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# Coming to America: An Examination of the U.S. Immigration Debate in its Historical Context

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I am a senior social work major, Spanish minor from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. For the past four years I have been a member of the Honors Program. I am also a proud representative of the College of Social Work as an ambassador. This project has been a long process that started during my first year at the University of Kentucky when I began teaching English as a Second Language to native Spanish speakers. Since that initial contact, I have been interested in the

current immigration debate as it relates to real people and real experiences. When Dr. Bhavsar gave his students a chance to choose any topic for an Honors pro-seminar thesis, I knew I had to investigate this issue. With Dr. Bhavsar’s encouragement and the many hours he spent with me to discuss my paper and ideas, I was able to turn my interest into a defense for the people who have truly made the United States the country that it is today. My volunteer work with immigrants and refugees also contributed to my passion for this subject.

I was recently nominated for a position with the Peace Corps, and I look forward to living abroad for two years to understand what it is like to adapt to a culture and language with which I am not familiar. When I return, I hope to work with refugee resettlement or an agency that provides immigrant support services.

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and Astronomy,  
and Director, Honors Program**



I am delighted to endorse this submission by Julie Davidson. Julie originally wrote this paper for my Honors Proseminar (HON 301) class. Her well written, provocative and timely paper on the currently relevant issue of immigration prompted me to suggest that she publish her work. *Kaleidoscope*, the UK Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship, is an apt venue for her thoughtful analysis of the historical roots of immigration and modern debate on this divisive subject. Julie researches concerns that are raised about the influx of immigrants, explodes myths, and points to our historical past as a guide to pursue a humanitarian approach to improving US policy on the important matter of immigration.



# Coming to America: An Examination of the U.S. Immigration Debate in its Historical Context

## Honors pro-seminar thesis

### Abstract

The United States is considered a country of immigrants, but a historical tension has existed between new arrivals and the “native” population. Policies regarding immigration have frequently mirrored the nativist fervor that is created in opposition to large influxes of immigrants. The debate about revamping immigration policy, that has been a key issue in Congress in 2006, is not surprising in an historical context. The concern about large numbers, the fear of draining social services, dilution of American culture, loss of American jobs, and the compromising of national security are all concerns that have been voiced recently, and are almost identical to the concerns of earlier generations of Americans regarding previous influxes of immigrants. This essay explores the historical context in which the new debate is set and uses this history to deconstruct the anti-immigration arguments. Finally, the essay proposes, using humanitarian concern and historical roots as a guide, ways in which United States’ policy can be improved concerning immigration.

### Introduction

For decades, immigrants have journeyed to the United States of America. The Statue of Liberty has come to symbolize the aspirations and hopes for many people around the globe. As the New Colossus raises her torch to the sea, she proclaims, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” (Lazarus, 1883). In fact, the only true natives of the United States are Native Americans who comprise about 1.5 percent of the population (Ogunwole, 2002), so the vast majority of the inhabitants of the United States are the product of immigration. Although the poem at the base of the Statue of Liberty paints a bright picture for immigrants, and the nation’s population is primarily of immigrant origin, many US

policies and a history of nativist xenophobia have stood in direct opposition to Lady Liberty's welcoming message.

Even as a nation of immigrants, the United States' population has typically reacted negatively to each new wave of immigration. Immigration policies frequently mirror the nativist fervor that is constructed in opposition to large influxes of immigrants. Set in this historical context, the current Congressional debate about revamping immigration policy is not surprising. Issues that seem new and unique to the wave of predominantly Mexican immigrants — such as concern of large numbers, the fear of a drain on social services, dilution of American culture, loss of American jobs, and the compromising of national security — are almost identical to the concerns of Americans in response to previous influxes of immigrants.

These concerns have fueled and continue to fuel policy and politics, and are reflected in bills the Congress has been debating recently. The current Senate bill includes measures such as a border fence, increased border patrol, and an electronic system for employers to verify the legal status of a worker, all reforms designed to curb undocumented immigration. Additionally, the bill proposes an increase in skilled-worker H-1B visas, a guest worker program, and outlines a program to grant undocumented persons the right to permanent residence after meeting several requirements (*The Washington Post*, 2005). The House bill, though, is harsher. To halt illegal immigration, this bill proposes a seven-hundred mile long fence, increased fines for employers who hire undocumented workers, and makes helping an undocumented immigrant in any way a felony. The bill also seeks to make undocumented status a felony (*The Washington Post*, 2005). Clearly, the immigration issue is as pertinent in the United States in 2006 and 2007 as it ever has been.

This essay explores the historical context in which the current immigration debate is set, and uses this history to deconstruct anti-immigration arguments. The essay proposes, using humanitarian concerns and historical roots as guides, ways in which United States immigration policy can be improved.

