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Talented, Yet Seen With Suspicion: Surveillance of International Students and Scholars in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The attacks of September 11, 2001, put terrorism at the forefront of the American political landscape. Donald Trump played into these fears of terrorism through his political rhetoric during his presidency, particularly targeting international students as "threats" to the nation. However, we argue that the labeling of international students as security threats was not started after 9/11 nor invented by Trump. Through historical records and accounts across decades of policies related to this issue, we seek to answer two questions: How has the U.S. government monitored visa policies and programs for international students? How have U.S. national policies evolved to view international students as national security threats? We found that mistrust of this population has been embedded throughout U.S. immigration history and that federal tracking policies emerged incrementally from long-held security concerns. The essay closes with a discussion on why the entire population of international students should not be scapegoated due to these fears.

Keywords: higher education, international students, migration, policy studies, security

The United States has had a paradoxical relationship with international students, viewing them as both important talents but also as suspicious threats. According to a recent report published by the American Council on Education

([ACE] 2021), 41% of American voters believed that some international students in the United States were threats to various sectors, from security to innovation (p. 29). Meanwhile, Fischer (2021) wrote, "Despite the isolationist, pull-up-the-bridges rhetoric of the past four years [of the Donald Trump presidency], public attitudes toward international students have been warming, with Americans saying their presence on college campuses increases global understanding and improves U.S. competitiveness" (para. 1). There is much concern that the scrutiny of the Trump era has done lasting damage to international students in the country (see Allen & Ye, 2021; Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020; Lee & Haupt, 2021; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017; Streitwieser et al., 2020). Given this paradox, it is worthwhile to look back at the history of these students and the policies surrounding them to understand what the future might hold. With the importance of international students but also the scrutiny placed on this population, this essay is guided by two questions: How has the U.S. government monitored visa policies and programs for international students? How have U.S. national policies evolved to view international students as national security threats?

This historical research uses both primary documents and secondary accounts related to how terrorist threats have been associated with international students (see Marius & Page, 2015). The primary source documents include Congressional reports, government documents or memos, newspaper articles, and organizational records, while the secondary sourcing comes from scholarly articles, law reviews, and book accounts from the various eras. Following similar designs (Cameron, 2006; Kim, 2009; Stein & McCartney, 2021), the purposeful selection of these materials allowed contextualization through a historiography of international students in the United States and the policies surrounding them, interconnecting the population with the security sector. With this type of historical approach, Marius and Page (2015) argued that the results should not simply be an "encyclopedia whose aim is to give nothing but facts" (p. 14). Instead, the design should provide broader contextualization for an argument through the piecing together of various sources to paint a more complete picture. From this approach, the current essay challenges the notion that the attacks on September 11 of 2001 birthed the tracking measures and illustrates how the scrutiny that foreign students faced under the Trump administration has been a part of a longer American tradition.

RECENT DISCOURSE ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2020), there were over a million international students pursuing degrees in American colleges and universities in 2019–2020. Each year, this student population contributes at least $44.7 billion to the U.S. economy. About 25% of the most innovative American companies, such as Intel (founder Andy Grove, Hungary), eBay (Pierre Omidyar, France), Yahoo! (Jerry Yang, Taiwan), and Google (Sergey Brin, Russia), were started by former international students who graduated from American colleges and universities (Bista, 2020). Today, there are at least 13.5 million people employed in U.S. Fortune 500 companies, and 101 of these Fortune 500

companies were started by foreign-born individuals, with another 122 founded by the children of immigrants (New American Economy [NAE], 2019). International students dominate in the science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM) fields, and many tech giants were the top employers of international students in 2018–2019, including Amazon (employing 2,911 international students), Integra (2,081), Intel (1,348), Google (1,193), Microsoft (867), Deloitte (747), Facebook (725), IMB (628), Cisco (411), and eBay (350; Bier, 2020).

