**The Case for Strong Borders**

**Balancing Access and Exclusion**

**By Mark Krikorian**

Borders are everywhere in our daily lives, even if we don't always think of them that way. My house has walls and a roof to keep out the rain and snow. My garden has a fence to prevent the deer from using it as a salad bar. My car has doors that lock. Facilities of all sorts – from courthouses to office buildings to power plants to military bases – have perimeter security. Individual cells have membranes. The largest human organ – the skin – is a border for our bodies. The Earth itself is sheathed in a magnetic field.

All these different forms of borders share a function, and that function is *protection* – to allow in only that which should be admitted and to exclude the inadmissible. Borders are not intended to be impenetrable, but instead to limit and select what comes in. I want the sunlight and rain to pass the border of my garden, of course, but not the hungry deer. A house needs to breathe and admit air from the outside, just not too much at any one time.

Nations have borders for the same reason. They are necessary, not so much to seal off the nation from what's outside, but to control what enters so as to protect what's inside. This need to balance exclusion and access is nicely captured in a 19th century aphorism quoted by historian David Frye in his new book *Walls: A History of Civilization in Blood and Brick*: "Love your neighbor, but don't pull down your hedge."

Nowhere is the question of how best to balance exclusion and access at the border more compelling than in the area of immigration. How many foreigners should be allowed to move here? How should we select them? How should we enforce the rules? In other words, who get access, and who is excluded?

We've answered those questions differently in different periods of our history, with immigration levels oscillating from low to high and back again. The Great Migration to New England in the early 1600s saw 20,000 people – an enormous number for the time – move from England to Massachusetts, shaping much of the character of our country to this day. Interestingly, at the end of this period, when immigration levels subsided, the first American immigration law was enacted by Massachusetts Bay – the exclusion of paupers, the precursor to today's "public charge" rules, which seek to exclude the settlement of foreigners who can't pay their own bills.

From the French and Indian War until the Irish Potato Famine, immigration was quite low – not zero, of course, but low, especially compared to the period that followed. That period, from the Potato Famine (and the German revolutions of 1848) until Congress passed restrictions in the early 1920s in response to the Bolshevik Revolution and the spread of anarchism, saw very high levels of immigration. The next two generations were filled with history – the Roaring 20s, the Great Depression, the New Deal, World War II, the post-war boom, the Cold War, the Moon shot, the Great Society, Vietnam – but immigration played no real part because there was so little of it from the 1920s to the 1970s.

We are now almost 50 years into another swing of the pendulum to a period of very high immigration, sparked by Ted Kennedy's change to the immigration laws during the Johnson administration. The foreign-born population – which is to say, people who were not U.S. citizens at birth, including legal immigrants, naturalized citizens, illegal immigrants – grew from fewer than 10 million in 1970 to 14 million in 1980 to nearly 20 million in 1990, more than 30 million in 2000, and close to 45 million today. The foreign-born share of our population has nearly tripled, from less than 5 percent in 1970 to close to 14 percent today, and in less than 10 years, during the first term of what I hope will be the Tom Cotton/Nikki Haley administration, the share will surpass the highest level ever recorded, with the share continuing to increase barring a change in the law.

So the question before us is whether, and how, we should change the current balance at our border between exclusion and access. Should we continue to admit 1 million legal immigrants per year? Should we continue to admit more than half a million "temporary" workers each year, many of whom are anything but temporary? Are our methods for excluding those who should not have access working properly, and if not, how should they be changed?

These questions are especially important given the potentially huge numbers of people who would move here if they could. The State Department reports that there are more than four million people on immigration waiting lists, whose sponsors have submitted paperwork but who must wait because of the numerical caps for the various categories. What's more, a Gallup poll a few years ago found that 700 million people say they would permanently leave their countries if they could, with the U.S. as the top choice for some 165 million of them; many more of them would choose the U.S. if their preferred country were unavailable.

On top of that, there are at least 5 billion people in the world poorer than the average Mexican.

It is thus more important than ever to find the right balance between access and exclusion. And I argue that the current balance is out of whack. Times change, and immigration policy has to change with them. The concern is not that today's immigrants are of lower "quality" or somehow intrinsically less desirable than their predecessors a century or two ago. Rather, America and the world have changed in significant ways that require a change in the balance at the border. Among those changes:

**Economy**. A century ago, the primary sector of the economy (farming, fishing, mining, etc.) still employed more Americans than any other, as it had everywhere on Earth since the dawn of man. Today, only 2 percent of our workforce occupies itself in this way. Meanwhile, the tertiary sector (service industries) now employs 80 percent of working Americans, and climbing.

**Education**. Along with the change in the economy, education has become more widespread. Nearly a quarter of American adults had less than five years of schooling in 1910; now, it's less than 2 percent. And the share of college graduates increased ten-fold, from 2.7 percent to 27 percent.

**Government**. Total government spending (federal, state, and local) per person in 1900 was around $500 in current dollars; today it is about $18,000. All levels of government combined took about 8 percent of GDP in 1900; today, government takes 36 percent of GDP.

