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America's Shifting Views on Immigration

By Mike Kubic
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From 1892 until 1954, Ellis Island in Upper New York Bay was the point of entry for over 12 million immigrants coming to the United States. Over time, who has been allowed to immigrate and where they went to enter the United States have changed, but discussions about perfecting the system continue to this day. In this text, former Newsweek correspondent Mike Kubic discusses the history of immigration in the United States and the policies that have shaped it to what it is today. As you read, take note of how immigration policies have changed over time in the United States.

[1] In his book *The Next America*, Paul Taylor, a demographer¹ at the Pew Research Center, writes that “[a]s a people, we’re growing older, more unequal, more diverse, more mixed race, more digitally linked, more tolerant, less married, less fertile, less religious, less mobile, and less confident.”

It’s quite a kaleidoscope² of differences. But what it does not show is that about one-third of us, or 100 million Americans, have one thing in common: our ancestors took their first step in the United States on a 27- acre landfill in Upper New York Bay called Ellis Island. For 62 years – from 1892 until 1954 – it was the site of a famous landmark, a huge, faux³ French Renaissance federal building that served as the main United States processing center for immigrants to the New World.⁴



"Ellis Island Public Health Service Physicians" by NIAID is licensed under CC BY 2.0

For the millions who responded to Emma Lazarus⁵ ringing call of “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” the pretentious⁶ edifice⁷ was the gateway to futures and opportunities vastly better than what they left behind.

Most of them were natives of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe – Slavs and Italians looking for a better life and Jews fleeing from oppressive ghettos – and as their ships passed the nearby Statue of Liberty, many cried in anticipation of reaching the legendary land of their dreams.

[5] In most cases, what followed was a rude awakening.

1. someone who studies characteristics of human populations, such as their size, growth, and distribution
2. a constantly changing pattern or sequence of elements
3. **Faux (adjective):** made in imitation
4. The “New World” is a name for the Americas, especially during its early exploration and colonization.
5. an American poet born in New York City
6. **Pretentious (adjective):** showing exaggerated importance
7. a large structure or building

Tired, sea-sick, and hungry after a crossing that could take up to six weeks, they would disembark from their crowded, smelly compartments only to be herded into a crowded, smelly great room that could hold (and sleep on the floor) up to 1,000 people.

They'd be asked 29 probing questions, including name, occupation, and what money they brought to tide them over until they found a job. (The safe answer was to claim 18 to 25 dollars, or about 400-600 dollars in today's currency – Uncle Sam⁸ did not want people who'd be a burden on their new country.)

And most critically, they had to pass a medical examination that started the moment they entered the station, when the medical staff began watching how healthy they looked and how easily they walked and climbed the stairs.

The immigration officials, doctors and nurses were looking for any sign of disability, physical abnormality (including in height and weight), or deformity. They paid special attention to indications of mental illness or intellectual disability, not only "imbecility" but also depression, epilepsy⁹ and cerebral palsy.¹⁰

- [10] Criminals, prostitutes and homosexuals were mandatorily excluded from entering the U.S., and sick arrivals had to either convince the medics that their health problems were temporary, or cheat. Their diagnosis was marked by chalk on the back of their clothing – and according to reports, many a new arrival simply rubbed out the mark and rejoined the queue of healthy immigrants.

Between 1891 and 1930, the Ellis Island immigration office reviewed millions of applications from would-be immigrants. Up to 1,300 of them were processed each day, and almost 450,000 during the station's first year. Most of the new arrivals were either remarkably fit, the medical standards were low, or the doctors ran out of chalk. Although some 700,000 were given certificates of disability or disease, only 79,000 of them were barred¹¹ from entering the country.

For the more the 12 million who passed the muster,¹² the process was remarkably efficient. Typically, they spent only 4-5 hours on the island before they were put on a ferry and sent to a port in New Jersey, free to start their new lives.

The record on the so-called "Ellis Island immigration" proved once again that the most valuable resource any nation can import is people.

Among the hundreds of prominent¹³ Americans who could trace their background to Ellis Island were such eminent¹⁴ celebrities and performers as:

- [15] Isaac Asimov, a prodigious¹⁵ science fiction writer and author of 500 books;

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8. a common national personification of the American government or the United States in general
 9. a neurological disorder that causes sudden recurrent episodes of loss of consciousness or convulsions
 10. Cerebral palsy is a condition that negatively impacts muscle coordination.
 11. **Bar (verb):** to prevent or forbid the entrance or movement of something or someone
 12. a formal gathering of troops, especially for inspection
 13. **Prominent (adjective):** important; famous
 14. **Eminent (adjective):** successful, well-known, and respected
 15. **Prodigious (adjective):** causing amazement or wonder

Irving Berlin, one of America's greatest songwriters whose "Alexander Ragtime Band" was a world-wide hit;

Frank Capra, the director of prize-winning movies including the classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*;

Associate Justice Felix Frankfurter, who served on the United States Supreme Court for 23 years;

Max Factor, the founder and developer of the modern cosmetics industry;

- [20] and U.S. Navy Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, the forward-looking military leader who became known as "Father of the Nuclear Submarine."

