of the social and intellectual underpinnings of extant immigration policies. One of the few exceptions was the *Saturday Evening Post*, which periodically ran editorials about the issues.

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While urging some moderation in the rigid immigration laws of the time, the *Saturday Evening Post* also perceived the risks inherent in tinkering with those policies. "Those who oppose immigration laws based upon the national origins system would burn the barn to roast the pig," said a *Post* editorial. "We should open the door for as many worthy aliens as we can. But we must hold fast to our policy so that the cultural characteristics of our population will not be materially altered."<sup>7</sup> As the country now wrestles with itself over multi-culturalism, there may be a few people out there who are "politically incorrect" enough to admire the perceptiveness of the person who wrote that editorial 33 years ago.

When it came to immigration, the *Saturday Evening Post* saw many of the issues and hazards long before most. While others were debating the pros and cons of the immigration issue out of emotion or paranoia, the *Post* was well ahead of its time in its hard-headed assessment of not only the proposed reforms, but also of the reformers.

Shortly after President Eisenhower signed an amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act authorizing an annual increase of 30,000 immigration visas (a step to which the magazine did not object), the *Post* observed a hidden agenda among many who were pushing most adamantly for increasing the quotas. "Despite this liberalization, the immigration law continues to be heartily denounced and vilified. Violent as this criticism is, it all boils down to one simple plea, namely, that more immigrants should be admitted."<sup>8</sup>

It is also worth noting that the original release of *A Nation of Immigrants* coincided with the peak of the post-World War II baby boom in the United States. In 1958 the *Saturday Evening Post* was again the first to recognize the dangers of runaway population growth and its connection with immigration. Long before it was the vogue the *Post* was writing about the need to limit population growth:

*It is true we had no quantitative or quota restrictions on immigration for a long period in our history. But that was when we had vast, unoccupied areas of free, fertile land and a far smaller population than now. Today there are 70 million more people in the United States than when numerical quotas first went into effect.*

*If present birth rates in this country and the present scale of immigration continue, we may have 40 million additional population in only 12 or 13 years from now. To provide housing, health, welfare, educational and employment facilities for our explosively expanding population is going to be a large enough task for even the richest of nations.*

Finally, the editorial, which was remarkable for its foresight in 1958, concluded: "To open wide the floodgates of immigration could well depress our standard of living to a dangerous level without making more than a dent on the world problem of overpopulation. Is it wrong for us to consider first the interest and welfare of the American people?"<sup>9</sup>

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Opening wide the floodgate was not, of course, what Kennedy had in mind. What he advocated was greater fairness in the selection process and a modest increase in the overall quotas. Nothing in his book (which became the basis of an immigration proposal he sent to Congress on July 23, 1963) suggests that Kennedy ever envisioned the endless chains of family migration that have resulted. Nor does it appear that he recognized the explosive combination of "push" factors that would drive unprecedented numbers of people in the underdeveloped world to take advantage of what seemed, at the time, like modest modifications in the immigration law.

Few did foresee such developments. In the analyses that appeared of the President's proposal to Congress, only *U.S. News and World Report* recognized the connection between growing global population pressures and US immigration policy.<sup>10</sup> "Rising population pressures abroad are a factor in the drive to lower U.S. immigration bars a little.... Basically, the U.S. is asked to help ease population pressures in the Caribbean and elsewhere,"<sup>11</sup> wrote the magazine.

At the time of his assassination, President Kennedy was working on a revision of *A Nation of Immigrants*. Under the supervision of his brother Robert Kennedy, the revisions were completed and published in 1964. As noted by every reviewer of the Harper & Row edition, this was to be John F. Kennedy's last published work. As such, it was treated with the kind of deference one would expect of a martyred man's last request.

In his foreword to the revised edition, Robert Kennedy noted: "I know of no cause which President Kennedy championed more warmly than the improvement of our immigration policies....When President Kennedy sent his historic message to Congress in 1963 calling for a complete revision of the immigration law, he decided it was also time to revise the book for use as a weapon of enlightenment in the coming legislative battle."