On July 6, 2020, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced that it would terminate the visa of international students currently studying at U.S. colleges and universities that do not offer in-person classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], 2020; Nowrasteh, 2020). ICE claimed national security was a major concern if students take only online classes, stating, "Over the past two decades, Congress has repeatedly stressed the importance of monitoring nonimmigrant students noting national security concerns" (Nowrasteh, 2020). In response to this announcement, more than 200 colleges and universities signed court briefs against the Donald Trump administration supporting Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology as they sued ICE (Binkley, 2020). These policies were particularly worrying for universities and educators, as Streitwieser et al. (2020) argued, "In the Trump era, we have witnessed a particularly intense and extreme manifestation of securitization politics, which has prompted an explosion of activity by the HEI [higher education institution] sector on behalf of affected students" (p. 421). Already prior to 2020, the sector had already seen a drop in international students, which scholars dubbed the "Trump Effect" (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017).

The higher education sector was specifically caught up in the growing distrust, as foreign students who had come from abroad to fill American universities were perceived as possible national security threats. Lee and Haupt (2021) argued, "Decoupling science from politics, supporting scientific inquiry, and encouraging cross-border investigations are obvious steps, but also challenging when science becomes a matter of national security (i.e., scientific nationalism)" (p. 324). This kind of scientific nationalism can manifest mistrust against certain groups of foreign students or scholars, especially in sensitive areas. Scholars have illustrated targets on various groups, such as Chinese students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Allen & Ye, 2021), Muslim students after the 9/11 attacks (Anderson, 2020), and Iranian students in the 1970s (Reimers, 1992). Higher education stakeholders have warned that demonizing foreign policy risks onto students is dehumanizing (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). Indeed, years before the election of Trump, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) shocked the world, forever impacting American domestic, foreign, and educational policy. The entire American society was altered after that day: travel, media, international relations, and politics. The nation witnessed a rise in racism and xenophobia. Gallup (2019) reported a sharp increase in American's fears of terrorism, which has persisted over time. More pressing, Haner et al. (2019) found that half of Americans lived with some level of fear of an attack and that these

sentiments were associated with support for anti-immigrant policies, especially regarding Muslim populations.

The U.S. government seemingly responded to several of the attackers gaining entrance into the country on student visas by beginning to track *all* foreign students entering the country through a centralized database, known as Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS; Siskin, 2005). However, when viewed from a longer historical approach, we argue that the tracking system emerged incrementally, rather than from what is known as a punctuated equilibrium or policy window (Peters, 2019). There were some higher education stakeholders who questioned if U.S. higher education could ever be the same after the installation of such a system due to its unwelcoming nature and bureaucratic impediments (Arroyo, 2002; Johnson, 2004; Obst & Forster, 2011), similar to the recent Trump Effect concerns (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). While the numbers of international students in the United States did rise, reaching record levels (Alberts, 2007; Altbach, 2004), the sentiments of the population as a threat remained. The Trump administration only played into these existing fears in multiple ways, such as nativist rhetoric of outsiders taking jobs from Americans or unfounded scrutiny of terrorism. While the former isolationist rhetoric warrants study, this research centers on the latter contention of the terrorist threat. This historical approach will illustrate the incremental coupling of international students and American fears of terrorism, long before the 9/11 attacks or Trump's presidency. The article is organized in the following sections: beginnings to the suspicion of this population, attaching the threat of terrorism, and contextualizing the attacks on 9/11 to the tracking system. We close with a discussion of the repercussion to the current discourse on international students and scholars in the United States.

Early Tracking of International Students in the United States

The United States has long had immigration policies that have impacted foreign students, as outlined in this section and summarized in Table 1. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first immigration ban based on racial or ethnic considerations, barring most Chinese from entering or naturalizing, but the ban still allowed the entry of some foreign students (Allen & Liu, 2016). Indeed, American colleges accepted a growing number of Chinese students over this period, often related to missionary endeavors. The Immigration Act of 1924, though, was the first federal policy allowing international student admittance into the United States. Although the United States already had minimal student exchanges prior to this act, its passage marked the first recognized national policy on international students (Haddal, 2007). The U.S. federal government continued to expand its presence into this burgeoning sector for the next 70 years.