## Numbers Are Deceptive

Historically, when immigrants have arrived in the United States in large numbers, anti-immigration advocates have worried that the nation will be unable to absorb the influx. For example, one of the largest groups of immigrants to come to the United States were the Irish. Between 1850 and 1859, the United States received 1,029,486 immigrants from Ireland (United States Department of Homeland Security [USDHS], 2006). The Irish far outnumbered other immigrant groups. Americans met the Irish immigrants with hostility, and "the motivation was not suspicion of their loyalty, so much as the fear of their large number" (Curran, 1975, p.15). The Irish were more visible in society because of their sheer numbers, and American citizens thought they were being inundated by new arrivals. A large number of immigrants from a single country felt more threatening to the American population than a handful of people of a single ethnicity. This phenomenon is occurring once again with the current wave of Latino immigration. Like the Irish in the mid-1800s, Mexican immigrants currently make up a large group. Between 1968 and 1993, 20 percent of all immigrants came from Mexico (Hing, 2004). From 2000 to 2005, more than one million Mexican immigrants obtained legal permanent residence status, and the US currently has an estimated 11 to 12 million undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants (USDHS, 2006). The number of Mexican

immigrants has sparked controversy, just as the influx of Irish did a century ago.

In *The Case Against Immigration*, journalist Roy Beck argues that the sheer numbers are the most alarming aspect of immigration today (Beck, 1996). Beck believes that the United States simply cannot absorb immigrants on such a large scale, and he proposes that the increasing immigrant population will eventually destroy the economy, environment, and American life in general (Beck, 1996). The Federation for American Immigration Reform, or FAIR, echoed similar population concerns. The United States' population was estimated to reach 300 million in 2006, and FAIR points out that, "most of the future U.S. population increase will result from immigration" (Federation for American Immigration Reform [FAIR], 2006b). Supporters of curbing immigration argue that the United States will in no way benefit from an immigrant population increase; rather, they argue that large numbers of new arrivals will drain resources and ruin the American economy, a bad situation when the United States has its own citizens to support.

Although the numbers seem overwhelming to some people, pro-immigration groups such as La Raza and the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund see increasing immigration as an asset to the United States. Most notably, supporters of immigration point to the numbers because, "Overall gains to the U.S. economy from current immigration are estimated at about \$20 billion even by critics of immigration. Some estimates are much higher. Either way, allowing more immigrants into the United States would increase these gains even more" (Powell, 2005). Pro-immigration groups argue that immigrants strengthen the economy rather than detracting from the United States' ability to support its people.

Furthermore, immigration supporters contend that immigration does not have as large an impact on the nation's population as immigration opponents believe to be the case. A Cato Institute columnist points out that "Immigrants are also blamed for...crowded schools and suburban sprawl...But immigration on average has accounted for...[only] 30 percent of the change in individual state populations since 2000" (Griswold, 2006). According to these statistics, immigration does not constitute the majority of population growth. The article goes on to state that Americans have a much better standard of living than they did a century ago, primarily because food is plentiful and many diseases have been eradicated.

Prosperity has increased along with population. As a result, "There is no reason why these trends cannot continue as the population rises" (Griswold, 2006). Nevertheless, during a large wave of immigration, such as the current Mexican influx, new arrivals are more visible and opponents to immigration become alarmed with the

possible consequences of their numbers. This anxiety, however, is not supported by the statistics, because the immigrant population continues to contribute to the United States.

## The Impact on Public Services

The concern that immigrants may drain American public services builds on the fear of immigrants arriving in large numbers. During the Great Depression in the 1930s, Americans in the Southwest, particularly in Los Angeles, believed that Mexican immigrants were draining the welfare system (Boisson, 2006). In a time when everyone was desperate for any kind of assistance, people of Mexican origin were seen as the last priority even if they were citizens. Officials were so convinced that Mexicans were depleting public assistance that they began a policy of arresting both immigrants and citizens to be “repatriated” (Boisson, 2006). A leading official went so far as to send Mexican people in nursing homes or asylums back to Mexico, because he was determined to alleviate the perceived Mexican scourge of the welfare system (Boisson, 2006). During this anti-immigrant fervor, 60 percent, or about 1.2 million, of the “repatriated” people were United States citizens (Boisson, 2006). Mexicans, however, “did not produce a disproportionate strain on welfare services during the Depression” (Boisson, 2006, p. 25); in fact, Mexicans accounted for only about 10 percent of welfare recipients.