**Technology**. In 1915, the first transcontinental phone call from New York to San Francisco cost about $487 in today's dollars for three minutes; the same call in 2000 cost 36 cents, and today, via FaceTime or Skype, is essentially free. You can now fly from London to New York in a few hours at half the price of a weeks-long passage in steerage a century ago.

What do such changes mean for immigration policy? In other words, how should the balance between access and exclusion be changed so the nation's border can better fulfill its protective function?

I'll address these questions regarding three protective functions: Protection for less-skilled or less-sought-after workers, protection for the social safety net, and protection for the civic and cultural foundations of American society.

**Workers**

The first topic often addressed is jobs and workers. Importing large numbers of people from abroad depresses the wages of workers already here who compete with them. In some cases, Americans lose their jobs or don't get jobs they otherwise would have. Over time, though, the economy adjusts, absorbing the new workers, but not without significant cost to American workers.

The authoritative study assessing these economic effects was published in 2016 by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, or NAS. The NAS study found that immigration obviously increases economic growth – with more people, the economy is bigger. Immigration also creates a real net economic benefit—an "immigration surplus"—of roughly $50 billion a year, raising the income of the average native-born American by 0.3%.

That net benefit – which tiny considering we have a $20 trillion economy -- is derived from lowering the wages of Americans who compete with immigrants by about $500 billion. Businesses, in turn, benefit from the efficiencies created to the tune of about $550 billion, resulting in the $50 billion immigration surplus. In effect, immigration functions as a redistribution program, shifting wealth from labor to capital, from the poor to the rest of society. As Reihan Salam puts it in his new book, *Melting Pot or Civil War: A Son of Immigrants Makes the Case Against Open Borders*, "The bigger the negative impact of immigration on native wages, the bigger the positive impact on consumer prices."

The native-born workers facing this competition from immigrants aren't just evenly drawn from the whole workforce – they're mainly those who are least sought-after by employers: the less-educated, teenagers, recovering addicts, ex-cons, the disabled, single mothers needing flexible hours. Protecting them – the most vulnerable and least capable of our countrymen – is one of the functions a border serves.

The rejoinder to this is that immigrants don't actually compete with native-born workers because the two groups are in different occupations—in other words, immigrants are doing "jobs Americans won’t do". This is false.

Of the hundreds of categories into which the Census Bureau classifies American jobs, only a half-dozen smaller ones in the data for 2012-2016 were majority immigrant, and even in those, nearly half the workers were native-born. Most immigrants were found to be working in sectors where most of their co-workers are native-born. This includes maids, taxi drivers, landscapers, construction laborers and janitors. Janitor cannot logically be a "job Americans won’t do" if nearly three-quarters of janitors in the U.S. are native-born Americans.

Conceding all this, one might still argue for a balance between access and exclusion that protects those who benefit from immigrant labor rather than those harmed by it. Like any policy choice, immigration decisions create winners and losers. So the question is, as Harvard economist George Borjas asked in his 2016 book *We Wanted Workers*, "Who are you rooting for?" I root for marginalized workers, those most in need of protection, at least to the extent of maintaining a tight labor market that the only thing they have to offer – their labor – is worth more than it would be without protection.

**Safety Net**

Immigration limits are also designed to protect the social safety net. Milton Friedman famously argued that you can't have both relatively open immigration and a generous welfare state. This is because large-scale immigration, whether under current policies or the more permissive rules that have been repeatedly been promoted by the left-right coalition in favor of looser borders, attracts large numbers of less-skilled workers. Because of their low level of education, most will only be able to earn low wages. These low wages mean, in turn, that they pay little in taxes but are eligible for many means-tested government benefits.

Friedman’s preference was to abolish the welfare state rather than limit immigration, but in the real world, that's not possible. Some form of extensive social provision for the poor is an inherent part of modern society. I'm a conservative, so I think it needs to be tighter and less prone to fostering dependency, but simply eliminating it will not, and cannot, happen.

The sequence of little education to low wages to high welfare use is not a moral critique of immigrants. Our welfare system is designed to subsidize the working poor with children, and a large share of immigrants fit that category. Data from a 2012 Census Bureau survey focusing on "program participation" (i.e., welfare use) showed that 51 percent of households headed by immigrants use at least one means-tested welfare program. The most widely used are Medicaid and the nutrition programs (food stamps, the WIC nutritional program, school lunches), which immigrants use at nearly double the rate of the native-born.

This safety net would buckle under the weight of much higher levels of immigration. Even our current flow of 1.5 million immigrants (legal and illegal) a year creates a significant fiscal deficit. The aforementioned NAS study examined these costs—the balance between services used and taxes paid by immigrants and their dependent children—and found immigrants to be a net fiscal drain under any scenario, with the loss as large as $299 billion a year.

Some who favor expanded immigration concede the need to protect the safety net but argue the way to do that is to tighten the border around welfare, not around the country as a whole.