At the closing of World War II, the United States established the Fulbright Program, its global flagship student and researcher outreach, recruitment, and exchange program. While the program helped to popularize international students

on U.S. university campuses, it also drew derision from those concerned about Soviet influence on American education (Vestal & Leestma, 1994). After World War II, returning veterans took advantage of the G.I. Bill, leading to a massification effect that ballooned the entire higher education sector, in general. Likewise, the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 targeted immigration from war-ravaged European countries, but initially held limitations that restricted Jewish entrants (Dinnerstein, 1981). At the same time, elite American universities were looking to "reduce the number of Jewish students" (Dinnerstein, 1981, p. 136). Throughout the 1950s, the Federal Government was the largest economic contributor in the international student sector, and it centralized operations through a non-governmental organization, the Institute of International Education. Even as the United States battled the USSR in an ideological Cold War throughout the world, this period saw the initial questioning of the growing foreign student population on college campuses (Du Bois, 1956).

Table 1: Timeline of Early International Students and Federal Immigration Policy

Date	Policy	Context
1882	Chinese Exclusion Act	The first federal immigration policy based on national origin exclusion, though it did provide a provision for students.
1924	Immigration Act of 1924	The act dramatically capped the number of foreign emigres to the United States, especially limiting to non-Western European nations.
1946	Fulbright Program	The flagship public diplomacy effort normalized international scholars and students at high levels in U.S. universities.
1948	Displaced Persons Act of 1948	A program that targeted immigration from post-World War II Europe, but with limitations to the Jewish population.
1965	Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965	Opened the caps on foreigners established in 1924 and expanded higher education offerings, with inclusion of international student language.

In the 1960s, policymakers were still attempting to make sense of the increasing flow of students from abroad, as the sector was still maturing. With the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the strict racial and ethnic quotes from previous Acts were nullified, opening the door for more international students (Pub. L. 89–236, 1965). In the 1964 publication, *The Foreign Student: Whom Shall We Welcome*, stakeholders in the sector were brought together by Education and World Affairs, a private American nonprofit organization, to discuss the discourse surrounding American policies on international students (Harari, 1964). The publication especially focused on admissions for this student population. One recommendation from this mid-1960s publication suggested better mechanisms for screening foreign students. "We are convinced in principle of the need and value of establishing a limited number of informal and screening mechanisms overseas for the unsponsored foreign students… who are likely to continue to account for the dominant portion of our total foreign student population," the report stated (Harris, 1964, p. 20).

While it does not explicitly state that the U.S. government should be the organizer of this mechanism, it does give early credence to the centralized screening process.

Concurrently, the passage of the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 also considered the issue of tracking students. Section 134 of the HEA of 1965 explicitly prohibits a federal database that tracks *all U.S.* university students, but it does allow exceptions for states to create tracking systems for their own students (Pub. L. 89–329, 1965). This tracking section, though, makes no mention of foreign students. However, the Act does directly reference foreign students in a brief section that covers tuition from international students. It states that institutions have a legal right to create policies that guarantee foreign nationals will pay for tuition, though there is no connection to U.S. foreign policy. The HEA's central focus is exclusively a domestic-focused policy, barely mentioning international education.

ATTACHING A THREAT TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Around a decade after the passage of the HEA and as early as 1972, international students drew scrutiny for being possible critical national security concerns from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and other government entities (Eldridge et al., 2004). But it was the Iran Hostage Crisis of 1979 that truly sparked apprehension of this population. During the crisis, Jimmy Carter (Democrat) and his administration scrambled to find Iranian or other perceived radicalized students from around the world that were in the United States on student visas (Reimers, 1992). Iranian students across the country were forced to undergo visa reviews and interviews as captured in various campus newspapers (see Bowling Green State University [BGSU], 1979; California Polytechnic State University [CPSU], 1979; Eastern Kentucky University [EKU], 1979). However, the administration was shocked to learn that the INS did not know how many

students were in the country or where they even were (Reimers, 1992). While no national tracking system was established after the realization, a crude, nonmandatory reporting mechanism for universities called the Student and Schools System (STSC) was put into place for visa management (U.S. Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General [U.S. DJOIG], 2003). It marked the first instance where the executive branch pushed intelligence agencies to interrogate this population at large as possible national security threats.

Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush (both Republicans), his Vice President and former head of CIA, carried over the same concerns for unaccounted foreign students, especially from Middle East nations. In 1984, upon intelligence that Muammar Gaddafi may have sent assassins to the United States disguised as foreign students, every Libyan student was tracked down and fingerprinted, which was the first official nationwide international tracking project of its kind by the federal government (Eldridge et al., 2004). During this time, the INS attempted to track all student visa entrants via the STSC, but because tracking the students by paper was too cumbersome and the amount of paperwork received by the office was massive, the attempt ended in failure. It was even proposed that the educational institutions bear the burden of tracking this student population, foreshadowing the future mechanism that was later put into place (Reimers, 1992). The technology of the 1970s and 1980s simply did not allow for the kind of system desired. In accordance, a 1999 report posited that the United States would not have the technical capabilities to implement a nationwide foreign student tracking system until 2003 (Orbach, 1999).

In 1993, the World Trade Centers were the target of a terrorist attack that marked the dawn of domestic terrorist attacks in the modern United States, as a truck containing a makeshift bomb was detonated in the parking garage of the towers, killing six people and injuring hundreds more (Lu, 2008). The U.S. government quickly uncovered the culprits and found that they were all either of Middle Eastern descent or Muslim, several of whom were in the country legally through asylum or tourist visas, while two of the attackers were American citizens (Farnam, 2005). It was later discovered that one of the attackers had come to the United States on a student visa, overstaying his visa expiration date. Despite only one out of the small group of attackers being in the United States on a student visa, foreign student entry to the country was moved to the forefront of security concerns within the intelligence community. In 1994, FBI Director Louis Freeh, who served under both the Republican George H.W. Bush and Democrat Bill Clinton presidential administrations, called for a reexamination of international student visa policies because of potential security threats (Wasem, 2002). A task force was created to examine Freeh's concerns, auditing the entire process of international student entry in the United States. The FBI realized that the INS was not tracking international student addresses or even keeping current records on the sector. Upon this review, the agency insisted on international student visa policy reform, but another domestic terrorist attack helped to move the scrutiny away from international students soon after.

Even when incidents had no relation to foreign students, the security apparatus remained suspicious of the population. In 1995, a makeshift bomb was

loaded into a Ryder truck and detonated in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people and injuring several hundred more, which at the time, was the deadliest terrorist attack in U.S. history. Despite initial conjecture of Islamic terrorism, similar to that of the 1993 World Trade Center attacks, the perpetrators were right-wing, Christian, White, and domestically born Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols (Benjamin & Simon, 2003). The FBI established the largest task force since the John F. Kennedy assassination to investigate the bombing, geared toward domestic right-wing antigovernment groups (Hamm, 1997). The attacks forced the agency to remove some resources away from foreign terrorist threats, including international students, but the scrutiny on this population did not disappear. Prompted by the investigation into the Oklahoma City bombing, the FBI attempted to gather information on students they deemed as potential threats via the INS STSC, but the records had not been updated since 1988. The obsolescence set off alarm bells with some federal agencies, according to an interview with Morrie Berez, a senior officer in the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, in a report for the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (NCTAUUS, 2003).

CIPRIS Pilot System

Although the domestic terrorist attacks partially subdued the fervor to connect international students with terrorism, moving significant resources toward domestic right-wing militias, the discovery that INS could not readily provide information about students concerned the intelligence apparatus. Director Freeh had put in motion the creation of another task force to reexamine student visa policies, along with other immigration and national security issues, comprising INS, the United States Information Agency (USIA), the Department of State, and a few educators too. The group called the "Task Force on Foreign Student Controls" soon recommended the creation of a federal tracking system for international students (Miyokawa, 2009). In 1996, following the group's recommendation, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) with bipartisan support, including strong praise from President Clinton. The act had an explicit purpose of tightening immigration restrictions and giving the Federal Government greater control in the sector by increasing enforcement mechanisms used by various agencies seeking to rein in immigration (Porter, 2011)

Before the IIRIRA, all of the sponsoring agencies (schools, universities, etc.) were already required to manage visa documents for students entering the country (either an I-20 or DS-2019) under STSC, meaning the data already existed for tracking the population, but there was no centralized database. As opposed to other types of visitors entering for other means like business or tourism, tracking all foreign students was actually feasible given the proper resources and focus (Farnam, 2005). With the passage of the Act, international students were explicitly targeted in Section 641, entitled *Program to Collect Information Relating to Non-Immigrant Foreign Students and Other Exchange Program Participants* (Pub. L. 104–208, 1996). This section stated that the Attorney

General, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Education would collaborate to create a tracking system for persons entering the country on F (student), J (exchange), and M (vocational school) visas. The program was directed to track the following categories: American addresses, visa entrance and expiration dates, academic records, part-time/ full-time status, and criminal convictions. The act explicitly stated that this data collection was not illegal under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, as the targets were noncitizen entrants.