A similar anxiety over depletion of public resources has resurfaced in today’s immigration discussions. The current debate about immigrants’ harm to health and social service systems centers on undocumented immigrants from Mexico, particularly in California due to the high population of Mexican immigrants residing there. Undocumented immigrants are especially targeted, because most citizens believe they do not contribute enough by way of taxes to cover the cost of serving them.

One claim is that children of undocumented workers cause a strain on the public school systems. A recent *Time* magazine article explains that this problem arises because most of these children need specialized services, such as English as a Second Language classes. The supposition is that the parents of these children “typically don’t pay enough in taxes to cover schooling” (Cullen & Fonda, 2006, p. 43), and other taxpayers must struggle to support immigrant education.

FAIR claims that immigrants are destroying schools because, “The total K-12 school expenditure for illegal immigrants costs the states \$7.4 billion annually” (FAIR, 2002). Reflecting this concern, Proposition 187, passed by 60 percent of California voters in 1994, denied access

to public education, including post-secondary institutions, to undocumented immigrants and their children (Meier & Gutiérrez, 2003).

Proposition 187 also addressed strain on the health care system. Under Proposition 187, no medical treatment can be given to undocumented immigrants except for emergency care (Meier & Gutiérrez, 2003). FAIR posits that, “High levels of unpaid medical bills for undocumented immigrants have forced local health care providers to reduce staffing, increase rates, and cut back services. Dozens of hospitals ... along the southwest border have either closed or face bankruptcy because of losses caused by uncompensated care give[n] to illegal immigrants” (FAIR, 2003). While recognizing that denying emergency care would be unethical, both FAIR and Proposition 187 stressed that undocumented immigration could force the medical system into bankruptcy.

Finally, anti-immigration supporters see the flow of undocumented immigrants as a financial handicap to the welfare system. FAIR cites a study by economist George J. Borjas that states, “For immigrants, their reliance on welfare aid went from 23.4 percent in 1994 to 20 percent in 1998, and rose to 21 percent in 2000. In California, immigrants on welfare went from 31.2 percent to 23.2 percent in 1998, but in 2000, 26.7 percent of immigrants received welfare assistance” (FAIR, 2002). As these statistics point out, those who want to see a decline and eventual end of immigration fear that immigrants come to the United States to be taken care of by the welfare system. This destruction of schools, health care, and the social welfare system in the United States seems truly frightening, but there is sufficient evidence to refute this traditional fear.

Hard evidence for the alarming claims of anti-immigrant supporters is elusive. Even in Colorado, a state in which an estimated 250,000 undocumented immigrants live, the evidence does not support the contention that immigrants strain the school system (McCombs, 2006). Many schools have high numbers of students needing English as a Second Language instruction, including students who are United States citizens. However, school districts spend only one percent of their total budget on the services typically most utilized by undocumented immigrants (McCombs, 2006). Immigration opponents argue that these children have gained citizenship by being born in the United States to undocumented immigrants, but many could be children of legal immigrants, or United States’ citizens who speak Spanish in their homes. The underlying point is, the United States has to maintain a commitment to public education to help create productive citizens, and even if these citizens are children of undocumented immigrants, they are citizens nonetheless. For these reasons, the strain undocumented immigrants’ children put on the school systems is a highly questionable assertion.

The argument of undocumented immigrant strain on hospitals is also difficult to defend because “most hospitals, community care centers, and doctor’s offices don’t track the documentation of their patients” (McCombs, 2006). Without systematic data collection it is impossible to say conclusively that undocumented immigrants are the sole or even the primary cause of bankruptcy for border hospitals. Undocumented immigrants are the obvious scapegoat because of the correlation between their location and the number of hospital bankruptcies, but correlation does not prove causation. Undocumented immigrants are a part of a much larger group of people, including citizens, who do not have health care insurance, and “Any uninsured patient — regardless of immigration status — presents a challenge

to health care professionals” (McCombs, 2006). Undocumented immigrants cannot be targeted exclusively as the cause of hospital bankruptcy, because this problem is tied to the larger crisis of millions of Americans not having access to health insurance.

The anti-immigration contention that documented and undocumented immigrants are draining the social welfare system is on even more tenuous ground. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, more commonly referred to as the Welfare Reform Act, changed the eligibility criteria and benefits for immigrants and citizens alike. Undocumented immigrants were denied all benefits beyond emergency health care, public schooling for children, and the use of emergency assistance such as soup kitchens (LeMay, 2004). As a result of this legislation, there was a forced reduction in immigrant welfare use and there is evidence that “welfare reform has hit the non-citizen group harder than other groups” (Kim, 2001, p. 321). This statement is supported by the statistics that the “use of public benefits among non citizen households fell more sharply (35 percent) between 1994 and 1997 than that of citizen households (14 percent)” (Kim, 2001, p. 321). In addition, immigrants contribute to payroll taxes equal to or greater than domestic workers and, because they are more likely to be of working age than the native born population, immigrants are less likely to collect public benefits (Green, 2002). Use of the social service system by documented immigrants was limited to begin with and, after 1996, this use fell once again. Documented immigrants both contribute to and under-use social services in the United States.