The "Peopling" of America

"The peopling of the United States is one of the most important stories of the last 500 years," wrote Michael Barone in his *Shaping our Nation*, a history of America's immigration waves. It is a triumphant story about the inclusion and assimilation¹⁶ of hundreds of millions of Americans born abroad; but it is also a story of wholesale¹⁷ exclusions of others that we today recognize as racist.

The selective process started already with the first surges of immigrants to the American colonies. They were the Scots-Irish, Germans and Scandinavians – mostly Northern European Protestants. They took great risks and suffered endless hardships to reach the New World and succeed, but succeed they did. As the pioneers, they shaped the culture of the young nation, and they were determined to keep it that way.

They made it clear by the passage of the Naturalization Act of 1790, the first federal law that set the rules for granting United States citizenship. The act limited that status to immigrants who were "free white persons of good character," thereby excluding – among others – Native Americans, slaves, indentured servants,¹⁸ free blacks, and Asians.

Asians, in particular, were to be excluded from emigrating. In the 1860s, Congress became obsessed with the offensively named "Yellow Peril," the name given to thousands of Chinese laborers who had been brought in the country to build the First Transcontinental Railroad. In 1870, the legislature passed a Naturalization Act that denied them U.S. citizenship. For good measure, the law also banned the entry to all Chinese women, so that the men could not find Chinese brides and settle in the U.S.

- [25] Since that did not seem to do the job, the lawmakers in 1882 barred all Chinese immigration; in 1885 they prohibited employers to bring to the U.S. foreign laborers; in 1907 they concluded a "Gentlemen's Agreement" under which the Japanese government agreed to regulate the emigration of its citizens to the U.S.; and in 1917 they enacted the so-called "Literacy" or "Asiatic Barred Zone Act." It was America's most sweeping exclusion measure, and it restricted the immigration of all Asians.

16. **Assimilation (noun):** the integration of people or culture into a wider society or culture

17. **Wholesale (adjective):** done on a large scale; extensive

18. a person under contract to work for another person for a definite period of time, usually without pay but in exchange for free passage to a new country

The next focus of racist legislation were two other categories of “undesirable” immigrants – European Catholics and Jews – who by the start of the 20th century were flooding Ellis Island. In response, Congress in 1921 overrode President Woodrow Wilson’s veto and enacted a new system for keeping the country predominantly Anglo-Saxon and Protestant.

The Emergency Quota Act, which was made more specific in 1924, limited the number of immigrants from every country to three percent of its natives who lived in the U.S. in 1910. Professionals and Latin Americans were admitted without restrictions. But the immigration quotas for Central, Southern, and Eastern Europeans, who in the early 1900s were only very small American minorities, were negligible.¹⁹

Their arrivals dropped so steeply that by 1924 the processing of immigrants was turned over to U.S. embassies and consulates, and the Ellis Island immigration office dealt only with immigrants with faulty paperwork and individual refugees.

The exclusionary emphasis highlighted also the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, a Cold War measure that reflected the fears generated by the aggressive expansionism of the Soviet Union. The law, which was passed over the veto of President Harry S. Truman, barred the entry and allowed the deportation of suspected subversives²⁰ and Communist Party members.

- [30] Other laws, however, began to make America more welcoming. In 1948, President Truman scored a major victory by persuading Congress to enact the Displaced Persons Act. After several amendments, the law admitted 600,000 refugees from Communist-dominated Europe to the U.S., almost all of whom were the once-rejected Eastern and Central Europeans and Jews.

In 1965, another seminal²¹ measure, the Immigration and Nationality Act, for the first time committed the United States to accepting immigrants of all nationalities on a roughly equal basis. The law eliminated the use of national-origin quotas, and – most importantly – greatly eased the unification of immigrant families. The results were dramatic.

The naturalization²² of a single immigrant from any country opened the door to his or her relatives and their spouses, and once they became American citizens, they could sponsor their own brothers and sisters. In 1960, seven out of every eight immigrants were Europeans; by 2010, nine out of ten were coming from other parts of the world.

The share of the U.S. population born abroad tripled, and as Paul Taylor noted, became far more diverse.

But what all the immigration laws have failed to resolve is an issue with which Congress and our Presidents have grappled since the mid-1950’s: the huge – and illegal – immigration of Latin American workers drawn by our country’s post-World War II prosperity and economic strength. While they brought here welcome skills and energy, their massive influx across the porous²³ Mexican-U.S. border has defied the search for a formula that would legitimize and regulate their stay.

