

IMMIGRATION

Our nation is the product of immigration and it will be stronger if we continue to welcome immigrants. The primary difference between our past and future immigration policies must be the avoidance of discriminatory national-racial quotas. Future immigration policies should include clearer equal rights protections and pathways to citizenship. Here is a brief review of the key US immigration policies which have influenced my position on immigration:

In 1790, Congress passed a Naturalization Act which created a process for free-white persons to become U.S. citizens. That Act was driven, in part, by a desire to increase the nation's power and influence while celebrating and rewarding contributions made by northern and western European immigrants. Excluded immigrants and Native Americans did not share the predominant imperialistic attitudes and they discovered that "people of color" had to obtain the "inalienable rights" espoused in the Constitution before those rights could be protected. That meant overcoming racial barriers against obtaining US citizenship. At that time, the most effective way of preserving the racial goals of the Naturalization Act without violating basic constitutional principles was to establish immigrant quotas based on national origin. The National Origins Act, which became operative in 1929, favored immigrants from northern and western Europe. At that time, immigration laws were directed toward those coming from outside the Americas. Movement across the Mexican and Canadian borders was essentially unrestricted and provided much needed workers, especially in the South.

FDR's "New Deal" initiatives made immigration more attractive and WWII diverted attention away from immigration. After the war, President Truman believed that the American social welfare system could help refugees find jobs and housing while the nation benefited from their labor. JFK agreed with Truman and the book, "A Nation of Immigrants", was posthumously attributed to JFK. That book included his proposal to liberalize immigration statutes. After JFK's death, LBJ pressed forward and succeeded in cajoling Congress to pass the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that eliminated discrimination based on national origin but put a limit on the total number of annual visas issued to immigrants - including those coming from Mexico and Canada.

In 1986, President Reagan signed the Immigration and Reform Act which granted amnesty to millions of undocumented immigrants, increased border enforcement and sought to curtail "illegal" immigration. The U.S. Supreme Court has acted on several occasions to uphold the basic rights established in the Constitution which include protections for immigrants. President Trump's administration believes that we will be overrun by criminals unless a continuous border wall is built at the Mexico border and people from predominantly Muslim countries are kept out. The debate about immigration continues to be how can we selectively restrict entry while professing belief in human equality and inalienable rights.

As a self-described conservative, I believe in limited government and equal opportunity for persons to become law-abiding citizens with equal protection under the law. I disagree with the current Administration's apparent policy regarding immigration. I believe the total cost to keep people out is more than any dubious benefits that might come from withholding the blessings of liberty from them. I am hopeful that there will be bipartisan agreement on pathways to citizenship that are paved with fairness and just treatment. I am concerned that issues, such as immigration, will be used for political purposes at the expense of overall national interest. In her 1950 speech to the U.S. Senate entitled "Declaration of Conscience", Senator Margaret Chase Smith warned that we "have the responsibility of rendering constructive criticism, of clarifying issues, of allaying fears by acting as responsible citizens." That is the least I feel obligated to do for the privilege of being a U.S. citizen.

- Bobbie Shields

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