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# This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land: An Analysis of Presidential Immigration Rhetoric in the "Nation of Immigrants"

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**THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND, THIS LAND IS MY LAND: AN ANALYSIS OF  
PRESIDENTIAL IMMIGRATION RHETORIC EMPLOYED BY RONALD REAGAN  
AND BILL CLINTON IN THE “NATION OF IMMIGRANTS”**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF THE ARTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

The bosom of America is open to receive not only the Opulent and respected Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions; whom we shall welcome to a participation of all our rights and privileges, if by decency and propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment.

– George Washington, Letter of General George Washington on America as Asylum, New York, December 2, 1783.<sup>1</sup>

The quote above, written by the first president of the United States, provides excellent foreshadow for presidential immigration rhetoric and the conditional nature of public immigration sentiment for the centuries that followed its formation. This thesis explores presidential immigration rhetoric and its consequences using two presidential case studies from the 1980s and 1990s, and explores the first rhetorical responses to the most recent wave of immigration to the United States. Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton are the subjects of this project due to their oppositional political ideologies. Further, the immigration legislation passed during the two decades in which they served as presidents can be characterized as oppositional in effectiveness, despite stated similar goals of the legislation. Reagan was a conservative, pro-business Republican, while Clinton was a more liberal (though still relatively moderate neo-liberal) president who favored globalization policies. Immigration legislation passed during Reagan's presidency was expansive in admittance policy, whereas restrictive immigration policy was implemented during Clinton's administration and the U.S.-Mexico border was tightened. Immigration policy was viewed as unsuccessful under both presidents, but examining the ways in which Reagan and Clinton spoke about immigration can lead to greater understanding of how rhetoric contributed to public sentiment and interpretation of legislative action.

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1. Michael Lemay and Elliott Robert Barkan, *U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Laws and Issues: A Documentary History*, (Greenwood Press, 1999).

The late 1970s and early 1980s marked the beginning of the fourth and current wave of immigration to the United States, which meant needs and perceptions of newcomers shifted on the basis of an influx of immigrants and their changing demographics. The end of the Bracero program and the implementation of the 1965 Immigration Act are often credited with causing this influx, of both documented and undocumented immigrants. U.S. immigration laws generally favored Anglo-European immigrants, but became non-discriminatory by definition in 1965, when quotas were removed from the legislation. Until 1965, various groups were excluded on the basis of nationality, and sometimes this exclusion was justified using racist language, exacerbated by the manipulation of social science and the eugenics movement in the early 1900s. The Asiatic Barred Zone excluded all Asians from the U.S. in 1917, and in 1924 the National Origins Act called for 82% of immigrants to the U.S. to be of northern or western European origin. “Operation Wetback” in the 1950s was the first time that immigrants from Latin America were explicitly deported. Current legislation is not so explicit, but the ways in which rhetoric surrounding policy implies racist overtones on the basis of assimilating to “American” culture and attributes specific characteristics to immigrants is important and pointed.

This thesis focuses on rhetoric, which is language employed for persuasive purposes. The specific immigration discourses to which presidential immigration rhetoric contributes are also crucial for discussion of the function of the rhetoric during the two administrations in question. Discourse is essentially the existence of terms, rhetoric, and discussions that are heard and compiled into an understanding of a theme, particularly understood by insiders of communities where discussion of the particular theme exists. Discourse is the way that issues are discussed thematically, and repeated rhetoric is used to contribute to discourses on particular topics. In discussion of the analysis of discourse in her book, *Making Sense of Public Opinion: American*

*Discourses about Immigration and Social Programs*, Claudia Strauss writes, “Conventional-discourse analysis assumes that people encounter political messages from many sources. From each source people acquire not an overall ideology but something narrower in scope, a common way of talking and thinking about one aspect of a topic. Each of these familiar points and its associated rhetoric is a conventional discourse.”<sup>2</sup> Discourses are a framework through which common phrases and ways of speaking are reiterated. Strauss continues, “Even if there is only a one-way communication from a single speaker to an audience, ideas are stated, often using the somewhat standardized rhetoric of conventional discourses.”<sup>3</sup> Because standardized rhetoric only needs to come from one speaker to an audience, conventional discourse analysis can be applied to presidential rhetoric. Strauss writes, “Conventional-discourse analysis is also useful for studying the rhetoric of elites. It is common for politicians to juxtapose conventional discourses from different sides of an issue.”<sup>4</sup> The suggested saliency of discourses, specifically conventional-discourses, means that rhetoric that contributes to discourse is meaningful for shaping the way political topics are spoken about and understood on various levels and by various constituencies.

Scholarship on presidential rhetoric sheds light on the saliency of discourses and the way rhetoric aids political agendas. Scholars point to the symbolic role that the president of the United States invariably plays. The position, steeped in historic symbolism, allows for a unique pedestal from which those who hold it can contribute to discourses. Michael Novak posits that

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2. Claudia Strauss, *Making Sense of Public Opinion: American Discourses about Immigration and Social Programs*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.

3. Strauss, *Making Sense of Public Opinion*, 15.

4. *Ibid.*, 14.

the president commands more power and significance in their speech than other governmental actors, like the speaker of the house or the senate leader.<sup>5</sup> Novak writes, “In an analogous way, when the president of the United States walks into a room, not only power but also memory enters with him.”<sup>6</sup> The president signifies not only current power of the U.S., but represents presidents of the past as well. In addition to representing history and the aspirations of the nation, Novak argues, symbolic presidential power comes from being elected legally and by popular vote, as a theoretical tribune of all of the people of the United States. Using Clinton as an example, Novak writes,

The presidency gave Clinton great symbolic power to polarize judgments nationwide – for him or against him – compared to any power he would have had, say, as a law professor in Little Rock or even as a governor of Arkansas. What he said and did as president not only rubbed off on the country but it has been ineluctably added to the associations that the White House from now on will always have. It has altered the image that Americans now have of the nation.<sup>7</sup>

Longevity of the rhetorical input of presidents after their administrations are no longer in office points to further saliency of the messages they promote while there.

Because the president holds symbolic power, it means that their rhetoric also carries a certain weight in its influence on audiences. Jeffrey E. Cohen conducted a study of presidential State of the Union addresses to test the hypothesis that the more attention that is paid by a president to a particular policy issue in their State of the Union address, the more public concern for that policy grows. The State of the Union address reaches a large number of people and is a

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5. Michael Novak, “President of All the People,” in *Who Belongs in America? Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration*, edited by Vanessa B. Beasley, 19-36. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006).

6. *Ibid.*, 19.

7. *Ibid.*, 23.



consistent speech across presidencies, which made it useful for Cohen's study. Results showed that the public had an increased attention to policies that presidents mentioned in their State of the Union addresses. Presidents were not shown to have to use substantive arguments, and could sway public opinion simply by mentioning policies, though substantive arguments and an explanation of reasoning for a certain position aided in public attentiveness and understanding of that policy. This outcome was the case particularly for members of the mass public who are not relatively politically inclined. Cohen emphasizes the invariability of the role of the president, irrespective of individual factors and characterizations they bring to the office. Cohen writes, in concurrence with Novak, "No other politician or office is accorded such a role; none can compete effectively with the president in terms of prestige, status, media access, public attention and interest."<sup>8</sup> The wide-reaching impact of the president is consistent, even if only symbolic, though the particular type of impact and method contributing to impact has changed over time.

Suggested instrumental changes in public persona of presidents are documented in scholarship. Theodore Roosevelt is considered the first president who embodied the "modern" presidency, and Elvin T. Lim explains that the "data powerfully support the general claim that a significant transformation of presidential rhetoric occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century."<sup>9</sup> Lim argues that "modern presidents" are rhetorically very different from their predecessors. He writes that scholars who study presidential rhetoric under varying schools of thought "observe a significant transformation of the presidency... from a traditional,

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8. Jeffrey E. Cohen. "Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda," in *American Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 1 (1995): 89.

9. Elvin T. Lim, Center for the Study of the Presidency, "Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric: An Analysis of Rhetoric from George Washington to Bill Clinton," in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2002): 332.

administrative, and unrhetorical office into a modern, expansive, and stridently rhetorical one in which incumbents routinely speak over the head of Congress and to the public to lead and to govern.”<sup>10</sup> Lim describes five hallmarks of the modern president’s rhetoric: the anti-intellectualization of rhetoric, the rise of abstract rhetoric, assertive rhetoric, democratic rhetoric, and conversational and anecdotal rhetoric. Some pre-modern presidents exhibit one or more of those characterizations, but they are ultimately exceptions that “prove the rule” that the “modern” president is increasingly rhetorical in their symbolic position.

By anti-intellectualization, Lim refers to the informality in modern rhetoric and the decrease in reflection of cognitive reasoning to reach conclusions. In addition to anti-intellectualization, abstract rhetoric, characterized by expansion and loftiness, has risen with the modern presidency. Lim writes, “As rhetoricians through the ages have realized, abstract rhetoric has great political value.”<sup>11</sup> Abstractness of rhetoric has magnified even from the founding rhetorical terms “life,” “liberty,” and “the pursuit of happiness.” In description of assertive rhetoric, Lim explains, “[modern presidential rhetoric] has become activist, ‘realist,’ and confident.”<sup>12</sup> According to Lim, assertiveness implies a strengthened executive branch, increased presidential power (symbolically) and a consequent lack of humility in the president as orator. Significantly, Lim explains the argument that modern presidential rhetoric is increasingly democratic: “Presidential rhetoric has become more people-oriented in the past century and especially in the past three decades.”<sup>13</sup> This rhetoric brings compassion, inclusivity, familial

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10. Ibid., 328-29.

11. Ibid., 334.

12. Ibid., 335.

13. Ibid., 338.

values, and egalitarianism to presidential rhetoric on the basis of universal values of equality that are inherent to democracy and thus inherent to the United States. A rise in conversational, anecdotal rhetoric that describes the experience of the American people is arguably employed to offer a trusting closeness to audiences receiving modern presidential rhetoric. Increases in rhetorical strategies characterize the modern president and imply that rhetoric employed by Reagan and Clinton can be characterized through those hallmarks.

With a documented rise in specific rhetorical strategies from modern presidents, including Reagan and Clinton, the audience to which presidents address their rhetoric becomes pertinent. Three main concerns in the formation of presidential rhetoric include “those which relate to the pragmatic politics of the day, those which emanate from the institutional constraints of their office, and those which invoke the larger and more abstract symbolic themes of *mythos* of U.S. nationalism.”<sup>14</sup> Constraints may be considered in conjunction with attention to audience, and shifting levels of concern of an audience’s reception. A distinction exists between speaking to “the people” and speaking to state and national legislators. Presidents also mobilize voters to elect and pressure legislators who will pass specific legislation. Mobilizing voters is especially useful for making legislative change when Congress is politically polarized. Lim’s suggestion of an evidenced rise in democratic presidential rhetoric that is also more conversational, colloquial, and anti-intellectual implies language use that is increasingly geared toward the mass public. The rise of the “modern” president means that their audience has increasingly become “the people.”

If the mass public has increasingly become the target of the modern president’s rhetoric, public opinion analysis can gauge the function and perceived success of that rhetoric. Marrero

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14. Vanessa Beasley, *Who Belongs in America? Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 5.

discusses presidential immigration rhetoric of modern presidents and asks, “Why do the prevailing dialogue and hard-line policies continue, when public opinion is actually much more rational than what is reflected in the news?”<sup>15</sup> Marrero suggests disconnects between dialogues surrounding immigration and the public’s reception of specific dialogues, particularly the misconception that the public cannot understand more nuanced arguments. Masuoka and Junn also discuss how political elites and their communication influences public opinion on immigration. The two use the racial hierarchy theory to argue that one’s race is one of the primary determinants of their opinion on immigration issues and their reception of rhetoric on immigration.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, they argue that racial undertones are clearly present in immigration policy and discussion, and that is why using the theory of racial hierarchy in order to determine how various groups respond to immigration policy and discussion is crucial.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, to show that elite rhetoric is not the only communication contributing to discourses surrounding immigration, Masuoka and Junn argue that while politicians can align immigration topics within certain frameworks through their messages to the public, immigration activists and advocates can make similar alignments, emphasizing different values like fairness and opportunity, rather than negative values like danger to national security.<sup>18</sup> While the thesis project at hand looks

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15. Pilar Marrero. *Killing the American Dream: How Anti-Immigration Extremists are Destroying the Nation*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, 211.

16. Racial hierarchy theory is the widely accepted concept that a racial hierarchy exists in the social structure of the United States, and it historically gives unwarranted privilege and advantage to white people, while disadvantaging people of color. The hierarchy is perpetuated through stereotypes and an underlying understanding of the operation of the hierarchy in the U.S., even if it is not explicitly stated as reason for biased action (i.e. aversive racism).