Part of the implementation process stated that the government should incorporate or improve current "computer software" to track the data and that, where possible, the information should be stored electronically, hence a database (Pub. L. 104–208, 1996). By this time, technological advances made the tracking system a reality, fixing key barriers from the failed attempt in the 1980s. The initial pilot phase was created and began implementation by January 1, 1998, mandated under IIRIRA. Any institution that issued student visas had to follow the guidelines as set out in the Act or risk losing visa-granting status, meaning that any university that wanted to continue enrolling international students had to be compliant. To help fund the program, a $100 fee was also enacted for all international students applying for a U.S. visa, which provided serious discontent from the educational sector when introduced (Miyokawa, 2009).

The government agency tasked with the creation and implementation of the tracking system was the INS. However, the agency's chief concern was illegal immigration and economic issues with the inflow of foreigners coming to the United States, and not with the terrorist threat paradigm (Benjamin & Simon, 2003). When the governmental division under the Justice Department began the tracking system creation process, there was no urgency around the program and the lead for the project went to Berez. Despite continued defunding for the agency, Berez and INS formed a task force that dreamed up a computerized system that would track all foreign students coming in and out of any American educational institution, which could be cross-referenced by consulates or other federal agencies (Eldridge et al., 2004).

In 1997, the INS launched and began operating a pilot program for the envisioned tracking system, which was called the Coordinated Interagency Partnership Regulating International Students (CIPRIS). However, due to budget constraints, CIPRIS was only tested at 21 higher education institutions, in four states (Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, and South Carolina), and in conjunction with the Atlanta Hartsfield Airport and the Texas Service Center (Cronin, 2001). After this initial pilot phase, the program was expected to expand nationally by January 1, 2002, but to only a select few countries with the expectation that the pool would later be expanded after a review and feasibility report (Orbach, 1999). While Orbach (1999) suspected the countries targeted would be from the Middle East, that part of the plan was never implemented. The IIRIRA stipulated that a fully operationalized nationwide tracking system should be in place, including every international student entering the United States, by January 1, 2003.

The CIPRIS pilot program officially ended in October of 1999, and some point to the backlash from critics, who viewed the tracking of international students as a violation of civil liberties, as one reason for its suspension (Benjamin & Simon, 2003; Malkin, 2002). However, Michael Cronin, Acting Executive Associate Commissioner for the Office of Programs at INS in the early 2000s, countered the theory that the program was ended because of opponents, saying that CIPRIS was never intended to be long-term, and it was only a "throw-away" program designed to test the feasibility of a future nationwide system (Cronin, 2001). The pilot system did indeed work as tested and had the capabilities of being scaled across the United States. In the early 2000s, the INS was devising an expansion of the system that would cover the entire country for all incoming international students as stipulated by IIRIRA (Eldridge et al., 2004).

Student Tracking Expansion and Pushback

The Counterterrorism Security Group and the National Security Agency had long discussed foreign students and security issues, but it was a problem too large to realistically solve (Benjamin & Simon, 2003). Solutions had to be proven feasible in order to get support from these agencies. Aside from feasibility, the political attention brought on by educational interest groups worried these agencies as well (Miyokawa, 2009). One interest group that played a significant role in the opposition to the system was NAFSA: Association of International Educators, a group dedicated to international education and exchanges. Marlene Johnson, the organization's executive director, personally talked about getting Berez removed from leading CIPRIS. The nonprofit also hired lobbyist Victor Johnson to condemn the program (Benjamin & Simon, 2003; Malkin, 2002). "There is no evidence that foreign students constitute a terrorism threat" and "there is no reason to single them out," said Johnson (as cited in Malkin, 2002, p. 71). Pushed by NAFSA and other supporters, in early 2000, 21 U.S. Senators requested that INS delay the nationwide rollout of the system and that the $100 be picked up by the agency. With the pressure, Berez was removed from the project before the national tracking system was unveiled (Benjamin & Simon, 2003; Malkin, 2002).