Likewise, some evidence confirms that undocumented immigrants contribute more in taxes than they will benefit from (Bischoff, 2002); therefore, undocumented immigrants are unjustly targeted for ravaging the social service system. Those trying to avoid authorities would not enter this country and immediately seek assistance from a government agency. Even if they did try to take this approach, they could not receive social service benefits because of the Welfare Reform Act. Admittedly, many undocumented workers do procure falsified documents and social security numbers. These fraudulent documents, however, mean that the undocumented workers pay taxes, and “Through 2002, [undocumented immigrants] paid an estimated \$463 billion into Social Security. Their takeout: almost nothing” (Cullen & Fonda, 2006, p. 43). Undocumented immigrants who work to put the money into the Social Security system will not reap the reward. The benefits will be entirely enjoyed by American citizens. Daily living in the United States also costs money; undocumented workers pay sales tax on items they purchase, and they add to the real estate market by paying rent (Bischoff, 2002). The purchasing power of undocumented immigrants, combined with their avoidance of public assistance and their contribution to the Social Security system, argues that they do not exhaust social services.

## Culture Shock

Immigrant groups have also sparked fears of Americans losing the American “way of life.” Since the colonial period, Americans have tried to protect their lifestyle through exclusionist policies. In fact, colonial legislatures in conjunction with the British Parliament passed laws to restrict immigrants who might be a threat to the cultural fabric of the colonies (Curran, 1975). Excluded groups included Catholics, Jews, anyone who had committed a crime, and the poor. In the mid-1700s, Benjamin Franklin expressed his fears concerning German immigrants’ effect on American culture. In

*Observation Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (1751), Franklin wrote, “Why should Pennsylvania founded by the English, become a colony of aliens who will shortly be so numerous, as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them?” (Curran, 1975, p. 16). Franklin’s attitude was still present around World War I when “The German language, in particular, came under severe attack” (Bischoff, 2002, p. 154). Language was and is an important part of culture, and the German immigrants’ use of the German language was considered unpatriotic, especially while the United States was at war with Germany. In fact, in 1917, Governor W. L. Harding of Iowa mandated that English was the only language allowed for communication in schools, at work, at church, and while conversing on the telephone (Bischoff, 2002).

The cultural frustration that many people opposed to immigration experience today mirrors these exasperated sentiments. In Pat Buchanan’s new book, *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America*, the author discusses his fear of losing the white majority in the United States. He contends that current trends in immigration have led to the Hispanicization of the Southwest, and this trend will overtake the whole nation if nothing is done to curb new arrivals (Buchanan, 2006). Buchanan’s view, much like Franklin’s opinion before him, is that Americans need to defend their customs before they are completely culturally demolished.

The English language has been a frequent issue in discussions of the protection of American culture, and anti-immigration advocates fear that this important cultural element is being compromised in the current Mexican wave of immigration. Echoing the rejection of the German language decades earlier, in 1998, Californians reacted to the increased influence of the Spanish language with Proposition 227. This proposition requires that all public school classes, with the exception of foreign language classes, are to be conducted in English (Meier & Gutiérrez, 2003). Essentially, Proposition 227 is a backlash to bilingual education, underpinned by the fear that Mexican immigrants are not assimilating to American culture because they are not learning English. If immigrant children are not learning English in American public schools, they probably will not learn it anywhere else. By rejecting English, an essential form of communication and culture in the United States, Mexican immigrants are denying the American lifestyle, and may even want to change American culture. Pat Buchanan illustrates this fear when he writes, “California could become an American Quebec, demanding formal recognition of its Hispanic culture and identity” (Buchanan, 2006, p.

49). According to this view, Mexican immigrants must assimilate to American culture, including the English language, if they want to live on American soil.

Although many Americans fear their cultural heritage will be compromised by this wave of immigration, there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that this concern is unfounded. A recent study shows that immigrants, and especially their children, do learn English, finding that, while 90 percent of immigrant children come from a home where their families speak a language besides English, 73 percent of these children preferred English over the language spoken at home (LeMay, 2004). Such language assimilation does not happen instantly; the children formed their preference for English after being in the United States for three years (LeMay, 2004). A preference for English shows that immigrant children are learning the language of their new country, and becoming so comfortable with it that they would rather speak English than the language of their parents. Indeed, English proficiency increases with the time immigrants have been in the United States so that, by the third generation, 78 percent of Latino immigrants are English dominant and 22 percent are bilingual (Pew Hispanic Center [PHC], 2004). Even of the first generation, 4 percent are English dominant and 24 percent are bilingual (PHC, 2004). Clearly, English is not being overtaken by Spanish. In fact, over time, and it certainly does take time to become proficient in a foreign language, Latino immigrants master the English language. Clearly, becoming English dominant results in acculturation, which is, after all, the ultimate goal.