17. Natalie Masuoka and Jane Junn, *The Politics of Belonging: Race, Public Opinion, and Immigration*, (The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

18. *Ibid.*, 157-58.

specifically at presidential rhetoric from two “modern” presidents, it is important to note that other sources of rhetoric contribute to immigration discourses and public opinion of issues on the basis of rhetoric, and presidential power is certainly not the only force at work in the national immigration conversation.

Presidential immigration rhetoric, however, aligns with characterizations of the “modern” president’s rhetoric: the anti-intellectualization of rhetoric, abstract rhetoric, assertive rhetoric, democratic rhetoric, and conversationally anecdotal rhetoric. Beasley asserts that immigrants are spoken about either as symbols of hope and opportunity, or as dangerous threats to economic stability and national security. Opposing representations of immigrants in rhetoric are pervasive, and a study by Damien Arthur and Joshua Woods draws attention to many factors that influence presidential immigration rhetoric and its formation within the bounds of these opposing symbolic characterizations. Their study, “The Contextual Presidency: The Negative Shift in Presidential Immigration Rhetoric,” coded for negative immigration frameworks in speeches made by Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama. Primary negative frameworks for which they coded were frameworks of illegality, criminality, terrorism, or threats to economic stability. The study ultimately asks eight research questions in order to determine how context plays a role in presidential immigration rhetoric. The independent variables Arthur and Woods studied were whether there was an election transpiring (and whether that was a midterm or presidential election), whether the speech was made before or after 9/11, who the audience was, whether branches of the government were politically divided or in unison, who had control of the chamber, approval rating of the president the day before their speech, the type of speech the president gave (whether it was a news conference, a town hall meeting, a major speech,

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interview, remarks, or another form), whether or not the nation was in a recession, the inflation rate, GDP, social identifiers of the immigrants about whom they were speaking, geographical area where the speech was given, whether or not they mentioned reforming the immigration process, and whether or not the speech was given in a border state or not.<sup>19</sup> Independent variables used in this study are considered in analysis of Reagan and Clinton's rhetoric in this thesis, along with frameworks developed on the basis of conventional immigration discourses.

Strauss provides multiple national discourses surrounding immigration in her book, and presidential immigration rhetoric readily contributes to the frameworks she describes. While a large number of discourses exist, I will focus on four main discourses and their sub-discourses for the purpose of analyzing rhetoric in this thesis. The first is the "nation of immigrants" discourse. Strauss writes, "The basic schema conveyed by [the Nation of Immigrants] discourse is that, except for American Indians, everyone in the United States is either an immigrant or a descendant of one. Immigrants and their descendants have made this country what it is today, so of course immigration has benefited the country."<sup>20</sup> Asserting people in the U.S. should not be opposed to immigration in principle, the "nation of immigrants" discourse frames discussions about immigration as important to the nation, but separates current immigration events from the immigration of the past as a distinct nation-forming phenomenon that is no longer relevant because the U.S. is now a unified "melting pot." Discussions about cultural diversity as a guiding and enriching principle, as well as allusions to humanitarian efforts to help immigrants (especially children) maintain human rights, fall under the discourse of the "nation of

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19. Damien Arthur and Joshua Woods, "The Contextual Presidency: The Negative Shift in Presidential Immigration Rhetoric," in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2013): 475.

20. Strauss, *Making Sense of Public Opinion*, 24.

immigrants.” Marrero reiterates the operation of this discourse: “Generally, the ‘good’ ones are the people already here, who came before now (whenever ‘now’ is); and the ‘bad’ are the people just arriving now or who will in the future.”<sup>21</sup> This discourse is harmful because it trivializes the current immigration experience and stratifies immigrant communities.

The next discourse and its sub-discourses stem from the perceived impacts immigrants have on the U.S. economy. Economic discourses are framed using examples of the positive contributions immigrants make to the U.S. economy through their labor, or the negative threat to resources immigrants pose. Positive economic immigration discourses include the “free market” discourse: there should not be forces interfering with the market; guest worker programs are positive because they ensure high labor supply and competition among laborers. Primary language used to express free-market discourse points to flexible labor markets, profits, and supply. Another positive discourse Strauss outlines refers to immigrant work ethic. It is formed based on language asserting that immigrants work hard (often harder than U.S.-born Americans), and their hard work should be respected and rewarded. Specific language used in contributions to this discourse includes statements about hard work, effort, drive, and the desire for a better life.<sup>22</sup> Framing immigrants as hard-working laborers means exploitations of their labor under the discourse of the “free market” can be more readily justified.

Negatively based economic discourses include the assertion that there are “too many immigrants” in the U.S., with language referring to limited resources, the environmental impact of overpopulation, economic, legal and cultural concerns, the “broken border,” invasions, and

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21. Marrero, *Killing the American Dream*, 204.

22. Strauss, *Making Sense of Public Opinion*, 52.

“floods” of immigrants.<sup>23</sup> Another is the “benefits for contributors” discourse, which asserts that only people who make an economic contribution through labor or taxes should receive government benefits. It operates either under the untrue assumption that undocumented immigrants do not pay taxes and consequently should not receive benefits, or under the assumption that immigrants contribute to the economy regardless of their documentation, and consequently are entitled to taxpayer-funded benefits.<sup>24</sup> The “benefits for contributors” discourse is problematic due to the subjective nature with which someone might be deemed a “contributor.” Most of the discourse claiming immigrants are not contributors assumes that it is undocumented immigrants reaping benefits from the government they do not deserve. The bias attributed to undocumented immigrants can be explained by the weight placed on legality and illegality, discussed in the next main discourse.

Generally speaking, there is a hyper-focus on terms of “legality” when describing the immigrant experience, even when the experience is not so narrow. In general, immigration is understood and discussed under terms of “legality.” The primary discourse in this realm states “being illegal is wrong.” Language about the border, enforcement of the law, the term “illegal” applied to immigrants, references to breaking the law, the U.S. as a nation of laws, and amnesty as a negative term fall under “illegal is wrong” discourse. It asserts that documented immigrants are welcome in the United States, while undocumented immigrants are not.<sup>25</sup> An extension of rhetoric encouraging an enforced border focuses on national security, stressing language about

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23. Ibid., 50.

24. Ibid., 51.

25. Ibid., 52.



keeping “criminals” and “terrorists” out of the country through border control.<sup>26</sup> By categorizing immigrants under strict categories of “legal” and “illegal,” this discourse removes the human dimension from the immigrant experience and implies that documentation or lack thereof is the most important way to describe a person who was not born in the United States. Marrero writes, “the whole concept of illegality has become the biggest stumbling block to a rational dialogue on immigration.”<sup>27</sup> Isolating the discussion of immigration to language of legality prohibits meaningful reform and complex discussion.

The final discourse pertinent to this thesis is the “comprehensive reform” discourse. It is employed at times when immigration legislation is being proposed, and generally refers to “fixing the broken immigration system” through a number of provisions that address multiple areas of concern on the topic of immigration. “Comprehensive reform” is often attributed to legislation that calls for tighter border control, coupled with fast visa processing, effective guest worker programs, and programs that lead to eventual documentation. Language referencing coming “out of the shadows” and pathways to citizenship are common within this discourse.<sup>28</sup> An emphasis on “comprehensive reform” and a description of legislation as “comprehensive” can lead to complacency with less successful policy. Comprehensive reform also emphasizes bipartisanship in the creation of legislation. The enactment of so-called “comprehensive reform” means there is a perpetual compromise between opposing constituencies (“bipartisanship”) to pass immigration laws, meaning that actual meaningful reform fails to move forward. The perpetuation of discourse that gives Americans negative frameworks through which to discuss

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26. Ibid., 53.

27. Marrero, *Killing the American Dream*, 204.

28. Strauss, *Making Sense of Public Opinion*, 53.

immigration or frameworks that encourage misunderstandings of the immigrant experience are detrimental to effective policy implementation and the immigrant experience alike.

I argue that presidential immigration rhetoric made by Presidents Reagan and Clinton is unsuccessful in procuring meaningful immigration legislation because the rhetoric contradicts itself, contains multiple messages in attempt to appeal to multiple constituencies, and does not accurately reflect results of legislation on the lived experience of immigrants in the United States. I specifically examine the presidential immigration rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton in order to show the persistence of rhetoric that contributes to negative immigration frameworks throughout the past three and a half decades. The lack of meaningful reform since the beginning of the fourth wave of immigration indicates the harmful nature of the continuation of these discourses through the rhetoric of the “modern” president. Presidents who came after Reagan adopted or were required to navigate the framework for immigration rhetoric under which he operated. Democratic presidents, and specifically Clinton, operated on the basis of Reagan’s precedent, which has made their rhetoric rather moderate and neoliberal, even while it has been more left-leaning than Reagan’s. Operating under the constructs of negative immigration frameworks that have existed throughout history but have been exacerbated since the 1980s has implications for the development and continuation of rhetoric that fails to secure legislation that has a positive, meaningful impact on the lives of immigrants.

To show how presidential immigration rhetoric leads to legislation with unfavorable outcomes for immigrant populations in the United States, I use public speech content of Reagan and Clinton (including official remarks and statements, annually delivered speeches, and television interviews) newspaper articles, and secondary source material about immigration policy and events. I conduct a qualitative rhetorical analysis of speech in primary resources.

While coding all of the public speech content of Reagan and Clinton using a language generator could provide insight into rhetorical decisions based on a larger volume of rhetoric, a deeper understanding of language found in speeches most pertinent to immigration issues was more appropriate for the nature of this thesis. A close reading allows for expanded conversation on specific moments that contributed to the frameworks under which immigration is continually spoken about.

Close reading analysis begins in Chapter One, where I discuss Reagan's active initial stance on immigration issues, adopted as numbers of immigrants to the United States rose. Reagan's pro-business approach was evident in his rhetoric, and he frequently used the "nation of immigrants" discourse throughout his discussion of the topic. The passing of the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986 brought with it abstract "amnesty" rhetoric, and results for immigrants that contradicted the positive rhetoric Reagan expressed over the bill. Chapter Two begins with Clinton's initial relaxed stance on immigration issues and shows the shift that occurred over the course of his presidency to rhetoric that enforced the "nation of immigrants" discourse, coupled with pressing language that the U.S. was also a "nation of laws." Clinton adopted Reagan's preferences for the free market and globalization, shown in discussion of rhetoric on the passage of the North America Free Trade Agreement in 1994. The development of immigration rhetoric from Reagan to Clinton shows how discussion of this topic has limited the prospect for meaningful legislative reform and has consequently had a serious impact on immigrant communities in the United States.

## CHAPTER ONE: Amnesty, the Free Market, and ‘The Great Communicator’

The magnet that draws them is freedom and the beacon that guides them is hope. America offers liberty for all, encourages hope for betterment, and nurtures great expectations. In this free land a person can realize his dreams – going as far as talent and drive can carry him. In return America asks each of us to do our best, to work hard, to respect the law, to cherish human rights, and to strive for the common good.  
– Ronald Reagan, National Immigrants Day, 1986.<sup>1</sup>

The 1980s brought a rise in levels of immigration to the United States, and political actors, like President Ronald Reagan, responded politically and rhetorically to the changing political climate that resulted from this influx. Compelling language, exemplified in the quote above, characterized Reagan’s rhetoric on the topic of immigration, as he invoked emotional appeals through his speech. As a reputed and charismatic orator, Reagan’s speech-making skills and perceptivity to speech informed the ways in which audiences received his public statements regarding immigration and immigrants. In an obituary posted shortly after Reagan’s death, Peter Hannaford writes, “He was the public speaker – The Great Communicator – to whom all others were compared.”<sup>2</sup> Shortly after Reagan’s death, Lou Cannon, who was *the Washington Post’s* White House correspondent during the Reagan presidency, wrote that Reagan “earned that title [of Great Communicator] because of his skill at talking evocatively and using folksy anecdotes that ordinary people could understand.”<sup>3</sup> The language in Reagan’s speech was accessible to the mass public and this meant he could more easily deliver his rhetorical arguments. Cannon

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1. Ronald Reagan, “Proclamation 5510: National Immigrants Day, 1986,” in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1986.

2. Peter Hannaford, “Remembering the Great Communicator,” in *Human Events*, 2004, 577.

3. Lou Cannon, “Why Reagan was the ‘great communicator,’” in “News,” *USA Today*, 2004, 21.

continues, “Moreover, Reagan paid attention not only to his speeches – but also his audiences’ reaction to them... he knew when his speeches were effective and when they weren’t. And when they weren’t, he changed them to make them effective the next time.”<sup>4</sup> While Cannon spoke with intentional fondness in a posthumous tribute, Reagan’s immigration rhetoric did show his ability to appeal to various audiences and demonstrated his attentiveness to the constituencies who received his rhetoric.