Despite contestation from the education sector, supporters were still pushing for the pilot program's expansion into a nationwide operational database for all international students entering the United States. The "Countering the Changing Threat of International Terrorism: Report of The National Commission on Terrorism," submitted to the U.S. Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations in June of 2000, showed strong support from federal agencies and other high-ranking conservative officials, including Bob Barr (Republican, Georgia), John Ashcroft (Attorney General under Bush), and James Sensenbrenner (Republican, Wisconsin). Accordingly, a congressional research report from February 2001 supported the expansion and described how the future system would allow the government to flag students who might drop out or who suddenly change their field of study to sensitive areas, directly citing the World Trade Center attacks from 1993 (Perl, 2001). The report did note that Congress was concerned with

protecting civil liberties but believed that combating terrorist threats overruled the impact rights of noncitizens. In July of 2001, INS announced that, in conjunction with partner federal agencies, a new tracking system would be rolled out on the national level, based on lessons learned from CIPRIS and feedback from relevant stakeholders (Cronin, 2001). Because this system would be national, the agency decided to change the name from CIPRIS to the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) and the online system would be known as SEVIS.

The new SEVIS program began implementation at only 11 Boston-based institutions, with aggressive plans for national expansion, as all F, J, and M visas would be incorporated into the system progressively (Cronin, 2001). It was unclear why Boston was chosen, as the previous pilot sites were located in the South. Cronin, in the official SEVIS announcement, did not state any firm expansion dates and noted that higher education institutions were already aware of the coming changes, but that the public would be notified as the system expanded. The announced SEVIS program was based on the pilot CIPRIS precursor and had much of the envisioned functions as described in the IIRIRA of 1996 and even earlier conceptions of foreign student tracking in the United States (Eldridge et al., 2004; Farnam, 2005; Wasem, 2002).

Unsurprisingly, there was considerable pushback from the educational coalition. In a public response letter to the tracking system sent to Kevin Rooney, Acting Commissioner of INS, the American Council on Education, representing a wide range of institutions and organizations from across the United States, laid out opposition to the announced expansion and reformed SEVIS program (Haddal, 2007; Wasem, 2002). The letter explained how the policy could hurt the educational sector, listing the timetable of implementation as unfeasible, citing the $12.3 billion industry built around the international students, and adding that the policy and new fees would deter student mobility to the United States. The letter was sent around the leading associations and institutions in higher education, including National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, NAFSA, Association of Community College Trustees, Association of American Universities, Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, and American Association of Presidents of Independent Colleges and Universities.

In August 2001, Representative Betty McCollum (Democrat, Minnesota) introduced a bill that would have repealed Section 641 of IIRAIRA, the student tracking section. NAFSA immediately showed its support for the repeal with a press release lauding the repeal bill (Miyokawa, 2009). Despite support from NAFSA, early analysis of the bill from Dan Curry of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* suggested that it did not have much of a chance to pass. “Outlook: Not great. The bill has only five cosponsors, all Democrats,” wrote Curry on September 7, 2001, also pointing out that there was no companion bill in the Senate, meaning that it faced a difficult challenge to become law due to the bicameral nature of the U.S. Federal Government. On September 10, the bill would quietly move to the Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims of the House of Representative for discussion. The bill was never publicly mentioned

again, as the following day the United States faced its most deadly attack in 60 years.

HOW 9/11 IMPACTED THE TRACKING OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

On September 11, 2001, the United States was forever changed by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon, with national security moving to the forefront of the American consciousness (Altbach, 2004). Hijackers took control of flights and flew their aircrafts into targets in New York and Washington, D.C., with one flight downed in remote Pennsylvania. Almost 3,000 people died in the attacks, with thousands more injured. The national mood oscillated between anger, sadness, and confusion (Reese, 2005). The investigation revealed that several attackers were in the United States on student visas, with a few enrolled in small flight schools learning to pilot aircraft. Sweeping changes were made to a multitude of policies in the name of protecting the country from another terrorist attack, including the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS; Arroyo, 2002).