As mentioned above, bilingual education is another important issue involving language. Although voters in California tried to strike down bilingual education through Proposition 227 because they feared that immigrants were not learning about American culture, bilingual education is intended to help children acculturate. Furthermore, bilingual education's "original purpose was to help in the education of English-deficient immigrant students. At least part of their schooling was to be in their native language, so that they could learn some subject content while they were learning English" (Bischoff, 2002, p.158). If applied in this form, bilingual education can serve to help with the acculturation of immigrants while they learn English. Children gain knowledge in a language they can understand so they can actually retain information. This way, time is not wasted in learning other subjects, like American history, while the student is not proficient enough in English to retain complex information in a, for them, foreign language. Bilingual education is not a rejection of the dominant language; rather, it serves to promote education and acculturation while students also learn English.

## Job Displacement

Citizens' fear of immigrants does not stop with immigrants' large numbers, their impact on the social service system, and their perceived destruction of American culture. Citizens also fear the loss of Americans' jobs to immigrants. Once again, history can illuminate the sources of this fear. While immigrants have historically had multiple reasons for leaving their home countries, a powerful motive throughout the centuries has been economic. Once in the United States, however, immigrants often encounter protectionist and racist practices. Nineteenth century Irish immigrants encountered this phenomenon when employers would qualify a help-wanted sign with the statement "No Irish Need Apply." This poignant example illustrates that Americans have feared losing jobs to immigrants for many years.

Other historical examples demonstrate that immigrants are desired to perform a job, but are rejected when economic problems arise for Americans. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese immigrants came to the United States, primarily the West Coast, to fill mining and railroad jobs. Between 1820 and 1850, only 46 Chinese immigrants lived in the United States. By the 1850s, however, 35,000 Chinese immigrants lived in California alone (Curran, 1975). The growing number of Chinese immigrants did not seem to be a problem while there was work to be done and companies could not find enough workers to do the jobs. When there was a decrease in jobs, however, problems arose. Miners spoke out against Chinese immigration in 1852 because they were worried about competition for jobs that were not as plentiful as in previous years (Curran, 1975). Further fueling the backlash against the Chinese, labor unions began to point out the "racial inferiority" of the Chinese (Curran, 1975). Not only were Americans' jobs being taken, the jobs were being taken by people who were seen as sub-human. As American nativist fervor rose, many public figures and the general population decried the Chinese "scourge" on society. Finally, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed to suspend Chinese laborers' immigration and deny the right of naturalization to any Chinese immigrant already in the United States (Curran, 1975). Unfortunately, the primary motive for this policy stemmed from the perceived threat of Chinese immigrants to American jobs.

Given this history, it is not surprising that current anti-immigration supporters complain about the robbing of American jobs by undocumented and documented immigrants. They believe that, although immigrants usually fill jobs that are rather undesirable, Americans would do these jobs except that "The presence of immigrants keeps those wages and conditions from improving to the point where Americans would take jobs" (Beck, 1996, p. 103). In other words, Americans could have had these jobs at higher pay and in less disagreeable conditions, if cheap immigrant labor were not present. Undocumented immigration, especially, has made many businesses, "so addicted to cheap, compliant foreign labor, they may have ceased to try to attract American workers" (Beck, 1996, p. 104). With plenty of immigrants available for low-skill, undesirable jobs, anti-immigrant supporters argue that there is no market for American unskilled workers who need jobs.

Even skilled, documented immigrants may be seen as a threat to the American job market. Visas such as the H-1B exist to permit skilled workers into the United States on a temporary basis (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2006). To qualify for an H-1B visa, a foreign worker must have at least a bachelor's degree and the sponsorship of a United States employer (USCIS, 2006). Recruiting skilled labor from other countries can undercut highly skilled Americans. In fact, some argue,

American college graduates frequently obtain a degree and apply for a job, only to find out the position is filled by a foreign worker. Anti-immigration supporters believe that there is no reason why the United States should solicit foreign employees when Americans are just as intelligent and talented (Beck, 1996). Anti-immigration advocates conclude that an equation in which undocumented immigrants devour low-skilled jobs while other foreigners have special visas to take high-skilled jobs adds up to very little opportunity for American workers.