The path that led Reagan to become known as “The Great Communicator” can be traced back to his early professional career in radio announcing. He secured a job as a regular sports announcer before he began his acting career in 1937. He became Vice President and then President of the Screen Actors Guild, and Hannaford writes, “In later years [Reagan] credited his SAG experience with honing the negotiating skills he used so deftly in elective politics and summit meetings.”<sup>5</sup> Reagan became the General Electric Theater television host in 1954, and this role led him to visit factories across the country and meet with workers. It was through interactions with factory workers that “he developed his technique of giving brief opening remarks about values and the country’s problems, then shifting to taking questions (‘a dialogue, not a monologue,’ as he put it).”<sup>6</sup> Reagan began many of the speeches that he delivered on the topic of immigration with that model, with allusion to the immigrant history of the United States, using the “nation of immigrants” discourse, after which he delved into pertinent and sometimes-contradictory issues he intended to discuss. Reagan practiced speaking about his political ideology during factory visits as well. Cannon writes that Reagan “went throughout the country

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4. Ibid.

5. Hannaford, “Remembering the Great Communicator,” 580.

6. Ibid.

speaking to all of these workers at plants, because General Electric's chairman, Ralph Cordiner, had this idea of decentralization. Reagan would speak to audiences, and it was just wonderful political training."<sup>7</sup> Opportunities to speak to large groups of workers about political and economic issues, particularly the "menace of the Communist movement," set the stage for Reagan's entrance into politics, his campaign for governor of California, and later, his campaign for the presidency under a pro-business Republican framework. By honing his speaking skills, Reagan learned how to most effectively employ rhetoric that appealed to desired constituencies. His consequent rhetoric contributed to "nation of immigrants" discourse, economically based discourses about resources, jobs, and work ethic of immigrants, and "amnesty" rhetoric that fell precariously between discourses of "legality" and "illegality."

With Reagan's particular oratory talent in mind, this chapter begins with a discussion of his initial rhetorical reactions to rising levels of immigration to the United States. Reagan was attentive to immigration politics and public sentiment at the outset of his presidency, and held a distinctly pro-business stance in his immigration rhetoric that reinforced economic interests for "legal" immigration. Reagan grounded the need for active immigration legislation and rhetoric on the basis of reports released by expert groups and commissions that were formed at the beginning of his presidency, as well as the 1980 Refugee Act. I argue that Reagan, informed to act on immigration issues at the beginning of his presidency, used the "nation of immigrants" discourse in order to situate the U.S. as a country that benefited from immigrants (and their laborious economic contributions). Meanwhile, his accompanying language implied themes of limited resources and "legality" and was ultimately restrictive in nature. Reagan's rhetorical contradictions were particularly evident during his presidential campaign tours, and also in

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7. Cannon, "Why Reagan was 'the great communicator,'" 21.

debates and the eventual passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986. Reagan's positive rhetorical tone in discussion about "amnesty" legislation as forgiveness to immigrants for wrongdoing, outside the dichotomy of "legal" and "illegal," contradicted IRCA's results for immigrant communities. Contrary rhetoric, coupled with actions on immigration and refugee policy couched in language of national security of U.S. resources, led to unintended and often detrimental consequences for immigrant populations.

The climate surrounding immigration politics in the 1980s was largely shaped by the influx of immigrants to the United States prior to the decade, resulting from the termination of the Bracero program and the passing of the 1965 Immigration Act. The influx of immigrants entering the U.S. leading up to the 1980s is known as the fourth (and current) wave of immigration in the United States. The termination of the Bracero program meant that immigrants who had served as documented temporary workers lost their jobs, but some remained in the U.S. and overstayed their visas. The termination of the legal pathway to immigration that the Bracero program provided meant that unauthorized immigration rose in the 1970s and 1980s. When the 1965 Immigration Act passed, it removed categorical exclusions from immigrant admission laws that were primarily in place for non-European sending countries, which meant that Asian, African, and Middle Eastern immigrants were eligible for entry to the United States. Instead of explicit categorical exclusions, the 1965 Act implemented a preference system for family-reunification and highly skilled workers who migrated to the United States. It also allowed asylum seekers (primarily from Communist-led countries) to seek refuge in the United States. While largely seen as a symbolic gesture to show America's lack of hypocrisy during the Civil Rights movement, the 1965 Immigration Act effectively led to an increase in immigration to the U.S. and a shift in the makeup of the immigrant population. The increased number of immigrants

as a result of these events led to a consequent desire to curb immigration flows, and this shaped immigration politics at the beginning of Reagan's presidency.

Reagan's initial stance on immigration appeared to be proactive, perhaps as a result of the heightened awareness of immigration politics due to the increased number of immigrants entering the United States. His initial stance was also economically driven. In *Dividing Lines: the Politics of Immigration Control in America*, Daniel Tichenor writes, "During his 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan endorsed the notion of a North American free trade zone in which goods, services, technology, and workers could move freely across U.S., Canadian, and Mexican borders."<sup>8</sup> While a North American free-trade zone initiative did not come to light until the Clinton administration in 1994, Reagan's campaign showed an economically motivated immigration stance and an intentional focus of attention to immigration as a political issue. In an article in the *New York Times* in 1980, Howell Raines wrote about statements Reagan made while he traveled through Texas on his presidential campaign. Raines noted that Reagan used the term "undocumented" during his campaign, at this instance particularly in the state of Texas. The use of the term "undocumented," as opposed to use of the term "illegal," was relatively unprecedented at this time and showed that Reagan was aware of the beneficial political use of this term in a border state. Reagan's language use suggested that he was taking a proactive stance that acknowledged immigrants while also prioritizing his political agenda.

New refugee legislation passed in 1980 as Reagan campaigned for the presidential election. The 1980 Refugee Act passed with "narrow majority" and contributed to shifts in

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8. Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), 255.



immigration politics at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> The 1980 Refugee Act ended the refugee system enacted in the 1965 Act (to admit refugees from Communist countries), called for regularized flows of refugees, and set a maximum capacity ceiling at 50,000 admissions. It created funding for a U.S. Coordinator of Refugee Affairs, created more refugee assistance opportunities, regularized resettlement programs, and required annual consultation between the White House and relevant congressional committees. Finally, it aligned the United States' refugee law with United Nations protocol on the definition of a refugee. Before this provision in the 1980 Refugee Act, the U.S. had the ability to blatantly accept refugees on the basis of the government's Cold War agenda. The Select Committee on Immigration and Refugee Policy was also formed through the legislation.

In 1981, Reagan spoke about the task force that was created to have a more informed basis for the implementation of immigration policy and immigration agenda priorities during his administration. The Task Force on Immigration and Refugee Policy presented a package to Congress, with principles "designed to preserve our tradition of accepting foreigners to our shores, but to accept them in a controlled and orderly fashion."<sup>10</sup> Reagan's description of these principles invoked the "nation of immigrants" discourse, and alludes to immigration as a founding attribute of the U.S. that must be legally adhered to in the present day. In this statement, Reagan explained the principles that the Task Force on Immigration and Refugee Policy presented. These principles were to continue "America's tradition as a land that welcomes peoples from other countries" while acknowledging the shared responsibility with other

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9. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 247.

10. Ronald Reagan. "Statement on United States Immigration and Refugee Policy," in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, July 30, 1986.

countries for resettling those people, and to provide adequate legal authority and control that strengthened enforcement and made immigration law efficient and “consistent with our values of individual privacy and freedom.”<sup>11</sup> Economically influenced principles outlined in the report were to reflect the U.S.’s neighborly relationships with Mexico and Canada, to “recognize that both the United States and Mexico have historically benefited from Mexicans obtaining employment in the United States” (and that “a number of our states have special labor needs, and we should take these into account”), and to recognize and provide legal status for the productive and established “illegal work force” in the United States while also discouraging *further* “illegal” immigration. Principles designed to address limited resources in the United States were to improve the capacity of governmental agencies to deal with immigration matters and fair distribution of benefits across different parts of the country, to find ways to integrate refugees “without nurturing their dependence on welfare,” and to “seek greater international cooperation in the resettlement of refugees and, in the Caribbean Basin, international cooperation to assist accelerated economic development to reduce motivations for illegal immigration.”<sup>12</sup> The principles Reagan outlined from the Task Force and the way in which he delivered them gave weight to certain desired understandings of the immigration agenda moving forward on the basis of the report. Reagan described the principles proposed, and used language that appealed to restrictive immigration ideals while it also perpetuated narratives about welcoming immigrants unconditionally. Additionally, Reagan called for an acknowledgment of the economic advantages of immigrant labor, and highlighted the special labor needs filled by immigrant workers and the benefits that would come from providing legal status for the “illegal work

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11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

force.” Reagan discussed refugee admittance, made allusion to economic concerns regarding immigration when he said he did not want refugees to be dependent on welfare, specifically mentioning refugees from the Caribbean basin, while he maintained a welcoming and humanitarian-based narrative.

Reagan opened this speech with the following lines: “Our nation is a nation of immigrants. More than any other country, our strength comes from our capacity to welcome those from other lands. No free and prosperous nation can by itself accommodate all those who seek a better life or flee persecution. We must share this responsibility with other countries.”<sup>13</sup> With this statement, Reagan employed rhetoric that enforced the “nation of immigrants” discourse, while he maintained a stance of adherence to certain limits to immigration admittance. Reagan’s interpretation of the Task Force recommendation in his Statement on United States Immigration and Refugee Policy set the tone for his immigration agenda at the beginning of his presidency. He spoke about refugees and immigrants in conjunction, and this allowed him to make statements through a humanitarian lens, while he also discussed legality. He combined the “nation of immigrants” discourse with sentiments about economics and legality that set a limit on the narrative of welcoming immigrants to America’s shores. Ultimately, Reagan was forthcoming in his statements about his desire to work toward immigration reform based on the recommendations of the report.

In addition to Reagan’s statements about the report of recommendations on immigration released by the Task Force, the Justice Department and the Attorney General also issued statements. On the basis of the report, the Justice Department recommended enhancing Border Patrol, stronger enforcement of labor laws, civil fines for employers hiring undocumented

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13. Ibid.

immigrants, a worker verification system, the possibility of experimenting with a guest worker program, and some amnesty (the level of which would be appropriately determined).<sup>14</sup> JoAnne Spotts, who outlines immigration politics from the Reagan to the Clinton era, writes, “Both the Attorney General and the President’s statement reiterated the recommendations contained in the Justice Department’s statement, but the President stressed his support of a continuation of high levels of legal immigration.”<sup>15</sup> The Justice Department and the Attorney General placed the principles outlined in the Task Force’s report [and that Reagan outlined in his statement] in tangible legislative terms that could be translated into policy action. Based on the recommendations that could lead to tangible legal action, Reagan’s initial immigration stance was a proactive one. It was grounded on the idea that reform to immigration policy was necessary to create certain limits to immigration and immigrant use of resources, but that the “nation of immigrants” narrative should be used to encourage immigrants who could provide the fulfillment of labor needs to the U.S. economy to come to the country using authorized pathways.

The Task Force’s recommendations on refugees (and Reagan’s retelling of them) indicate further initial stances on the influx of bodies into the U.S. at the beginning of the 1980s. U.S. foreign relations and identification of allies during the Cold War contributed to the large number of individuals who sought asylum in the United States. The recommendations on refugee admittance and procedure stemmed from an influx of refugees from Cuba and Haiti during this time period. Responses to this influx shifted after President Carter’s administration, and Cuban and Haitian refugees shaped most of the discussion surrounding asylum policy at this time.

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14. JoAnne D. Spotts. “U.S. Immigration Policy on the Southwest Border from Reagan through Clinton, 1981-2001,” in *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 16 (2001-2002): 609.

15. Spotts, “U.S. Immigration Policy on the Southwest Border,” 609.

Denise Bostdorff, who delivered arguments about presidential rhetoric on Haitian refugees at a conference at Texas A&M, explains how there was negative public sentiment in reaction to the way that President Carter handled the Mariel Boatlift<sup>16</sup> and Haitian refugee crisis. Carter handled the crisis in a more liberal fashion and “led the Reagan Administration, as well as those that would follow, to believe ‘that a powerful restrictionist current of public opinion would emerge to punish any president who was perceived as permitting a weak immigration policy that did not safeguard the nation’s frontiers.’<sup>17</sup> The discrepancy between admittance of Cubans versus Haitians seeking entrance into the United States was that the Haitian government was friendly with the United States government, and consequently Haitians had greater restrictions placed upon their entrance to the country while seeking asylum. Haitian refugees became inadmissible to the U.S. and Reagan adopted a policy that mandated that if refugees could not touch land in the U.S., they could not apply for asylum. This meant that Haitians fleeing by boat and intercepted at sea were ineligible. Bostdorff writes, “Preventing Haitians from reaching the shore forestalled their ability to become political refugees. Critics argued that Reagan’s policy violated both the 1967 United Nations Protocol, as well as the 1980 Refugee Act that had incorporated it.”<sup>18</sup> Reagan claimed that eligibility for asylum was being determined aboard Coast Guard ships and was consequently not as harsh as critics suggested. “Yet,” Bostdorff writes, “as immigration legal scholar Arthur Helton pointed out, from 1981 through 1991, only 28 of 23,000 Haitians

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16. The Mariel Boatlift refers to mass migration of Cubans by boat to the United States in the late 1970s.