19. **Negligible (adjective):** insignificant

20. someone intending to overthrow, destroy, or undermine an established or existing system

21. **Seminal (adjective):** strongly influencing later developments

22. the admittance of a foreigner to the citizenship of a country

23. **Porous (adjective):** easy to pass or get through

- [35] In 1986, President Ronald Reagan took a major step by giving amnesty²⁴ to 11.4 million of these illegal immigrants. But three decades later, there was again a similar number of illegal residents in the country, and this time the solutions most bandied²⁵ around – for example, their expulsion or building a wall along the 1,954 mile-long U.S.- Mexican border – were far more harsh and of dubious²⁶ nature.

The only optimistic answer to the seemingly insolvable problem came from a 400-page report published in September 2015 by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

A panel of the Academies' scholars, scientists, and other experts investigated the records of 41 million foreign-born residents — including about 11.3 million illegal immigrants — and their children born in the United States. The researchers found that the often-heard worry – that these Spanish-speaking immigrants will never become Americans – was baseless.

According to the report, the illegals' English language learning "is happening as rapidly or faster now than it did for earlier waves of mainly European immigrants in the 20th century"; their education levels, the diversity of their jobs, and their wages are improving, and the newest generations of immigrants are assimilating into American society as fast and broadly as the previous ones.

The conclusion of Mary C. Waters, a sociologist at Harvard who led research was that "The force of integration²⁷ is strong. However we do it, we are good at it."

- [40] It was a welcome assurance that America's traditional formula for dealing with immigrants – their assimilation – still works, even without their passage through the Ellis Island.

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24. a general pardon for offenses
25. to pass from one to another or back and forth
26. **Dubious** (*adjective*): not to be relied upon
27. **Integration** (*noun*): the act or process of uniting different things

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. The United States government is rightly concerned with monitoring immigration, as it has been proven that integration can negatively affect a community.
 - B. The United States' inability to monitor those who are immigrating into the country has negatively impacted the overall success of the United States.
 - C. The United States is beyond believing it to be necessary to monitor the entrance and movement of immigrants in the United States.
 - D. While controlling immigration continues to be a concern of the government, policies have mostly shifted from being exclusionary to inclusionary over time.

2. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "They took great risks and suffered endless hardships to reach the New World and succeed, but succeed they did. As the pioneers, they shaped the culture of the young nation, and they were determined to keep it that way." (Paragraph 22)
 - B. "Their arrivals dropped so steeply that by 1924 the processing of immigrants was turned over to U.S. embassies and consulates, and the Ellis Island immigration office dealt only with immigrants with faulty paperwork and individual refugees." (Paragraph 28)
 - C. "In 1965, another seminal measure, the Immigration and Nationality Act, for the first time committed the United States to accepting immigrants of all nationalities on a roughly equal basis." (Paragraph 31)
 - D. "According to the report, the illegals' English language learning 'is happening as rapidly or faster now than it did for earlier waves of mainly European immigrants in the 20th century..." (Paragraph 38)

3. PART A: What is the meaning of "yearning" in paragraph 3?
 - A. intense desire
 - B. desperate begging
 - C. hopefully expecting
 - D. tirelessly fighting

4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "...Slavs and Italians looking for a better life and Jews fleeing from oppressive ghettos..." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "...many cried in anticipation of reaching the legendary land of their dreams." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "In most cases, what followed was a rude awakening." (Paragraph 5)
 - D. "Tired, sea-sick, and hungry after a crossing that could take up to six weeks..." (Paragraph 6)

5. PART A: How do paragraphs 37-38 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
- A. It shows that whether immigrants are "legal" or "illegal," they can successfully integrate.
 - B. It proves that how one enters the country isn't as important as how one adapts.
 - C. It proves that the government should not be concerned with "illegal" immigrants.
 - D. It shows how easy it is for immigrants to integrate into the United States.

6. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "A panel of the Academies' scholars, scientists, and other experts investigated the records of 41 million foreign-born residents..." (Paragraph 36)
 - B. "...the often-heard worry – that these Spanish-speaking immigrants will never become Americans..." (Paragraph 37)
 - C. "...the illegals' English language learning 'is happening as rapidly or faster now than it did for earlier waves of mainly European immigrants in the 20th century...'" (Paragraph 38)
 - D. "...their education levels, the diversity of their jobs, and their wages are improving..." (Paragraph 38)

7. How does the author support the idea that immigration laws have worked to exclude certain immigrants in the past?

8. How do the early immigration laws from 1892 until 1954 compare to the laws and concerns of the United States regarding immigration today?