Despite the fear that immigrants take American jobs, there is little evidence to suggest that immigrants cause widespread American unemployment. American workers without a high school diploma or GED are the ones most likely to be displaced by immigrant laborers, but immigrants are a positive force for other laborers in the United States. In general, immigrant workers, especially undocumented immigrants, “tend to push American-born workers up the job scale” (Bischoff, 2002, p. 269) rather than taking Americans’ jobs. By taking jobs that American workers indeed do not want, immigrants help to fill necessary jobs while leaving others open for American workers to fill. Evidence exists that immigrants actually create jobs by making the “economy more flexible [and] more dynamic” (Cullen & Fonda, 2006, p. 43). Immigration is not a zero-sum game for American workers — while some low-skilled workers are displaced, other jobs are created at moderate to high skill levels.

Furthermore, shortcomings of education that leave some Americans vulnerable to displacement because they fail to achieve high school graduation should not be blamed on immigrant workers. The alarming fact is that, in 2006, there are still many students who do not earn a high school diploma or GED. Measures should be taken to provide this basic educational need to make Americans more competitive in the job market, rather than blaming immigrants who take the low-paying jobs. In addition, some economists believe that immigrants keep “a lid on inflation and interest rates. As a result, prices for goods and services are lower, and citizens can purchase more” (Cullen & Fonda, 2006, p. 43). This effect of immigrant labor benefits Americans who do not have much purchasing power, such as those without a high school diploma or GED. Halting immigration, thereby probably raising prices, would not necessarily help American low-skilled laborers in the long run. Improved education and better training programs, however, would increase these workers’ marketability.

Anti-immigration supporters are concerned that skilled American professionals, too, can lose out to skilled immigrants such as scientists, engineers, and nurses. Some important job markets, however, are experiencing a labor shortage that citizens alone cannot remedy. A common example of a crucial labor scarcity is the current nursing shortage in the United States. According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the nation “is in the midst of a nursing shortage that is expected to intensify as baby boomers age and the need for health care grows. Compounding the problem is the fact that nursing colleges and universities across the country are struggling to expand enrollment levels to meet the rising demand for nursing care” (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2006). There are “projections that the nation’s nursing shortage would grow to more than one million nurses by the year 2020” (AACN, 2006). If nursing positions are not filled, health care quality will be severely compromised. This profession is in high demand with a limited base of Americans able and willing to do the work; if Americans cannot fill this need, the nation must solicit skilled immigrants.

Another argument in favor of H-1B and other specialized visas is that these foreign workers make the United States more competitive. Bill Gates pointed to the increasing sophistication of research institutions in China and India, and the United States’ need to keep up with this growing competition. Gates remarked on the ridiculousness of having, “too many smart people” (McCullagh, 2005). Not only does the competitiveness of the United States benefit from this addition of brainpower in the high-tech industry, but a need to exclude skilled foreign workers implies that Americans could not match their skills. When anti-immigrant supporters oppose skill-based visas on the grounds of taking jobs from capable Americans, it is an affront to the abilities of Americans with high skill sets. Americans can and do obtain high-tech jobs, and usually end up working alongside H-1B visa holders rather than being displaced by them. This combination of American and foreign intelligence can only benefit the United States by providing a diversity of ideas and skills.

Finally, while undocumented and documented immigrants are helping to create jobs today, their labor will be increasingly in demand as the Baby Boomers retire. The birth rate is low in the United States, the population is aging quickly, and “by 2025, ... 20 percent of the population will be more than 65 years old [so] more working people will be needed to support them and maintain the Social Security System through payroll taxes” (LeMay, 2004, p. 37-38). If the birth rate is low in the United States, the only alternative for sustaining the work force is through immigrant labor. This is the most viable option, unless anti-immigrant advocates are so opposed to immigration they would rather implement a program to force United States’ citizens to reproduce at a high enough rate to sustain economic activity. As demonstrated above, immigrants already contribute to Social Security, even undocumented workers who will not be able to collect these benefits, and the United States will continually require more of this support. In the relatively near future, the nation may well find immigrant labor an absolute necessity.