17. Denise M. Bostdorff, “Rhetorical Ambivalence: Bush and Clinton Address the Crisis of Haitian Refugees,” in *Who Belongs in America? Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration*, edited by Vanessa B. Beasley, 206-246. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 208.

18. Bostdorff, “Rhetorical Ambivalence,” 209.

interdicted at sea were allowed to go to the United States to apply for asylum – an especially low number given the repression of the Duvalier government and the brutal U.S. supported regimes that followed until Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s election in December 1990.”<sup>19</sup> U.S. foreign relations and interests clearly played a role in the policies surrounding Haitian refugees and the accompanying rhetoric, and support for Duvalier as the leader of the regime and as an ally in the Cold War had a profound effect on migration to the United States and consequent political and rhetorical reaction to that migration.

An additional contributor to initial immigration politics and Reagan’s consequent stance and rhetoric at the beginning of the 1980s was the Select Committee on Immigration and Refugee Policy (SCIRP). SCIRP was “created to avert a political backlash against immigration and to quiet intraparty battles over employer sanctions in the late 1970s.”<sup>20</sup> Having a third party to provide expert opinion on immigration was helpful in curbing political disagreements. Tichenor writes that SCIRP “played a significant role in immigration politics of the 1980s by advancing a ‘policy paradigm’ that helped frame reform choices and official narratives for over a decade.”<sup>21</sup> The report that SCIRP published in 1981 emphasized that “illegal” immigration had to be controlled before “legal” immigration policy could be revisited. With this recommendation, SCIRP introduced the trope that the U.S. must “close the back door” before it would be able to “open the front door.” Tichenor argues that SCIRP’s “contrasting portraits of illegal and legal immigration had the more lasting effect of helping to *decouple* these two migratory streams in

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19. Ibid., 209.

20. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 249.

21. Ibid., 249.

national politics.”<sup>22</sup> The decoupling of “legal” and “illegal” shaped how immigration was spoken about at the public, legislative, and executive level in decades to follow, and had consequent effects on how reform was structured surrounding the two binary categories of legality. SCIRP set a rhetorical and legislative framework for immigration discussion in the 1980s, and it contributed to Reagan’s initial framework for discussion and initial agenda on immigration politics. Further, it reiterated and made distinct the dichotomous categories of “legal” and “illegal” immigration, which left little room for rhetorical or political grey area on the topic of immigration.

Reagan further solidified his initial stance on immigration and his characterizations of immigrants when he announced National Hispanic Heritage Week in 1981. He acknowledged, “[Hispanic] influence on our nation began with the Spaniards long before our revolution brought independence from England.”<sup>23</sup> Reagan’s acknowledgment here placed Hispanic influence in a historic and distant past, and functioned in the same way that the “nation of immigrants” discourse functioned and continues to function. Reagan discussed how Hispanic architecture, art, history, and language could be found in the United States as evidence of Hispanic historical and cultural influence. Reagan discussed attributes of Hispanic immigrants that make them “good” and “hardworking” immigrants. He said, “The Hispanic peoples today add to our strength as a nation with their strong devotion to family, deep religious convictions, pride in their language and heritage and commitment to earning a livelihood by hard work.”<sup>24</sup> Reagan’s description of Hispanic people as hardworking and committed to religion and family placed them as important

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22. Ibid., 251.

23. Ronald Reagan, “Proclamation 4855: National Hispanic Heritage Week,” in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1981.

24. Ibid.

contributors to American social ideals. He further characterized Hispanic immigrants as he discussed individual immigrants who made contributions to the fields of science and technology, business, and public service. Reagan particularly pointed to public officials and mayors of Hispanic origin of major U.S. cities. Reagan concluded with an assertion of the necessity of giving deserved recognition to contributions of Hispanic Americans, and called for all citizens to reflect on the “brotherhood that binds [them] together as one people.”<sup>25</sup> With this proclamation, Reagan appealed to Hispanic American constituents, while he simultaneously placed their beginnings in the U.S. in the past, which made them a very distinctly “legal,” hardworking, and moral immigrant.

With an initial immigration agenda established, Reagan began discussion of legislation introduced at the beginning of his administration. The Simpson-Mazzoli Bill was initially introduced in the early 1980s by Republican Senator Alan Simpson from Wyoming and Democratic Representative Romano Mazzoli from Kentucky. It proposed a number of reforms to the immigration system in the realms of immigrant admission and employment. It included employer sanctions and border enforcement provisions.

In three television interviews in San Antonio, Texas, in July of 1984, Reagan discussed the bill and answered other questions pertaining to immigration. In his first interview, with Mr. Marrou of KENS TV, Reagan said, “I believe that [the Simpson-Mazzoli Bill] is a legitimate effort to regain control of our borders. We know that about 120 miles of the 2,000-mile border – that 120 miles in the Southwest – is our greatest problem. And we have approved a thousand

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25. Ibid.



more INS personnel.”<sup>26</sup> Reagan’s rhetoric about control of the U.S.-Mexico border in a border-state like Texas showed his attentiveness to his audience and their likely concerns. Reagan’s enforcement rhetoric reinforced the idea that national security must be secured along the U.S.-Mexico border through proactive legislation. Marrou asked Reagan to reassure fears about Hispanics being required to carry an identification card in order to prove their citizenship.

Reagan replied:

Well, we want to take every precaution we can to see that there won’t be what so many fear – just an automatic ruling of them out as employees. That would be unconscionable. And we want to be very careful that while we have safeguards to prevent employers from hiring the undocumented workers, that at the same time there is no discrimination against those who will be legalized under this bill, those who may still be undocumented but who’ve lived for a long period of time, put down roots in our society. We want to give them the right to legally live here and those who, as you say, are citizens.<sup>27</sup>

Reagan used the term “undocumented” in this (presumably) relatively candid television interview, which showed his attention to audience in a state with a large immigrant population. The fact that Reagan used the term “undocumented” at all, rather than the term “illegal,” was significant because it strayed from the strict binary of “legal” and “illegal” rhetoric and characterizations, and appealed to his desire to introduce an amnesty program that would provide documentation for “hardworking” immigrants who were significant contributors to the economy. While he entered the grey area between “legality” and “illegality” with comments regarding rights and documentation for immigrants who were not authorized to be in the country, he

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26. Ronald Reagan, “Interview with Marrou, July 6, 1984,” from KENS TV, in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1984.

27. Ibid.

appealed to the “legality” discourse when he stated that he wanted to “give them the right to legally live” in the United States.

Reagan’s second interview in San Antonio was with David Scott from KMOL TV. Scott expressed qualms with the Simpson-Mazzoli Bill, and stated, “A lot of folks down here in Texas don’t like it for a lot of reasons. Some people say it handles illegals in an arbitrary fashion, that it will produce discrimination against legal Hispanics here, that it’s going to hurt businessmen, that it’s going to be costly, that it won’t be effective.”<sup>28</sup> Reagan replied that the bill would be cost effective and fair, “and it’s also necessary, because the simple truth is we’ve lost control of our borders. And no country can afford that.”<sup>29</sup> Reagan’s response appealed to Texans and alluded to the concept of controlling costly “illegal” immigration. Reagan likely emphasized a secure border in an effort to ensure support for the legalization of immigrants who were already living in the United States. Reagan continued:

And I’m convinced that we can protect our Hispanic American citizens from discrimination just on the basis that an employer might be afraid to hire them. We’re going to protect their rights. At the same time, we’re also going to have compassion and legalize those who came here some time ago and have legitimately put roots down and are living as legal residents of our country, even though illegal. We’re going to make them legal.<sup>30</sup>

Reagan repeated sentiments from his first interview about the need to give documented status to immigrants who have “put roots down” in the United States. His persuasive technique was confusing here, though, and showed the difficulty in the proposal of policy that falls somewhere

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28. David Scott, “Interview with David Scott, July 6, 1984,” from KMOL TV, in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1984.

29. Reagan Ronald, “Interview with David Scott, July 6, 1984,” from KMOL TV, in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1984.

30. Ibid.

between “legal” and “illegal.” Reagan’s desired amnesty program was difficult for him to support within this dichotomous framework of legality. The proposition that immigrants who would receive authorization had been in the United States for some length of time was a compelling rhetorical device for garnering reassurance about the proposed bill to skeptical constituents. Unclear and ambiguous language that described immigrants as “legal residents of our country, even though illegal,” made it easier to make a vague claim rather than explicitly outline the specifics of amnesty legislation provisions. Reagan appealed directly to his constituents, particularly those with voting power, in the following exchange:

Scott: Why, then, sir, have your most ardent supporters down here in Texas fought you on this bill? And might not it cost you in the State come fall?

Reagan: Well, I hope that they would give us the benefit of the doubt and recognize how much we mean to protect their interests.<sup>31</sup>

Reagan’s rhetoric framed the Simpson-Mazzoli Bill as beneficial to Texans and to U.S.-born constituents, but he ensured that it would also benefit established immigrants.

Deborah Daniels from KSAT conducted Reagan’s third interview in San Antonio. Reagan echoed sentiments he made in his interview with Marrou, and urged the need to address the 120 miles along the border that proved particularly problematic. Reagan also discussed the Simpson-Mazzoli bill further. He stated, “...we think that the program is going to provide for documented workers crossing the border to fill needs, particularly in agriculture. We think that we, with compassion, are going to recognize the problem of those undocumented immigrants to our country who have been here for a number of years, who’ve established a base and a home

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31. David Scott and Ronald Reagan, “Interview with David Scott, July 6, 1984,” from KMOL TV, in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1984.

and put down roots, and we're going to legalize them.”<sup>32</sup> Reagan continued his candid use of the term “undocumented,” here. He also revealed his free-market expansionist agenda, as he stated that immigrants fill labor needs in specific sectors of the U.S. economy. Tichenor describes the “free-market expansionist” framework as one based on the belief that immigrant rights in the U.S. should be restricted, while immigrant admissions to the U.S. should be expanded. Free-market expansionists would assert that immigrants who are already in the United States are an ideal population to fill labor needs.<sup>33</sup> Reagan’s beliefs seemed likely to be economically driven and founded in an ideal “free-market” where labor and goods could flow freely across national borders. Reagan contributed to a humanitarian discourse when he discussed the compassion with which U.S.-born citizens must treat immigrants (both documented and undocumented) who have established lives and families and good morals of hard work in the country.

Additionally, Reagan repeated sentiments in his KSAT interview that he made earlier in the day about protecting immigrants from exploitation and blackmail in the workplace. Daniels asked, “I’d like to know how important you feel the Hispanic vote will be in the upcoming election, and what are the Republicans and your administration offering Hispanics?”<sup>34</sup> Reagan replied that the Hispanic vote was important to him, as it had been in the 1980 campaign, and that he was trying hard to secure the vote of this population. Reagan explicitly stated his agenda to win Hispanic votes, and made clear that this constituency was important to him. He stated, “The other party has believed in handouts, grants, welfare – the making of people dependent.

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32. Ronald Reagan, “Interview with Deborah Daniels, July 6, 1984,” from KSAT, in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1984.

33. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 37.

34. Deborah Daniels, “Interview with Deborah Daniels, July 6, 1984,” from KSAT, in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1984.

And in my view, the Americans of Hispanic origin, their values are based on family and religion, on all the basic good values of ethics and work ethic, and they want to be independent. And that's what we offer – is opportunity.”<sup>35</sup> By framing Democrats as “the other party,” Reagan aligned his Republican political ideology with the characterizations he made about immigrants, while he ostracized Democratic Party ideology by characterizing immigrants as having inherent moral values that align with the Republican Party. Sentiments that characterized immigrants as having particular moral values aligning with specific political ideologies had the capacity to appeal to voters with an immigrant background as well as to those without. The fact that Reagan spoke in anticipation of an upcoming election likely shaped how he rhetorically framed the provisions of the Simpson-Mazzoli bill to a Texan audience during these three interviews.

At a moment when versions of the Simpson-Mazzoli bill were debated at the White House, top Reagan administration advisors showed skepticism about the reform package. Tichenor explains that in the face of this skepticism, “Simpson and Smith [another representative who advocated for the bill at the time] reminded Reagan that presidential resistance would not compare favorably with the House Democratic leadership’s decision to permit action on a problem that continued to trouble the mass electorate and the media.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, Reagan’s stance was informed by his desire to use his political power, to be seen as a leader who was taking action on an issue to which Democrats were attentive. This version of the bill failed, because the House and Senate could not agree on the terms set forth by the administration for its passing. Despite initial failures, “finally, in an era of divided government, both the House Democratic leadership and the Reagan White House were eager to avoid blame for killing an illegal

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35. Reagan, “Interview with Deborah Daniels” from KSAT, 1984.

36. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 259.

immigration control initiative endorsed by SCIRP, the media, and the general public.”<sup>37</sup> The bill was signed into law as the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986.