We tried it and it doesn't work.

Our "border controls" around the welfare system probably do keep immigrant welfare use somewhat lower than it would be otherwise, but they have not prevented extensive use of welfare, often at much higher levels than the native born. The fact is that a modern society is not going to let children starve or people die on the doorstep of the emergency room simply because they're not eligible for taxpayer-funded assistance. Admitting large numbers of poor people into the U.S. inevitably creates stress on the safety net, and the only way to protect it is to keep out people likely to rely on it.

**Culture**

Finally, a rebalancing toward exclusion is needed also to protect the stability of our civic arrangements. To be successful and harmonious, any society needs to cultivate a sense of fellow-feeling and solidarity among its members. Most of our fellow citizens are strangers to us, and yet we tax ourselves for their benefit, yield to their political choices at election time (though the alarming displays surrounding the Kavanaugh nomination suggest that may be changing), and perhaps serve in uniform to defend them. We do this precisely because they are our fellow citizens and have a greater claim on our loyalty and affections that citizens of other countries do.

In ethnically homogenous societies, like Japan or Denmark or Botswana, this social cohesion may arise organically from kinship ties and a shared cultural heritage. But in a more heterogeneous society like ours, it must be cultivated if it is to flourish, and we can't ignore factors that undermine it.

This isn't to say that the superficial, albeit important, aspects of assimilation don't happen. Immigrants generally do learn English, get a job, and drive on the right side of the road. But the deeper and more important process of reorienting one's emotional and psychological attachments from the old country to the new – patriotic assimilation, as John Fonte of the Hudson Institute call sit – has not fared well in recent decades in the U.S. This is true both because advanced communications and transportation technology makes it easier to keep a foot in each country, and also because American institutions are less committed to fostering assimilation – and indeed, are often aggressively hostile to the very concept of assimilation.

The results are unmistakable. In *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, a classic study published in 2001, the sociologists Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut followed thousands of children of immigrants in San Diego and Miami over several years, surveying them when they began high school and then again as they were finishing. Their research covered many issues, including the students' ethnic and national self-identification.

At the beginning of high school, the majority identified as American in some form, either simply as "American" or in some hyphenated form as, say, a Filipino-American or Cuban-American. After several years of American high school, the primary institution tasked with imparting civic consciousness to young people, barely one-third still identified as American, with most adopting either a foreign national identity (Cuban or Filipino) or a pan-racial identity (Hispanic, Asian). Our educational system continues to do a terrible job at civic education, not least because of the influence of multiculturalism.

Aside from the ideological hostility to assimilation (or even a commitment to reverse assimilation) prevalent among all major American institutions, modern society is marked by the loss of what the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam calls "social capital". As he showed in his influential book *Bowling Alone* and in later research, the weakening of connections among individuals and the decline in social trust appears in many areas: falling membership in unions, civic organizations, and professional societies, declining church attendance, less participation in politics, even a drop in having friends over for dinner.

This social atomization wasn't caused by immigration, but it has two important implications for immigration policy. First, the institutions that in the past helped to assimilate immigrants into American life are no longer able to do the job; unions, churches, urban political machines, grassroots ethnic self-help organizations (burial societies and the like) either are significantly weakened or have disappeared altogether.

In addition, Dr. Putnam's research shows that high levels of immigration actually exacerbate the bowling-alone tendencies in the wider society, overloading it with more ethnic diversity than it can handle. He found that diversity didn't so much cause increased hostility *between* groups, as one might expect – balkanization, in a word. Instead, it seems to cause people to pull into their shells like turtles. As Dr. Putnam writes: "Inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbors, regardless of the color of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more but to have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to huddle unhappily in front of the television."

It is no coincidence that Los Angeles, which immigration has made into what Dr. Putnam calls "among the most ethnically diverse human habitations in history," had the lowest level of social trust among all the communities that his team studied.

The difficulties faced by many less-sought-after workers, the dysfunction of our public finances, and the fragility of our civic culture are not caused by immigration, and will not magically solve themselves if we further restrict access to the United States. But they are exacerbated significantly by high levels of immigration and cannot successfully be addressed without reducing immigration. If our border is to serve its protective function, reducing immigration levels is imperative.

How, specifically, should we readjust the balance between access and exclusion regarding immigration? The goal should not be zero immigration but zero-based budgeting – start at zero, because a modern, post-industrial, continent-spanning nation of one-third of a billion people doesn't *need* any immigration. But then decide what categories of people have the most compelling case for admission, and let in everyone who qualifies each year. That would include spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens; genuine Einsteins; and refugees who cannot be helped in any other way than resettlement.

(The *means* of carrying out this protective function – the enforcement tools needed to make these limits stick and limit illegal immigration – are beyond the scope of this paper.)

This would result in a level of immigration less than half the current flow of 1 million legal immigrants a year, but one that would still admit for permanent settlement more immigrants than any other nation on Earth – a rebalancing, certainly, but not a sealing off.

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