## National Security

The final point of concern for anti-immigration advocates is the national security of the United States, especially while the nation is at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Throughout the history of American conflict, foreign-born people have been targeted and their loyalty questioned. This practice can be found as early as the French and Indian War of the mid-1700s. During that time, the loyalty of French residents in the British colonies was considered highly uncertain;

this fear led to the imprisonment of many people of French origin during the war (Curran, 1975). Such anxieties during wartime did not end with the colonial period of American history. An infamous example of wrongful imprisonment based on xenophobia occurred during World War II, after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Following this surprise attack that jarred the United States into involvement in World War II, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ordered the internment of approximately 110,000 people of Japanese origin. Most who were interned were United States citizens. The United States was also at war with Germany and Italy, but there was no order to imprison people of those nationalities (Curran, 1975). The internment of Japanese immigrants and Japanese-Americans is a blot on America's record of civil liberties, and serves as a reminder of the fear of foreigners that people experience during wartimes, and the lengths to which they will go to control the alarm.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans have been increasingly concerned about the porous borders of the United States. This dread has been focused on the U.S.-Mexico border, where even the efforts of the border patrol have not been able to curb the inflow of people. Many legislators and anti-immigration supporters have called for tighter security to keep out not only undocumented immigrants, but also potential terrorists. Former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert remarked, "We're at war, and we need to act like it ... We need to close the borders" (Fears & Aizenman, 2006). The contention is that, if so many undocumented immigrants are entering secretly by way of the U.S.-Mexico border, then it is entirely possible that terrorists are also gaining access to the United States by this route. This national security argument was used to support the building of a border fence and, in October 2006, a bill passed the Senate and House in support of a 700-mile long fence on the nearly 2000-mile long border.

Although national security is at stake, many immigration supporters wonder why the U.S.-Mexico border is the sole target of bolstered border control measures. As stated, this border is about 2000 miles long. The U.S.-Canada border, however, is more than double this length, and most of that border is not patrolled. If the United States is so concerned about terrorists coming by way of Mexico, there should also be alarm about the vast, unprotected U.S.-Canada border. The fact that Congress passed a bill to build a fence across much of the U.S.-Mexico border is inconsistent with the nearly complete lack of attention paid to the larger, less protected U.S.-Canada border. It seems unlikely that the United States wants a fence between itself and Mexico as protection against terrorists as the

nation leaves a larger stretch of border vulnerable; rather, it is intended as a barrier to Latino immigration.

The difficulty of constructing this 700-mile-long fence can be imagined by considering the difficulties officials have faced trying to build a 14-mile fence between San Diego and Tijuana. That fence, tiny in comparison to the newly proposed fence, has not been completed after ten years of construction. Multiple lawsuits, from Latino groups as well as environmental groups, have arisen in opposition to the fence (Pomfret, 2006). This short fence shifted the migration patterns to the deadly Arizona desert, where many migrants have perished trying to reach the United States. The shift in movement also forced border guards to this desert region, basically leaving only the fence to prevent illegal entry through San Diego (Pomfret, 2006). T. J. Bonner, the president of the National Border Patrol Council, remarked that, "San Diego is the most heavily fortified border in the entire country, and yet it's not stopping people from coming across" (Pomfret, 2006). Cost estimates for the 700-mile fence range from \$2 to \$6 billion (Weisman, 2006). Based on the San Diego example, a fence, especially one with such an astronomical price tag, is not a feasible way to control the border. Funding could be used for other measures that have proven more successful; for example, the Marine Corps found that a combination of traffic blockades and ground radar was an effective way to protect the border (Pomfret, 2006). While both the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada borders need to be more secure, simply targeting the U.S.-Mexico border with a fence is not a sufficient measure from a national security standpoint.

### **What is the Next Step?**

There is no question that immigration policy needs to be overhauled, no matter which side of the controversy one supports. However, building fences and stoking the fires of xenophobia have not historically been effective in controlling immigration or in creating positive relationships with the home countries of immigrants, and they will not be beneficial today. This paper has shown that questions about the economic impacts of immigration are difficult to answer conclusively, but it is possible to talk about the question in a way that upholds the American ideals of equality, justice, and the pursuit of happiness. By treating the immigration issue more as the humanitarian dilemma it is, and with a consideration of history, policy makers can create effective, humane reforms to immigration law.

The first issue that should be addressed by policy makers, because it is the one most in contention today, is undocumented immigration. Both the House and Senate bills as discussed earlier suggest a border fence as their main provision to curb illegal entry. Without border patrol officers to monitor this fence, there would be no one to stop undocumented immigrants from scaling the fence or even destroying parts of the barrier in isolated areas. A more practical solution is hiring more border patrol personnel instead of building a fence. Additionally, if the United States is truly concerned with terrorists entering through a porous border, the longer and more remote Canadian border should not be forgotten. Both the Mexican and Canadian borders need to be protected with more border patrol officers. In conjunction with providing more personnel, new technology should be used to curb undocumented immigration and secure the border. As noted, the Marine Corps National Guard successfully used ground radar and road blocks to stop undocumented entrants. Because these measures have been shown to be more effective, it would make more sense to invest in this kind of technology. In addition, border patrol agents should be trained to treat undocumented



entrants humanely and with dignity; in particular, agents should be fluent in Spanish to facilitate communication. A combination of technology and agent training could address the immediate flow of undocumented workers, while ensuring that human rights are not violated.