The stated goal of IRCA was to restrict the flow of undocumented immigrants into the United States, under the assumption that if the legislation allowed undocumented but established immigrants to “legalize” under an amnesty provision, numbers of undocumented immigrants would decrease in the country and would stem future flows of documented and undocumented immigration. The “amnesty” provision of the law was controversial due to the rhetorical arguments surrounding the term and consequent attempts to counter its implications. Rhetorically, granting amnesty implied “forgiveness” and could be interpreted as a breakdown of strict categories of “legal” and “illegal.” Amnesty can be conceptualized as existing in the grey area between “legal” and “illegal,” as it granted documentation to a population that was previously framed as “illegal” and undocumented. In the midst of lobbying and efforts to pass immigration reform, the plausibility of defining legislation as “amnesty” was debated. In addition to the difficulty in articulating “amnesty” within preexisting frameworks, Orrenius and Zavodny explain that amnesties are hard political sells, but that they make the most sense given the size of the undocumented population in the United States.<sup>38</sup> Amnesties are hard political sells because they do not fall under the category of “legal” or “illegal” in terms of immigration, and certain groups see them as granting favors to people who have not earned those favors. In contrasting logic, “amnesty” implies that people who are “granted” amnesty have done something wrong for which they must be forgiven, which can ostracize immigrants. Reagan’s

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37. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 261.

38. Pia M. Orrenius and Madeline Zavodny, “The Economic Consequences of Amnesty for Unauthorized Immigrants,” in *Cato Journal* 32, no. 1 (2012).

attempt to defend an amnesty provision was difficult because of reinforced discursive frameworks of “legal” and “illegal” that tend to be difficult to break due to the way that they shape societal structure in the United States.

In this particular case, amnesty required complementary restrictive legislation that called for an increased presence of law enforcement at the border and sanctions for employers who hired undocumented immigrants. Orrenius and Zavodny explain “because it is impossible to credibly commit to not conducting repeated amnesties, it is vital that a legalization program be accompanied by other reforms that make future amnesties less likely.”<sup>39</sup> Political implications of enacting an amnesty were considered in forming arguments about rhetorical implications. Perry writes, “In keeping with the American tradition of turning to the law to resolve social issues, amnesty was thus a promise of freedom and civil rights that the self-proclaimed ‘nation of immigrants’ ... conferred to all citizens, and in the 1980s that promise of freedom for a diverse populace was especially compelling.”<sup>40</sup> The U.S. social contract calls for democracy and freedom for all, and an amnesty could fulfill that ideal while it also appealed to free-market expansionists who wanted to increase the size of the workforce.

Ultimately, legislators, politicians, and other stakeholders who endorsed amnesty were able to pass the legislation. Under IRCA, documentation was provided for immigrants who could prove their residence in the United States since January 1, 1982. Legally Authorized workers were those who could prove continuous U.S. residence for at least five years, while Special Agricultural Workers were those who could prove ninety days of employment in the U.S.

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39. Ibid.,100.

40. Leah Perry, “Overlooking/Looking Over Neoliberal Immigration: Amnesty Policy in the ‘Nation of Immigrants,’” in *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 5, 6 (2014): 845.

agriculture industry. Return migration after labor needs were met was encouraged for Special Agricultural Workers, and they were largely considered seasonal immigrants. IRCA created the H-2A and H-2B programs. Immigrants with Temporary Worker Cards could apply for permanent residency after one year of consistent employment in the United States, but were prohibited from public cash assistance programs until five years after their documentation. Family members of immigrants who received documentation through IRCA were eligible to join their documented relatives in the U.S. after 1989, and beneficiaries became eligible for U.S. citizenship in 1994. Provision 245(i) allowed beneficiaries who were living undocumented in the U.S. already to pay a fine and adjust to documented life without the requirement of meeting an entry bar.<sup>41</sup> Provisions of IRCA that provided political countering to the granting of “amnesty” were employer sanctions, introduced to hold employers accountable for hiring workers who could prove documentation, and increased border enforcement. Employers were required to prove the “legality” of the employees they hired, and harsher penalties were enacted for those who could not.

Overall, response to IRCA was relatively critical of its failure to fulfill its goal of decreasing undocumented immigration to the United States. Tichenor writes, “Originally designed as a restrictive enforcement measure, IRCA proved to be surprisingly expansive in both design and effect.”<sup>42</sup> IRCA is credited with increasing both documented and undocumented immigration flows into the United States after its enactment. Further, Orrenius and Zavodny explain the shortcomings of the provisions that were meant to counter the documentation of

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41. Orrenius and Zavodny, “The Economic Consequences of Amnesty for Unauthorized Immigrants,” 90.

42. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 262.



millions of previously undocumented immigrants. They write, “The U.S. experience after IRCA indicates that an amnesty not accompanied by a well-designed, comprehensive overhaul of legal immigration policy can lead to increased legal and illegal flows and political backlashes.”<sup>43</sup>

IRCA not only led to an influx of documented and undocumented immigrants to the United States, but this rise led to consequent restrictive legislation, formed to curb immigration.

The economic impact of IRCA was particularly well examined. IRCA led to declined wages, a rise in informal sector employment, and an increase in the receipt of cash wages for workers of immigrant background. Donato et. al conducted a study to examine economic results of IRCA for immigrants of various different nations of origin. They write, “...we observed significant signs of worsened labour [*sic*] market outcomes before and after 1986 among Mexicans and other Latinos, our findings suggest lower wages after 1986.”<sup>44</sup> Worsened labor market conditions included employer abuses and a rise in fraudulent document use in order to bypass adherence to strict provisions. Congress proposed a fraud-resistant system to address the spotty enforcement of employer sanctions, yet “the Reagan Administration... was against establishing such a system on the grounds that it was too costly and would result in an invasion of privacy. Consequently, President Reagan failed to exercise this authority granted to him pursuant to IRCA.”<sup>45</sup> Fraudulent document use rose as a means of maintaining employment for immigrants and functioned as a way for employers to maintain a source of cheap labor.

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43. Orrenius and Zavodny, “The Economic Consequences of Amnesty for Unauthorized Immigrants,” 86.

44. Katharine M. Donato, Michael Aguilera, and Wakabayashi, Chizuko. “Immigration Policy and Employment Conditions of US Immigrants from Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic,” in *International Migration* 43, no. 5 (2005): 21.

45. Spotts, “U.S. Immigration Policy on the Southwest Border,” 611.

Employer abuses continued despite the enactment of increased penalties for hiring undocumented immigrants, and sanctions were not readily enforced with any consistency. Perry writes, “What amnesty actually did was keep mostly male, mostly Mexican amnesty applicants, highly dependant [*sic*] upon and thus highly vulnerable to employer abuses during the five-year waiting period.”<sup>46</sup> Employer sanctions that were meant to balance the amnesty provision actually served to complicate the legalization process and decreased protection for immigrants from exploitation.

Employer abuses that resulted from the enactment of IRCA included discriminatory hiring practices, and demographics played a role in how IRCA affected immigrants. An investigation by the General Accounting Office (GAO) reported that IRCA resulted in discrimination by employers, who avoided hiring people of Latino descent (or that they perceived to be of Latino descent) for fear that they might be undocumented. “The findings indicate that IRCA-related discrimination occurs, although our estimates suggest only a small number of Hispanics are adversely affected.”<sup>47</sup> While the report indicated only slight effects of discrimination, the documentation that it occurred at a more than aversive level showed the inherent ambiguity of the provision. Mexicans were the largest national group who received amnesty. Mexicans comprised 1.3 million LAWs [of 1.7 million] and 1 million SAWs [of 1.1 million].<sup>48</sup> Despite the clear majority of amnesty recipients who were Mexican, groups from other countries of origin also received amnesty under IRCA. Donato et. al studied differences in

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46. Perry, “Overlooking/Looking Over Neoliberal Immigration,” 862.

47. Lindsay B. Lowell, Jay Teachman, Jing Zhongren. “Unintended Consequences of Immigration Reform: Discrimination and Hispanic Employment,” in *Demography* 32, no. 4 (1995).

48. Donato et. al, “Immigration Policy and Employment Conditions,” 7.

the consequences of IRCA between Mexican, Nicaraguan, and Dominican migrants, because they wanted to counter broad generalizations of the effects of IRCA and “to assess whether employment effects that are linked to the passage of recent immigration policies and have been documented for Mexicans hold for immigrants from two other national origins: Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic.”<sup>49</sup> They studied consequences for immigrants from Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic in particular because they were among the top sending nations in 2000, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. They concluded that Dominicans and Nicaraguans faced similar lowered wages and downturns in economic success after 1986. They suggest that there was a broader negative economic effect for smaller groups within the overarching Latino migrant community (even in immigrants who typically have better English language skills and more formal schooling, like Nicaraguans and Dominicans).<sup>50</sup>

The consequences of the passage of IRCA can also be examined through a gendered lens, and gendered consequences indicate how the law could be interpreted in ways that disenfranchised certain groups. Disenfranchising consequences of IRCA that were particularly gendered included vulnerability for immigrant women and the perpetuation of stereotypes regarding immigrant women. Perry writes, “[IRCA] excluded women and thereby made undocumented women and those few waiting to legalize hyper-vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence as they worked hard, and the SAW programme [*sic*] directly extracted temporary labour [*sic*] from Mexican men.”<sup>51</sup> The type of labor that led to the opportunity for legalization was particularly aimed at men: hard day labor that is stereotypically a male-dominated employment

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49. *Ibid.*, 6.

50. *Ibid.*, 21.

51. Perry, “Overlooking/Looking Over Neoliberal Immigration,” 862.

sector. Female immigrants typically dominated service-industry jobs and domestic work, which were not directly encouraged within IRCA's provisions, like agriculturally based jobs, more typical for men, were. Perry writes, "The text of the law and the possibility for enfranchisement that it offered was race and gender neutral but amnesty was administered in racist and sexist ways that facilitated the exploitation of immigrant labour [*sic*] and impoverishment of immigrant women."<sup>52</sup> Further, Perry argues that provisions within IRCA ultimately disenfranchised immigrant mothers of color. The disenfranchisement of immigrant women was due in part to interpretations and practical applications of IRCA provisions in the employment sector, but also due to stereotypes that were socially reinforced about women of color, specifically mothers, who were dependent on welfare. Perry writes, "While proposed cuts of family reunification failed, welfare restrictions included in IRCA directly tackled the fears provoked by women's immigration and combined with increased border militarization and employer restrictions effectively made Mexican female immigrants unrespectable and thus undeserving of rights."<sup>53</sup> Rhetoric surrounding women's use of and reliance on welfare shaped the material consequences immigrant women felt after the passing of IRCA. Gendered rhetoric reinforced the notion that women were using limited resources that they did not deserve, not only as members of the lower socioeconomic class but also as "undeserving" immigrants.

Unsurprisingly, Reagan's rhetoric in statements regarding IRCA on the day he signed it pointed to the positive attributes of the law, though his language was harmful in its ambiguity and appealed to restrictive constituencies despite the expansive nature of the legislation. He explained that IRCA was "the most comprehensive reform of our immigration laws since

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52. *Ibid.*, 855.

53. *Ibid.*, 852.

1952.”<sup>54</sup> Despite clear room for interpretive biases within IRCA’s provisions, Reagan reinforced the idea that the bill would eliminate discrimination. Reagan explained: “Our objective is only to establish a reasonable, fair, orderly, and secure system of immigration into this country and not to discriminate in any way against particular nations or people.”<sup>55</sup> With this statement, Reagan asserted the democratic nature of the reform while he ensured adherence to law, which by nature is supposedly objective despite lacking reflections of objectivity in applied practice. Perry writes about the way that rhetoric clouded some of Reagan’s seemingly inclusive language: “...the material consequences of the law – namely the bureaucratic red tape that kept disproportionately Mexican male amnesty applicants legally liminal and highly dependent on their employers during a five-year waiting period, women’s exclusion from amnesty, and the bald neocolonial extraction of temporary labour [*sic*] from Mexican men – were masked by the rhetoric of inclusion in the ‘nation of immigrants.’”<sup>56</sup> Reagan’s discussion of the democratic and universally liberal ideal of admitting immigrants from all nations fell short in the implementation of IRCA’s amnesty program and accompanying strict employment and border enforcement provisions.

The “comprehensive reform” rhetoric that Reagan used throughout his statements on signing IRCA ensured constituencies that this bill would appeal to their interests. Reagan stated, “The administration and the allies of immigration reform on both sides of the capital and both sides of the aisle worked together to accomplish these critically important reforms to control

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54. Ronald Reagan, “Statement on Signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, November 6, 1986,” in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1986.

55. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks on Signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, November 6, 1986,” in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1986.