Because of the student visa connection, international students drew frenzy from many across the nation, from both conservative and liberal positions. Within weeks of the attacks, Dianne Feinstein (Democrat, California) was shocked to learn that INS could not tell her the status of around 16,000 international students in her state of California and she immediately called for a moratorium on all student visas until the government could properly assess each student entering the country, echoing earlier calls from previous attacks and coming with bipartisan support (Malkin, 2002; Reeves, 2005). Fanning the flames further, months after the terrorist attacks, two of the perpetrators had their student visas renewed, despite being dead and known terrorists, an error that put more pressure on getting SEVIS operational (Farnam, 2005; Reeves, 2005). The pressures put the spotlight firmly onto the international student admissions process in the United States.

After the attacks, the momentum for rolling out the federal tracking system could not be hindered, as even the staunch opponents against SEVIS stepped aside to allow full implementation. NAFSA gave up its opposition and released a statement of support: "We no longer oppose the foreign student tracking system that is being implemented by the INS. The time for debate on this matter is over and the time to devise a considered response to terrorism has arrived" (quoted in Farnam, 2005, p. 105). The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001, passed in October of that year with bipartisan support, guaranteed the rollout of the full tracking system, with funding from the Department of Justice and a mandate of implementation by January 1, 2003 (Siskin, 2005). The original pilot tracking program was used to establish a nationwide system to track students at every U.S. educational institution, and the modern SEVIS system was born. By December 11, 2002, the system was fully operational to track all international students, which happened to coincide with the pre-9/11 deadline for the system. By August 1, 2003, all institutions had to enter their remaining foreign students into the system or else lose their visa-granting status (Wasem, 2002). Thus, the United

States would, from that point forward, electronically track all international students entering the country on F, J, or M visas in a centralized database under both the DHS and Department of State (U.S. DHS, 2012).

There were clear challenges for the new system. Retraining efforts, technical issues, and program reorganization were reported across the U.S. higher educational landscape (Kless, 2004). Further, despite some opponents dropping opposition, there were still criticisms that the foreign students were being scapegoated and that nativist perceptions would deter students from coming to the country. The sector did witness a slight drop in international students the academic years following the SEVIS deadline, and some argued that the nation would never again be a global leader in international student destinations (Arroyo, 2002; Johnson, 2004). Despite any of the concerns or glitches in the implementation of the nationwide tracking system, the sector eventually normalized and foreign students continued to flow into the nation at record levels only a few years after it was institutionalized (Connell, 2005). Some scholars argued that the decrease in international students was just one of many issues, not simply the new SEVIS program (Alberts, 2007; Altbach, 2004).

Table 2: The Coupling of National Security and International Students

Date	Event	Context
1979–1981	Iran hostage crisis	U.S. government officials were shocked to discover they could not track where Iranian international students were studying. INS established STSC.
1984	Muammar Gaddafi sends assassins to the U.S. disguised as students	Libyan students in the country were all targeted for fingerprinting, but the STSC proved too crude and cumbersome for tracking.
1993	1993 World Trade Center attacks	One of the several attackers entered the US on a student visa, prompting concern from the federal government.
1995	Oklahoma City bombing	While foreign attackers were initially suspected, the right-wing perpetrators put some national security focus on domestic terrorism. Intelligence agencies prompted to reexamine STSC.

Date	Event	Context
1996	CIPRIS pilot established	This pilot program to track international students was created and tested, providing the foundation for the future system.
2001	9/11 terrorist attacks USA PATRIOT Act of 2001	Given the severity and because several of the attackers were foreign students, the concerns as international students received widespread support.
2003	SEVIS system compliance deadline	The final implementation of the tracking system expanded and mandated across the nation, realizing aspirations decades in the making.

Note: INS = Immigration and Naturalization Service; STSC = Student and Schools System.

Currently, under DHS and the Department of State, the SEVIS system tracks over a million international students entering and moving about in the United States. Without the CIPRIS pilot system, just one key incremental step, it is unlikely that SEVIS would have been fully in place in 2003, which was not even two full years after 9/11. Illustrated in Table 2, there was neither one major policy shift nor a total moratorium on international students in the country due to the growing coupling of national security concerns with international students, with historical roots going back to the 1970s and before.