Although the borders need to be addressed, the issue of employers hiring undocumented workers is also an area of concern. Hiring undocumented workers is illegal, but these laws are rarely enforced. Not only is such hiring a violation of the law, it can result in the victimization of undocumented workers who are exploited by being underpaid, overworked, and mistreated. Sanctions should be imposed on employers who hire undocumented workers. Reducing the demand for undocumented labor would eventually decrease the supply of such labor. Enforcing sanctions would also mitigate the exploitation of undocumented immigrants, particularly if the sanctions were imposed in conjunction with opening more legal routes of immigration.

Opening more channels for legal immigration would almost certainly lead to less undocumented immigration. Most immigrants would prefer to be in the United States legally but, in their need to escape desperate poverty, they do not have time to wait for months or years to obtain a visa. The United States would also benefit from this measure, because immigrants contribute valuable labor that will be even more in demand as a large part of the American workforce retires with the aging of the Baby Boomers. If the United States opens more legal immigration opportunities, it can curb undocumented immigration, provide legitimate employment for immigrants, and have its labor needs met, without spending resources on combating undocumented immigration.

Of course, none of these measures, alone or together, will completely halt undocumented immigration. Truly comprehensive immigration reform will be achieved only when the lives of potential immigrants are so improved in their home country that emigrating to the United States becomes a choice rather than a necessity. The United States needs to examine exactly why immigrants, both documented and undocumented, are arriving. In many cases, immigrants are trying to escape dire political or economic situations in which they cannot maintain themselves and their families in their home countries. Consequently, people come to the United States seeking safety and better economic opportunities. The United States needs to work cooperatively with organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, to ensure that these institutions do improve the lives of the general population in nearby immigrant source nations such as Mexico. As long as national and international policies exist that support an elite who control the majority of wealth and power, a situation will exist in which people are driven to leave their home countries. If the United States truly wants to curb undocumented immigration, the economic situations of the home countries of immigrants need to be addressed.

These measures, although difficult, could curb undocumented entrants, but the millions of undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States are also an immediate concern. As proposed in the House bill, many Americans believe that undocumented immigrants should be felons. Making illegal entry a felony is both extreme and unfeasible. Although the law might be easy to write, it would be difficult to implement both financially and logistically. An amnesty program, although controversial, would be more logical.

The United States has granted amnesty in the past, and should continue to do so. A large-scale amnesty program was first enacted in

1986 under the Immigration Reform and Control Act. Approximately three million undocumented immigrants were granted legal permanent resident status (United States Immigration Support [USIS], 2007). Other amnesty initiatives have been passed to grant amnesty to Central Americans in 1997 and Haitians in 1998 (USIS, 2007). The United States does have a history of granting amnesty, and offering such a program now would be a logical, practical, and humane action. An amnesty program would have many benefits. For currently undocumented immigrants, an avenue to legitimate residency could finally be opened, providing more opportunities for employment, housing, medical care, and schooling. Such immigrants would continue to contribute to the American economy. Moreover, amnesty could contribute to crime prevention. Many Americans fear that undocumented immigrants can evade the justice system because of faulty papers. Legalizing current undocumented immigrants would provide them with legitimate documentation that could be used to locate those who commit crimes in the United States.

Amnesty should be offered to undocumented immigrants who can prove they have been working in the United States for the past year. While critics argue that amnesty will entice more undocumented immigrants, if this program is enacted simultaneously with an increase in visas, immigrants can be documented before they come to the United States. Undocumented immigrants are currently living in the United States, and an amnesty program would address this reality by legitimizing their presence and offering a way for both immigrants and citizens to benefit. Although the argument can be made that granting amnesty would be unfair to those who follow legal channels, this argument ignores the extreme difficulty involved in obtaining legal entry, and overlooks the extreme poverty that prompts many Mexicans and Central Americans to enter the United States illegally.

The suggestions in this paper are by no means comprehensive or exhaustive, but they take into account the historical patterns of xenophobia and fear that have paved the way to the current immigration situation in the United States. An examination of historical context, deference to American values, and a respect for human lives should guide current or future policy formation. Immigrants who come to the United States are not just statistics; they are people who are trying to make better lives for themselves and their families. Most citizens of the United States today are the descendants and beneficiaries of immigrants who dealt with the same persecution that Mexican immigrants are facing today. It is time for reforms that acknowledge this history and consider our relationship with the human faces of the "huddled masses" coming to the United States.

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