56. Perry, “Overlooking/Looking Over Neoliberal Immigration,” 847.

illegal immigration.”<sup>57</sup> Gonzales argues that immigration policy reform is not actually implemented because of the assumption that reformers, advocates, and politicians have met at a “compromised middle ground” that requires no further action and consequent complacency.<sup>58</sup> In his statements while signing the bill, Reagan discussed the various provisions and emphasized the bipartisan nature of the “comprehensive reform.” He acknowledged the legislators who made large contributions to the creation and passage of the act, further solidifying the idea that the legislation was all encompassing and comprehensive.

Reagan implied “legality” and “illegality” discourse as he said, “Future generations of Americans will be thankful for our efforts to humanely regain control of our borders and thereby preserve the value of one of the most sacred possessions of our people: American citizenship.”<sup>59</sup> Reagan’s vague language did not explicitly define what it meant to be a “citizen” of the United States, but he alluded, here, to the way that citizenship can be “possessed.” The possession of citizenship as a core American value was irrelevant to legalization provisions of IRCA, as those provisions provided temporary legal documentation until a certain waiting period had been fulfilled and an immigrant could then apply for naturalization and thereby acquire citizenship. However, allusion to citizenship enforced the idea that strict measures would prevent immigrants from taking this “possession” from U.S.-born people living in the United States. Reagan’s comments surrounding IRCA showed his attentiveness to “amnesty” as a difficult political sell, while his more restrictive and nationalistic language appealed to both pro- and anti-immigrant sentiment.

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57. Reagan, “Remarks on Signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act,” (1986).

58. Alfonso Gonzales, *Reform Without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State*, (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2014).

59. Reagan, “Statement on Signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act,” (1986).

Ambiguity and contradictions in Reagan's rhetoric continued in his discussions about refugees, which was clear during the Haitian refugee crisis but also in his rhetoric surrounding U.S. foreign relations with Central American countries whose refugees were selectively admitted to the United States. Contradictions abound as U.S. foreign relations dictate influxes of immigrants and refugees attempting to enter the U.S., while restrictive policy and the maintenance of relationships and aid to oppressive governments keeps the U.S. from allowing entrance to people fleeing persecution from allied governments. The United States often admits refugees from governments it is unfriendly with and does not admit refugees from governments that it *is* friendly with, because admitting refugees on the basis of political oppression or lack of safety would indicate that the U.S. takes issue with the government from which the refugee is fleeing. Political refugees are a distinct category separate from economic refugees, who not only struggle in their country of origin on the potential basis of lack of economic stability, but who also struggle in their country of origin due to persecution on the basis of an identifying group to which they belong. Bostdorff argues that ambiguous and ambivalent rhetoric employed in discussion of refugee admittance is indicative of the inequalities in the implementation of immigration law and specifically of asylum law.

Examples of inequalities between different groups of refugees include Haitian refugees versus Cuban refugees, as discussed earlier, but also between Nicaraguans and Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans.<sup>60</sup> For example, while Haitian refugees were barred from applying for asylum if they did not touch U.S. land or were offered the opportunity upon Coast Guard ships, Cuban refugees had particular provisions in place that shifted but were ultimately more accepting. At the end of the summer of 1986, brief contradiction to admittance practices took

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60. Bostdorff, "Rhetorical Ambivalence," 236-37.

place, as Cuban refugee admittance was restricted. Reagan's statements on this shift provided limited and vague understandings of refugee policy. He stated, "I have determined that it is in the interest of the United States to suspend entry into the United States as immigrants by all Cuban nationals, with the exceptions noted below, pending restoration of normal migration procedures between the two countries."<sup>61</sup> Exceptions included immediate relatives of Cuban immigrants in the U.S., preference immigrants who applied at consular posts prior to the date of the proclamation of barred entry, and at the discretion of the Secretary of State.<sup>62</sup> This prohibition of entry would be effective immediately, but would end when migration patterns were deemed "normal" again, highlighting the subjectivity of the application of refugee law and ambiguity in rhetoric surrounding the law.

It is particularly problematic when the United States does not admit refugees from governments it is friendly with, when the U.S. is also materially (or symbolically or politically) supporting the political oppression being rendered by that government. In other words, the United States directly causes mass migration and a population of asylum seekers, and then turns those refugees away. This was the case in Central America in the 1980s, where civil wars were taking place that made it impossible for certain groups to live there. In his article, "The Legend of Reagan the Peacemaker," Rossinow writes, "...during the 1980s governments in Central America strongly and materially backed by Ronald Reagan killed more than three hundred thousand of their own people, mainly in Guatemala and El Salvador (U.S. aid to El Salvador

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61. Ronald Reagan, "Proclamation 5517: Statement on Suspension of Cuban Refugee Admittance," in *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1986.

62. Ibid.



averaged over \$1 million per day for the decade of the 1980s).”<sup>63</sup> Serious crimes were committed against Central Americans, including oppression, violence, and massacres; U.S. refugee policy did not reflect a willingness to admit asylum seekers fleeing persecution from all of these governments. Gonzales argues that the hypocrisy implemented by U.S. refugee admittance policy and perpetuated through foreign relations that encouraged mass migration to the United States ultimately ensured that reform would not be successful. He writes, “[Attempts at reform] will fail because they will not address the driving force behind mass migration from Latin America over the last thirty years – that is, U.S.-backed neoliberal globalization, which was implemented through asymmetrical relations of domination with Latin American and Caribbean nations particularly in the 1980s and 1990s.”<sup>64</sup> Rhetoric justified relationships of unequal power and contributed to the continuation of mass immigration to the U.S., fortifying the cyclical nature of goals to curb that immigration.

In an article in the *New York Times* from 1983 titled “Reagan says security of the U.S. is ‘why Central America matters,’” statements Reagan made in Long Beach, California, are outlined and analyzed. It states, “President Reagan, using some of his sharpest language, said tonight that the security and safety of United States citizens were at risk in Central America.”<sup>65</sup> Reagan stated that the United States was giving two times the amount of economic aid to Central American governments than the amount of military aid it was providing them, in attempt to calm accusations of too much military aid. The article states, “Mr. Reagan said economic as well as

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63. Doug Rossinow, “The Legend of Reagan the Peacemaker,” in *Raritan* 32, no. 3 (2013): 56-76.

64. Gonzales, *Reform Without Justice*, 162-163.

65. “Reagan says security of the U.S. is ‘why Central America matters,’” *The New York Times*, (Long Beach, California) July 1, 1983.

military aid was needed in Central America,” justifying this spending and support. Reagan stated that this move was critical to ensuring national security, and not simply physical security, but a minimization of threats to national interests. For example, United States oil trade passed through the Panama Canal, and the loss of that route for the passage of oil would threaten national interest and consequently required the maintenance of relationships with Central American governments who were oppressive. Reagan apparently acknowledged contradictions in U.S. involvement in the area: “He acknowledged what he described as the ‘sincere motives’ of critics who have pointed out the human rights problems of the United States’ allies in the region. But he said El Salvador was trying to ‘build democracy.’”<sup>66</sup> This trope was convenient because it aligned the United States as a power who was promoting democracy in foreign lands that would suffer without such intervention and aid. It promoted the United States as a force for democracy, in line with the ideal of universal liberalism that would theoretically support people fleeing from places without democracy as well. Despite this, the trope did not necessarily address the consequences for people who lived in those places. The image of the U.S. as an intervening power was also damaging because it did not account for the contradiction in claiming to support democracy while not accepting certain categories of refugees on the basis of their national origin.

Reagan’s pro-business stance on immigration left him with rhetorical contradictions he made in an effort to appeal to both laborers and employers, to both “legal” immigrants and undocumented immigrants receiving “amnesty,” to both legislators and voting constituencies. Goals regarding immigration control were ultimately not met during the decade of Reagan’s presidency, and his ambiguous, emotionally appealing rhetoric predicted and contributed to the way that policy failed to procure productive results for the interests of reformers and of

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66. Ibid.

immigrants alike. Spotts writes, “The Reagan Administration did not succeed in achieving the single most important immigration policy goal: the reduction of the flow of illegal immigration... As a result, [Reagan’s] successors inherited this legacy of failure on immigration policy, which required the issues to be revisited again and again.”<sup>67</sup> The “legacy of failure” extended to President Bill Clinton, explored in the succeeding chapter, and particularly extended through the continuation of rhetoric that was ineffective in producing meaningful policy reform. Ineffective and ambiguous rhetoric continued specifically through the handling of Haitian refugee policy, the stressing of bipartisanship in immigration reform, and the contradictory, romanticized use of the “nation of immigrants” discourse. Lack of coherent action and rhetoric on immigration reform and politics meant a continuation of ambiguity of language and fragmented experiences of immigrants as a result of ineffective legislation.

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67. Spotts, “U.S. Immigration Policy on the Southwest Border,” 611.

## CHAPTER TWO: Clinton's 'Nation of Laws'

We are still a nation of immigrants; we should be proud of it. We should honor every legal immigrant here, working hard to be a good citizen, working hard to become a new citizen. But we are also a nation of laws.

– Bill Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 23, 1996<sup>1</sup>

If a response to increased levels of undocumented immigration urged the proactive and prominent immigration rhetoric and policy of the 1980s, a rise in public anti-immigrant sentiment urged immigration rhetoric and policy of the 1990s. Through his public statements on the topic of immigration, President Bill Clinton responded attentively to that characterization. Though not necessarily known for his speeches in the same elaborate and histrionic way that Reagan was, Clinton had the capacity to hold a captive audience with his language in a direct way, and that included his statements on immigration. James Fallows argues that Clinton's speeches were successful because he addressed the audience “as if they are smart” and used sophisticated political arguments in his rhetoric that made audiences feel as though they had insight into his decisions. Fallows, who was President Carter's speechwriter, explains, “He is showing that he understands the many layers of logic and evidence and positioning and emotion that go into political discussion – and, more important, he takes for granted that listeners can too.”<sup>2</sup> Fallows argues that Clinton's rhetoric was similar in style to sports talk radio, and that he “reminds us of the value (and rarity) of this tone in politics.” Further, Fallows claims “it's the

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1. William J. Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 23, 1996.” *The American Presidency Project*, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=53091>.

2. James Fallows, “Why Bill Clinton's Speeches Succeed.” *The Atlantic*, 2012. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/09/why-bill-clintons-speeches-succed/262032/>.

difference between clarifying, and over-simplifying.”<sup>3</sup> Clinton “clarified” so that his audiences felt as though they were part of the political conversation. Clinton’s clarifications helped him contribute to repeated discourses surrounding immigration through his use of language, and the continuation of these discourses that gave the general public a framework through which to understand issues of immigration aided in the success of Clinton’s rhetorical strategy. The discourses Clinton employed through his rhetoric included the “nation of immigrants” discourse, which he used as a qualifier to accompany stricter language, economic discourses about “limited resources” in the “land of opportunity,” and discourses surrounding legality, illegality, and criminality of the immigrant population.

The beginning of this chapter initiates a discussion of Clinton’s immigration agenda during his first candidacy and upon entering office, to show the shift in his attention to immigration as a political issue and the way he used language to broadcast his altered attention. His adoption of a stricter immigration stance became clear as he handled the Haitian refugee crisis and the rise of anti-immigration sentiments in the United States between 1994 and 1996. The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) created larger flows of commodities across the border, and this flow included immigrants. Clinton’s rhetoric about the U.S.-Mexico border emphasized his strict stance on the importance of adherence to immigration legislation and tough border enforcement. While his stance reflected a border that was doing more than it actually was to deter undocumented immigration and the image of the border contributed to the passage of restrictive immigration reform (The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act), Clinton’s ability to combine his rhetoric with allusions to the “nation of immigrants” discourse prevailed in keeping and attracting loyal immigrant voting

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3. Ibid.

constituencies in the 1996 presidential election. I argue that Clinton's immigration rhetoric was frequently ambivalent, ambiguous, and contradictory, but that he appealed to multiple constituencies through allusions to common frameworks, like "the nation of immigrants" and discourses of "legality," and was consequently able to avoid serious alienation of one group or another through his rhetoric. The ambiguity and contradiction in Clinton's rhetoric came from its content, not necessarily its delivery, and was consequently unproductive in terms of passing meaningful legislation with positive effects for immigrants.

At the beginning of his presidency, Clinton had limited interest in immigration as a high-priority agenda item. Despite a General Accounting Office (GAO) report suggesting that the number of immigrants in the United States increased at an average rate of 275,000 people per year between October 1992 and October 1996, Clinton's attention to immigration was relatively low as he entered office.<sup>4</sup> Increasing recommendations from experts, political pressure, and public sentiment all contributed to Clinton's shifted interest in "tackling" immigration as a high priority. The 1990 Immigration Act initiated the Commission on Immigration Reform, a commission led by Barbara Jordan (D-TX), and through the efforts of various opposing camps within the Jordan Commission, a report was released. Clinton's initial stance on immigration was informed by the report, as well as by political and public pressure to act on immigration. Daniel Tichenor writes, "Anxious not to be outflanked on the immigration issue in California and other states by its partisan and institutional rivals, the Clinton administration praised the nation's immigrant tradition while endorsing the recommendations of the Jordan Commission."<sup>5</sup>

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4. JoAnne D. Spotts, "U.S. Immigration Policy on the Southwest Border from Reagan through Clinton, 1981-2001." In *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 16 (2001-2002): 602.

5. Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), 278

Domestic pressure from states where immigration was becoming a widely recognized “problem” encouraged Clinton to become actively engaged in reform, legislation, and producing an image of stricter enforcement. Further, attention to the “nation of immigrants” discourse provided Clinton with a way to appeal to both liberal and conservative constituencies, as well as immigrant groups, as he embraced a stance on immigration and immigration reform legislation.

Although immigration was not a high priority for Clinton upon entering office, pressure to act on the “issue” soon led him to take a stance. Likewise, it was politically appealing for Clinton to adopt stricter immigration policy as a tactic to ensure approval from a wider political constituency, including cross-party approval. His rhetoric reflects this effort. Tichenor speaks broadly about the strategic politics of stances on immigration as he writes, “As was the case in the 1980s, neither Republican nor Democratic leaders wanted to appear lax in their response to unpopular illegal immigration; the failure of IRCA to address the problem only served to intensify ‘blame-avoidance’ strategies in an era of divided government.”<sup>6</sup> The fact that amnesty provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 did not serve to curb future undocumented or documented immigration to the United States, and the failure of IRCA’s employer sanctions to decrease exploitation and the hiring of undocumented immigrants led to serious criticism of the legislation and public discontent on the topic of immigration. The low morale on the basis of the supposed failure of IRCA meant that it was crucial for political leaders looking for large levels of approval (particularly political leaders with a large stake in having a wide constituency of support for leverage and reelection, like the President of the United States) to adopt stricter political stances on immigration. Clinton was not exempt from this pressure. Peter Andreas, who writes extensively on the U.S.-Mexico border, explains that “...Clinton soon

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6. Ibid., 282.

became an enthusiastic proponent of stricter enforcement in order to stay ahead of Republican initiatives in Congress.”<sup>7</sup> Andreas specifically discusses how Clinton adopted a strict stance on border enforcement, arguing that though it was a low priority at the beginning of his presidency, the tough stance led to a particularly ineffective strategy for the desired result of decreasing undocumented immigration into the United States.

Maintenance of a strict stance on immigration legislation and border enforcement in order to appeal to Republican constituencies meant that Clinton had to qualify his tough rhetoric with appeals to the “nation of immigrants” discourse. Maintenance of this discourse through rhetoric about the importance of diversity was an important strategy to avoid alienating immigrants as well as the public and politicians who did not agree with restrictionist ideals.<sup>8</sup> The “nation of immigrants” discourse is the continuation of the idea that the United States is founded on diversity and everyone in the United States comes from somewhere else. Examples of Clinton’s allusions to the “nation of immigrants” are present throughout his public statements about immigration and must be discussed in conjunction with his initial stance for a better understanding of the way he rhetorically shifted his language over the course of his presidency but maintained adherence to this discourse.

In remarks made to the National Association of Hispanic Relations in 1996 (well into his time as president and well into the enactment of stricter enforcement), Clinton discussed the strengths of the Hispanic community in the United States, and his desire to enforce legislation

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7. Peter Andreas, “Borderless Economy, Barricaded Border,” *Report on the U.S. Mexico Border, NACLA Report on the Americas* 33, no. 3 (1999): 15.

8. Tichenor describes restrictionists as those who believe in restricting admissions of new immigrants to the United States as well as restricting rights of immigrants who already live in the United States.



that prohibits exploitation in the workplace. He said, “And those of you who believe in immigration, who believe we are a nation of immigrants, I ask you to help me do that, so that we can preserve the support of the United States for a good, strong, legal immigration system that continues to bring us together across our diverse cultures.”<sup>9</sup> Speaking specifically to a Hispanic constituency and appealing to their interests informed Clinton’s rhetoric, especially through the acknowledgment that the U.S. was *currently* a “nation of immigrants,” rather than placing the “nation of immigrants” in the historic past as a description that was no longer relevant but that once shaped the country. In an address to a similarly vested interest group, Clinton spoke in San Diego, though he made his remarks at the police department headquarters, which likely gave his statements a bent toward discourses of legality and illegality. He stated:

Even as we crack down on illegal immigration and do more than has ever been done before on that, we must never forget that we are all a nation of immigrants and, except for Native Americans, we all came from somewhere else. I say this to make this point: Our incredible diversity is a source of our rich potential as we move into this global society. Anybody who is willing to work hard, obey the law, respect their neighbors, and follow the values inherent in the Constitution ought to have a chance in America, and that ought to be the rule here.<sup>10</sup>

Clinton paired allusion to the “nation of immigrants” and the diversity within the United States with rhetoric about adherence to the law and a certain social obligation that makes diversity and immigration a source of strength so long as immigration has been completed “legally.” It is

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9. William J. Clinton, “Remarks to the National Association of Hispanic Publications.” *Administration of William J. Clinton: Presidential Documents Book 01*, (U.S. Government Printing Office, January 26, 1996), 108. FDsys, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1996-book1/pdf/PPP-1996-book1-doc-pg105.pdf>.

10. William J. Clinton, “Remarks to the Community in San Diego.” *Administration of William J. Clinton: Presidential Documents Book 01*. (U.S. Government Printing Office, June 10, 1996), 887-88. FDsys, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1996-book1/pdf/PPP-1996-book1-doc-pg886.pdf>.

interesting that Clinton acknowledged the shortcomings of the “nation of immigrants” discourse in reference to Native Americans. His acknowledgment of the indigenous population gave his allusion to the “nation of immigrants” greater weight, because it took into account a more current line of academic understanding.

Clinton continued to pair the “nation of immigrants” discourse with “legal” and “illegal” discourse in his remarks in San Diego as he responded to a string of church burnings that were taking place at this time: “We need to come together as one America to rebuild our churches, restore hope, and show the forces of hatred they cannot win, just as we need to come together as one America to say **we are a nation of immigrants and we’re a nation of laws**. If you want to be in our country, you should be here lawfully. We will protect our people. We will enforce laws.”<sup>11</sup> Clinton emphasized his “nation of immigrants and nation of laws” trope in his State of the Union address in January 1996 as he stated, “And tonight I announce I will sign an Executive order to deny Federal contracts to businesses that hire illegal immigrants. Let me be very clear about this: We are still a nation of immigrants; we should be proud of it. We should honor every legal immigrant here, working hard to be a good citizen, working hard to become a new citizen. But we are also a nation of laws.”<sup>12</sup> Clinton’s rhetorical pairing of these two discourses appealed to multiple constituencies but ultimately the combination of qualifying statements whenever he spoke about immigration might not have had the effect he intended. Contradiction exists between “legal” discourses and the “nation of immigrants” discourse, because immigration legislation during Clinton’s presidency was often highly restrictive toward immigrants and pairing these ideas proved ironic and removed from actual experience.

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11. Ibid., 888.

12. Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 23, 1996.”

As growing attention was paid to immigration as a political issue coming off of the alleged failure to implement successful immigration policy in the 1980s, Clinton adjusted his attention to immigration as a political tool in order to appeal to legislators and a growing interest from the public. Clinton veered from an unengaged standpoint, and adopted a strict stance on immigration in order to appeal to Republicans and anti-immigration sentiment from the public. He invoked contradicting discourses through his rhetoric, alluding to the United States as a “nation of immigrants” in conjunction with allusions to the country as a “nation of laws.” His contribution to both of these discourses simultaneously helped him appeal to multiple constituencies by noting the positive diversity that comes from immigration, and it allowed him to, at the same time, take a strict, firm position on the necessity of tough enforcement. Clinton’s first test in terms of handling large-scale migration to the United States was the Haitian “refugee crisis,” which was an ongoing phenomenon throughout his campaign and early years of his presidency.

Following the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, many refugees from Haiti and Cuba fled to the United States to seek asylum from oppressive political regimes. The 1980 Refugee Act adopted the United Nations’ protocol in terms of refugee admittance, and broadened the definition of a refugee in the United States to include those fleeing violence, rooted fear of future violence, and political oppression on the basis of political ideology, religion, and group membership. Tough stances made by administrations on refugee admittance have prospectively been the result of attempts to counter the way that President Carter was seen as maintaining too liberal a policy on refugee admittance, as he gave temporary legal status to Haitian and Cuban

refugees, with the option for Cubans to become lawfully permanent residents.<sup>13</sup> This exodus was called the Mariel Boatlift, because Cubans and Haitians came to the U.S. by boat. Haitians were initially fleeing the Duvalier regime, but this regime was seen as an ally to the United States during the Cold War. It was difficult for Haitians to gain political asylum because historically the U.S. does not grant political asylum to people seeking asylum from governments that are friendly to the United States, regardless of whether that government is an evidenced repressive regime. The U.S. also has a history of “making political asylum much easier to obtain for petitioners from governments at odds with the United States.”<sup>14</sup> Prior to Clinton’s presidency, President Bush attempted to help restore democracy to the government in Haiti in an effort to deter migration to the U.S. Aristide was elected in Haiti, but a coup several months later by military leaders reversed this effort and political violence continued. Two key policies were implemented at this point. First, people attempting to flee Haiti could apply for asylum to seek refuge in the U.S. in an office in Port-au-Prince before leaving Haiti. Out-of-country asylum applications were seen as a method to curb the number of refugees who would actually make the journey to the United States. Out-of-country applications were dangerous and ineffective, because the application office was in a public venue and intimidation and violence made it difficult for people to complete applications or even make appointments at this office. In May of 1992, Bush ordered a direct-return policy, where refugees picked up at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard were sent back to Haiti without a chance to apply for asylum and without any temporary protections.

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13. Denise M. Bostdorff, “Rhetorical Ambivalence: Bush and Clinton Address the Crisis of Haitian Refugees.” In *Who Belongs in America? Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration*, (edited by Vanessa B. Beasley, 206-246. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 208.

14. Bostdorff, “Rhetorical Ambivalence,” 208.

Here, Bush employed the rhetoric of the “political” refugee versus the “economic” refugee, and this distinction of rhetoric continued into Clinton’s repertoire.

During his candidacy for president, Clinton spoke out against Bush senior’s policy to send refugees back to Haiti without first granting them temporary asylum, unless there was compelling evidence to suggest that they were not political refugees. When the case went to the Supreme Court in 1993, however, the Clinton White House argued in favor of continuing the “forced repatriation” of Haitian refugees.<sup>15</sup> While officially favoring the policy, Clinton attempted to differentiate his stance on the Haitian “refugee crisis” from Bush’s unpopular and strict stance. He argued that the policies of forced repatriation and out of country asylum application in Port-au-Prince were only temporary. Bostdorff writes on the presidential rhetoric surrounding the Haitian refugee crisis, and in her work on Haitian refugees and rhetoric, she explains that “while the president’s actions offended many individuals, including members of his own party, the fact was that Clinton had more to gain than to lose by adopting policies that stopped Haitian immigration – a point he seemed to recognize.”<sup>16</sup> By adopting policies that would curb the number of Haitian refugees seeking asylum in the United States, Clinton appealed to the interests of a number of constituencies. Bostdorff writes:

Clinton’s repeated reference in his public rhetoric to a possible exodus of Haitian refugees was, no doubt, a persuasive line of argument in the anti-immigrant climate of the United States at the time... At the same time, Clinton’s rhetoric on Haiti had begun to refer more often to the brutality of the military regime, which led to expectations that he might change his policy on Haitian refugees... Much like President Bush before him,

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15. *Ibid.*, 218

16. *Ibid.*, 222.

Clinton attempted to deflect criticism of the direct return policy by focusing attention on U.S. humanitarian efforts.<sup>17</sup>

Growing anti-immigrant public sentiment in the United States allowed Clinton to adopt rhetoric that supported the continuation of policies that prohibited the admittance of refugees to the country. He simultaneously appealed to the constituency of people living in the United States who were opposed to high levels of immigration to the country. His consideration to the ruling regime in Haiti and how the U.S. was working on bringing democracy back to the country not only deflected attention from the fact that the U.S. was also actively sending Haitians back to an oppressive regime, but also emphasized the trope that the United States is the ultimate benefactor of democracy in countries that need humane rescuing from corrupt governments.

The situation had escalated and there was open public opposition to the way that Clinton was handling the Haitian refugee crisis by early 1994. Aristide, leading Haiti from exile, compared the Clinton administration's actions to turning away Jews fleeing the Nazis. Bostdorff writes, "for his part, President Clinton seemed stunned by all the criticism and, in a passing conversation with newspaper columnists, almost seemed to agree with his critics."<sup>18</sup> His rhetoric in response to his critics drew attention to the military junta's violence against "ordinary Haitians," which he used as validation in discussions of potential U.S. military force being used to restore Aristide's leadership. Eventually, in response to intelligence reports and surely to domestic pressures, Clinton made slight adjustments to the forced repatriation policy: Haitians who were intercepted at sea were questioned and those who were clearly and distinctly political refugees would be taken to the U.S. or to other countries, while those whose refugee status was indiscernible were still sent back to Haiti. This adjustment to Bush's policy lessened criticism,

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17. Ibid., 226.