DISCUSSION AND REPERCUSSIONS

Educators and institutions have advocated against the increased scrutiny of international students in the name of national security by the federal government (Streitwieser et al., 2020). The fears of international students and their perceived connections to policy change via terrorism stem beyond the election of 2016; these sentiments of distrust also go back well before 9/11. When considering a larger historical narrative, the origins of an international student tracking system were built incrementally from policies much earlier than the perceived timing after 9/11. Concerns for keeping track of possible security threats from this population dates to the 1970s and before, connecting to anti-Chinese and anti-Semitic aspects of American history, rather than one specific so-called "punctured equilibrium" (Peters, 2019). Furthermore, the presence of the pilot phase project

and other tracking attempts shows that there was an incremental development process toward the current SEVIS database policy. Even with opposition from groups such as NAFSA, it is unclear whether they would have had enough political clout to stop the eventual rollout from the security apparatus. Casting aside conjecture, the implementation of the system aligns to CIPRIS and the replacement planned scaled national implementation.

It is surmised that the technical feasibility of tracking all international students in the United States was potentially the true barrier, as the Carter administration through Clinton struggled with implementation under INS and other federal agencies, but the barriers also go beyond simple innovation. The attacks on 9/11 coincided with the proliferation of technology that more easily allowed for a central database, allowing DHS to quickly scale up the CIPRIS pilot program nationwide. Indeed, technological innovations of the last few decades have allowed for more tracking, surveillance, and quantification, especially in terms of national security (Arroyo, 2002; Haner et al., 2019). Yet, there are differences in the way that international students are suspected through a tracking system rooted in mistrust compared to those of business class visitors or other types of travelers. There will always be a segment of right-wing nativists who distrust all outsiders, regardless of visa type. However, other segments of the population with more liberal stances on immigration and outsiders have seemingly accepted the coupling of international students and security, as aspects of tracking chronicled in this essay have seen bipartisan efforts. It is normalized that these students go to the United States with at least *some* suspicion due to the tracking apparatus and its policy roots in fears of terrorism from Americans and its leaders.

CONCLUSION

While there could be reasonable expectations for governments to account for and process foreign visitors, such as visa overstays, international students have been particularly labeled with distrust through these measures. After 9/11, there was increased scrutiny on the possible security threat of international students enrolling in U.S. institutions, but the fears also appear to be unfounded. In an analysis of attacks from 1975 to 2017, Nowrasteh (2020) found, "The annual chance of being murdered by a foreign-born terrorist who entered on a student visa is 1 in 72,838,750 per year during the 43-year period." These odds are lower than that of the native-born population, due to the likelihood of violence committed by local networks such as other family members (Harrell, 2012). International students at large, then, have been scapegoated as suspected terrorists. High-profile attacks have come to define the mistrust of the entire group, which was present before Trump, inflamed under his presidency, and will remain with the Biden administration and beyond.

While this work has added to the understanding of international students and security, it was limited by its scope common with this type of historical design (see Cameron, 2006; Kim, 2009; Stein & McCartney, 2021). Future research of public opinion surrounding the perceived security threats would be useful, such

as large-scale opinion surveys, as it would be telling to understand the evolution of American perceptions of international students and visa processes through longitudinal data. Likewise, this research focused on the contention of terrorism as a threat, but international students have also been painted as an economic threat, especially in recent years (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). Future exploration of a similar nature to this work should consider how this economic threat evolved and connected with federal policy. The so-called China Threat is only growing within American discourse (Lee & Haupt, 2021), but there were similar concerns with the rise of Japan in the 1980s. The political connections between the economic concerns would be a valuable companion to this study on terrorism threats, as the former has garnered much more focus from the political right in recent years.

In consideration of the incremental tracking of foreign students in the United States, the recent scrutiny placed on these populations and other outsiders could be seen along a continuum. The nativism or unwelcoming rhetoric toward international students and foreigners that has bubbled up during the past decade is a continuation of past legacies toward these students and the larger immigration population. Eventually, students from places that have been particularly targeted such as China or predominantly Muslim countries may choose not to come to the United States for study (Allen & Ye, 2021; Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). Universities and educators must continue to fight and protect this population from misplaced speculation and scapegoating. Even if security fades from the popular discourse, this research has shown that it can come in waves, as it is baked into the history of American immigration and higher education. While international students have brought recognized talents to the United States, national sentiments have also coupled the population as security threats.

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