By this time the issues raised in *A Nation of Immigrants* were no longer merely ideas—they had

already taken the form of legislation that, within a year's time, was destined to become the cornerstone of US immigration law. Again, the religious left wing was at the vanguard of the effort not only to push through the Kennedy program, but to sow the seed for its future expansion. Joining with the *Christian Century*, which was still active editorially on this matter, was *America*, a weekly journal published by the Jesuits of the United States and Canada. While echoing the growing chorus of those who believed that the existing immigration law was "incompatible with our basic American traditions,"<sup>12</sup> they were already, at that time, raising the question of whether any law was just that restricted the movement of people. "...[T]he revolution of rising expectations in overcrowded lands have made immigration policy an international issue," said a 1963 editorial. "In *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII taught that the State has a grave and moral obligation to accept immigrants who have a reasonable hope of providing a better future for themselves and their families."<sup>13</sup>

By 1964, when the book was reissued, there were few people prepared to argue that the national origins quota system was compatible with our American traditions. Even the *Saturday Evening Post*, which had earlier defended national origins quotas, now condemned them.<sup>14</sup> *Newsweek* saw the abolition of national origins quotas as a litmus test of America's determination to rectify centuries of racial and social injustice. "Some of [President Kennedy's] finest qualities are manifested in this book; one of his fondest hopes was that our immigration laws embody our most decent and humane impulses."<sup>15</sup>

The movement to do away with national origins quotas was also picking up important allies within the Johnson Administration. Perhaps chief among them was the State Department's head of Security and Consular Affairs, Abba P. Schwartz. In a speech at St. Olaf's College in Minnesota on April 3, 1964, Schwartz asserted that "Our discriminatory immigration policies send the wrong message around the world."<sup>16</sup> Schwartz also hinted that the reservations being expressed by organized labor and others were based on xenophobia and that the changes being proposed would have little practical effect.

In case there were any doubts about whether Schwartz spoke for the administration, they were laid to rest several months later when his St. Olaf's speech was incorporated, almost verbatim, into the testimony of his boss, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, before the Senate Immigration Subcommittee on July 31, 1964.

Rusk's testimony revealed how little the State Department understood the implications of the changes they were about to make. Rusk seemed confident that abolishing national origin quotas would have little practical effect on immigration to the United States and would merely be a cosmetic change to make us feel better about ourselves. "The action we

urge...is not to make a drastic departure from a long-established immigration policy, but rather to reconcile our immigration policy as it has developed in recent years with the letter of the general law."<sup>17</sup>

As if to underscore his (and presumably President Johnson's) misunderstanding of these policy decisions, Rusk offered an explanation of why the proposed changes to the immigration law would not substantially alter immigration patterns or the number of immigrants to the United States. It also reveals a degree of cynicism, in that the administration believed it was making an empty gesture.

*When Congress developed the national origins system in 1924, it appeared that it may have been fearful that our country would be swamped by vast numbers of untrained and impoverished people. Present day immigration is much different in volume and makeup... Immigration now comes in limited volume and includes a relatively high proportion of older people, females and persons of high skill and training. The significance of immigration for the United States now depends less on numbers than on the quality of the immigrants.*<sup>18</sup>

The State Department's lack of acuity was shared by its colleagues at the Department of Labor who confidently predicted that the proposed changes would add a mere 23,000 workers to the labor force each year.<sup>19</sup>

The business press, which had not seemed interested in the immigration issue when *A Nation of Immigrants* was first published, was very concerned by the time of its second publication. Anyone who followed the debate over the Immigration Act of 1990, would have to wonder whether the business press was simply recycling its old articles and columns. The same interests that feared an impending labor shortage in 1990, were expressing those same fears just as the front end of the great baby boom generation was entering the labor force. (In 1990 they worried about not having enough young workers; in 1964, the fear was a scarcity of mature workers.) "Immigrants are also expected to help fill the dwindling ranks of native workers in the prime age groups—35 to 44 years old. Without immigrants...this key group would decline in the 1960s by about 70,000, reflecting the slowdown in births during the 1930s."<sup>20</sup> [Editor's note: See the article by Elizabeth Koed in the Spring 1991 issue of *The Social Contract* in which the same arguments were used by the business community regarding the abolition of slavery and the restrictions on child labor.]

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Though American business may have been clamoring for an infusion of foreign workers, there was a healthy degree of skepticism from the general press and members of Congress about an impending labor shortage in the United States. "I don't think we ought to let this country get flooded with immigrants," said Senator John L. McClellan (D-Ark.). "We've got enough of an unemployment problem as it is."<sup>21</sup> Congressman William E. Miller (R-N.Y.), who was the Republican Vice Presidential nominee in 1964, also tried to use the issue of job displacement in his doomed campaign. He accused the Johnson Administration of wanting to "open the floodgates for virtually all who wished to come and find work in this country."<sup>22</sup>

In the year following the second publication of *A Nation of Immigrants*, Congress incorporated many of the ideas in the book (along with many that were not) into the sweeping 1965 revisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act. In retrospect, a quarter of a century later, it is now evident that these reforms were, in every respect, a component of what became known as the Great Society. Proposed and enacted with the very best of intentions, these changes set off a chain of events that few anticipated. They established new expectations and patterns of behavior that may be impossible to break, and created problems that, many would contend, are worse than the ones they were intended to solve.

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When one goes back and reviews the debates leading up to passage of the 1965 immigration law, it becomes readily apparent that neither the proponents nor the opponents of the reforms had a realistic understanding of the social, political and demographic situation. The opponents—many of them the same people who steadfastly opposed the civil rights reforms of the same era—clung to the antiquated (and, in some cases, overtly racist) beliefs that certain

classes of people, because of their race, ethnicity or religions, were inassimilable. The proponents of the 1965 reforms naively believed that they could open up immigration opportunities for the teeming masses of the underdeveloped countries, raise their hopes and expectations, and still remain in control of the numbers.

It is not necessary (in fact it would be wrong) to defend the 'national origins' quota system when pointing to the flaws in the system that replaced it. The national origins quotas, as Kennedy and many others asserted, were antithetical to basic American values. However, if the volume of immigration continues to explode, and we maintain domestic policies that continue to balkanize our increasingly diverse population, the immigration reforms of 1965 may eventually prove to be antithetical to basic American unity. ■

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>*Newsweek*. "By JFK," October 12, 1964, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup>President's message to Congress, July 23, 1963.

<sup>3</sup>The actual figure was closer to 300,000 owing to non-quota admissions and "special immigration bills" introduced by individual members of Congress.

<sup>4</sup>*Newsweek*. Op. cit.

<sup>5</sup>*The Christian Century*. "Fling Wide the Gates," September 4, 1957, p. 1028.

<sup>6</sup>Lines, John. "Immigration—The Trojan Horse," *American Mercury*, September 1957, p. 144.

<sup>7</sup>*Saturday Evening Post*. "'National Origins' Should Be Kept in the Immigration Law," April 20, 1957, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup>*Saturday Evening Post*. "What's So 'Illiberal' and 'Inhuman' About Our Immigration Requirements?" January 24, 1958, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup>*U.S. News and World Report* noted that the timing of President Kennedy's message to Congress was influenced by the decision of Great Britain to curtail immigration from its former Caribbean colonies, and the pressure being exerted on Washington to open up a safety valve for Caribbean immigrants.

<sup>11</sup>*U.S. News and World Report*. "If Bars on Immigration Were Lowered," August 5, 1963, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup>*America*. "Racism in Immigration," January 30, 1965, p. 158.

<sup>13</sup>*America*. "The Open Golden Door," August 24, 1963, p. 188.

<sup>14</sup>*Saturday Evening Post*. "The Hypocrisy of Our Immigration Laws," February 15, 1964, p. 78.

<sup>15</sup>*Newsweek*. October 12, 1964, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup>*Department of State Bulletin*. "Foreign and Domestic Implications of U.S. Immigration Laws," April 27, 1964, p. 675.

<sup>17</sup>*Department of State Bulletin*. "Department Urges Congress to Revise Immigration Laws," August 24, 1964, p. 276. (Statement by Dean Rusk before the Senate Immigration Sub-committee, July 31, 1964.)

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup>*Business Week*. "Should the Gates Be Opened Wider?" October 17, 1964, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup>*U.S. News and World Report*. "An 'Open Door' Policy in Immigration?" January 25, 1965, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup>*Business Week*. Op. cit.

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