18. Ibid., 228.

but Clinton was still appealing to anti-immigration public sentiment in his discussion of policies that would stop refugees from coming to the U.S. and incurring costs on the country. The influence of domestic pressure on Clinton's policy decisions and accompanying rhetoric was strong. First, he continued strict policies for refugee admittance in response to public sentiment in regards to President Carter's liberal approach to refugee admittance. He appeased anti-immigrant sentiments to continue Bush senior's forced repatriation, shifted to a less restrictionist version of this direct-return policy in response to pressure from within and from outside his own party, and invoked fears about new immigrants to the United States, on the basis of public anti-immigration sentiment, in order to validate U.S. intervention policy that would alleviate political repression in Haiti and consequently curb the flow of refugees to the United States.

Another key aspect of Clinton's rhetorical strategy throughout the development of events in Haiti was the revival of Bush's economic versus political refugee rhetoric in order to defend himself against renewals of opposition that said his shifts in policy did not do enough. In retort to this opposition, Clinton claimed that ordinary Haitians were economic refugees, therefore not requiring the urgency associated with seeking political asylum.<sup>19</sup> Clinton's defense is in direct contrast with his statements about the severe violence (including murder, rape, kidnapping, and maiming) that was happening to "ordinary Haitians" at the hands of the military junta and would quite obviously qualify them for political asylum in the United States under the terms of the 1980 Refugee Act. Bostdorff describes Clinton's consistently ambivalent rhetoric as "...rhetorical gymnastics that denied the viability of most Haitians' arguments for political asylum."<sup>20</sup> There is serious irony, inconsistency, and hypocrisy in Clinton's argument about instilling democracy in

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19. Ibid., 232.

20. Ibid., 236.

Haiti and sending U.S. military force to fight the military junta as a means of preventing Haitians from fleeing Haiti and flooding the United States, because he argued for the distinction of Haitian refugees as “economic” rather than “political” for such a long period of time in order to lessen their qualifications for entry into the United States.

The Haitian refugee crisis came to an end when a multinational force led by the United States began to invade Haiti on September 19, 1994, on the basis of the argument for instilling democracy. Last minute diplomacy stopped this invasion from following through, and the Haitian military agreed to step down, allowed the deployed forces to land peacefully, and restored Aristide to presidency.<sup>21</sup> Clinton’s rhetoric throughout the crisis was strongly influenced by domestic pressures and public sentiment. He showed inconsistency in the dichotomous language of “economic refugee” versus “political refugee” and in his insistence that ordinary Haitians were being persecuted by the military regime and consequently the U.S. was responsible to either a) intervene with force or b) to encourage a policy that would make political repression less feasible in Haiti. Further, the use of the image as the United States as a “rescuer” to a non-democratically governed people was harmful because direct-return policy was not reflective of an actual humanitarian-inspired refugee admittance guideline. Because of Clinton’s consideration of public sentiment in his decisions throughout the Haitian refugee crisis, it is necessary to delve into factors that contributed to anti-immigration sentiments in the United States during his presidency.

Anti-immigration sentiments grew between 1994 and 1996 specifically, and played a critical role in Clinton’s immigration rhetoric. Several events contributed to the rise of anti-immigration sentiments during this period. IRCA and its supposed failures to deter

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21. Ibid., 235.



undocumented immigration to the United States arguably set the stage for a backlash against immigration in the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> The 1994 bombing of the World Trade Center negatively impacted public opinion on immigration admittances by instilling a fear of immigrants and “foreigners” as threats to national security. Tichenor writes, “Popular support for restricting immigration also seemed to intensify across the country by 1994.”<sup>23</sup> Congressional shifts contributed to the rise in anti-immigration sentiment and created a setting for restrictionist reform to flourish. The House and Senate became majority Republican in 1994 and there were a growing number of committee chairs who favored restricting immigrant admissions and restricting immigrant rights. The Commission on Immigration Reform proposed increased border security, cutting overall legal immigration, implementation of a national employment verification system, and a shift in legal immigration legislation away from family-based to employment and skills based preferences. Aggressive lobbying by business and minority special interest groups brought this Congress to middle ground and restrictionist provisions were removed by the time IIRIRA was passed in 1996.<sup>24</sup>

A poignant reflection of anti-immigration sentiment at this time was a ballot measure proposed in California in 1994 called Proposition 187. It would prohibit undocumented immigrants from receiving healthcare, public education, and other social services. The measure was written by a group in Orange County who wrote to Congressional representatives and grassroots organizations with anti-immigration leanings for support, and eventually the

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22. Peter Andreas, *Border Games*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2009), 86.

23. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 277.

24. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 278; Spotts, “U.S. Immigration Policy on the Southwest Border,” 614-615.

proposition was pushed to the ballot in 1994. Republican Governor Wilson supported Prop 187 and it passed by 59%.<sup>25</sup> Proposition 187 was later appealed and found unconstitutional by a federal court. Clinton discusses legal immigration and exploitation in the workplace in terms of Prop 187 in his remarks to the National Association of Hispanic Publications in 1996:

Let me just say one other thing about security. I think if we're going to have security we have to have very firm, firm laws that protect the workplace in America. Federico said I opposed Proposition 187; I did. I thought it was a bad policy. I didn't want to see children thrown out of schools, sick people thrown out of hospitals. But I do not believe that people who are not here legally should be in the workplace, and a lot of them are being exploited today, exploited in unconscionable ways because we do not enforce laws that are on the books for legal immigration.<sup>26</sup>

Speaking directly to a Hispanic constituency, Clinton framed security as a protective measure for immigrants that would deter exploitative practices in the workplace. He simultaneously made it clear that he maintained a firm stance on undocumented immigration. He was able to denounce any indication that he might have approved of Prop 187, while his rhetoric contributed to a legally driven discourse. Clinton's attention to immigration in the workplace, such as comments about exploitative actions towards immigrants by employers, should be considered in conjunction with the passage of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, as it opened the economy to transnational operations despite the rise in anti-immigration sentiment so apparent in other arenas.

NAFTA was passed on January 1, 1994, and created an economic free trade zone between Canada, the United States, and Mexico. It encourages movement of information, capital, and people across the border, which led to the growth of social networks and fueled immigration

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25. Spotts, "U.S. Immigration Policy on the Southwest Border," 613.

26. Clinton, "Remarks to the National Association of Hispanic Publications," 108.

in the short and medium term, though Andreas argues that there was not certain evidence that NAFTA would contribute positively to the separate but ultimately related goal of deterring immigration in the long term.<sup>27</sup> Andreas explains the considerations of border security within negotiations on NAFTA further as he writes, “Concern that smugglers might benefit from NAFTA was deliberately not discussed during the negotiations over the free-trade accord in the early 1990s.”<sup>28</sup> Andreas argues that the open economic border that NAFTA initiated led to increases in smuggling of both narcotics and people across the U.S.-Mexico border. Imports from Mexico to the United States have doubled since NAFTA was passed in 1994, and Andreas writes that “...the post-NAFTA boom in commercial flows simultaneously drew more political attention to the border and made the task of weeding out the drug flow increasingly difficult.”<sup>29</sup> An example of Clinton’s rhetoric on NAFTA in his remarks to the National Association of Hispanic Publications in 1996 shows his motive to appeal to a Hispanic constituency while lacking acknowledgment of the detriments of the legislation:

I thank the Hispanic community for the support we received for NAFTA, for the support we received for the summit of the Americas, for the support I received in probably the most controversial – perhaps one of the two or three most controversial decisions of my administration, to try and reach out and give some support to the reformers in Mexico to keep the economy from collapse so that we could continue to be good partners and good friends.<sup>30</sup>

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27. Andreas, “Borderless Economy, Barricaded Border,” 21.

28. Andreas, *Border Games*, 74.

29. *Ibid.*, 13.

30. Clinton, “Remarks to the National Association of Hispanic Publications,” 108.

Despite reparations of relations over the economy that Clinton acknowledges, the flow of traffic that NAFTA caused also helped induce greater levels of smuggling of narcotics and immigrants across the U.S.-Mexico border and altered the Mexican economy such that employment opportunities in the country shifted and more people were encouraged to migrate. The lack of acknowledgment of NAFTA's shortcomings as they specifically harm the Hispanic community is pointed as he speaks to this audience. Andreas argues that the opening of the transnational economy led to tension at the site of the border, as security along the border simultaneously tightened in terms of immigration. The tightening of the border became one of the largest aspects of Clinton's immigration control agenda.

Clinton's attention to the tightening of the border as a particular site that was responsible for undocumented immigration allowed him to shift his stance to one of strict engagement with immigration as a political issue as the image of the border as a tool for immigration control grew. Clinton's engagement with immigration as a political issue came largely from his attention to the U.S.-Mexico border, but his attention was not always evident. Spotts explains, "In early 1993, [Clinton] even recommended reducing the number of Border Patrol agents in order to save money."<sup>31</sup> Domestic pressure encouraged Clinton to develop a stance on immigration and more specifically on the border. Andreas explains that the "build-up of policing along the border quickly emerged as the centerpiece of the Administration's immigration control policy."<sup>32</sup>

Specific strategies that the INS imposed to increase enforcement of the Border Patrol were inspired by strategies first tested in El Paso, Texas in September of 1993. Operation "Hold the Line" in El Paso was developed by Silvestre Reyes, and inspired Operation Gatekeeper in

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31. Spotts, "U.S. Immigration Policy on the Southwest Border," 613.

32. Andreas, "Borderless Economy, Barricaded Border," 15.

San Diego, CA, Operation Safeguard in Nogales, AZ, and Operation Rio Grande, implemented along its namesake.<sup>33</sup> In his opening statement in El Paso in 1996, Clinton thanked Reyes for his career in the INS. He said, “Thank you for proving that America can protect its borders and still be an honorable nation of immigrants.”<sup>34</sup> In his expression of gratitude, Clinton combined rhetoric about border protection with a contribution to the “nation of immigrants” discourse. The combination appealed to his audience while it expressed his approval of heightened border security measures. The military was also involved in increases in border enforcement. Military officers cannot make arrests of undocumented immigrants, but they helped with night scopes, provided motion sensors, communications equipment, and aided in building and maintaining roads and fences. Military equipment was adapted for use by Border Patrol agents.<sup>35</sup> Significant funding was redirected to border control, and Clinton boasted in 1997 that over the course of the border enforcement plan, “INS funding has grown 105 percent.”<sup>36</sup> Methods inspired by the military may have deterred migrants from crossing the border at high-security locations, but this meant that they adjusted to find increasingly dangerous methods of entry. Dangerous alternate routes through the desert led immigrants to experience exposure, dehydration, automobile

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33. Ibid.

34. William J. Clinton, “Remarks in El Paso,” *Administration of William J. Clinton: Presidential Documents Book 02*. 2014. (U.S. Government Printing Office, November 1, 1996), 2014, FDsys, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1996-book2/pdf/PPP-1996-book2-doc-pg2013.pdf>.

35. Andreas, “Borderless Economy, Barricaded Border,” 16.

36. William J. Clinton, “Statement on 1997 Appropriations for the INS.” *Administration of William J. Clinton: Presidential Documents Book 01*. (U.S. Government Printing Office, January 14, 1997), 36.

accidents, and drowning. An increase in fraudulent documents as a means of entry was another result of heightened enforcement in specific locations along the border.

The image of increased enforcement seemed to matter more to policy-makers than the resulting experiences and strategies of immigrants attempting to enter the United States. Andreas argues that “the unprecedented expansion of border policing... has ultimately been less about achieving the stated instrumental goal of deterring illegal border crossers and more about politically recrafting the image of the border and symbolically reaffirming the state’s territorial authority.”<sup>37</sup> Evidence shows that the implemented strategies did not contribute to any overall decrease in undocumented immigration into the United States, despite the perceived usefulness of the border as maintaining the image of a site of strict enforcement and control. Operation Gatekeeper led to a 40% increase in fraudulent document use, and “...neglect of visa overstays is itself a revealing indicator of how the symbolic importance of border control trumps the stated policy goal of reducing the size of the illegal immigrant population.”<sup>38</sup> Further, apprehensions *and entries* both increased by the end of Clinton’s presidency, which meant that even as Border Patrol agents made more arrests, the apprehension statistic that contributed to the image of a tightly controlled border did not acknowledge the ways in which it failed to achieve its stated goals.<sup>39</sup> Andreas explains that successful border enforcement initiatives procured for law enforcement agencies, elected leaders, and smugglers meant “a failing deterrence strategy, however, [could] still be a political success.”<sup>40</sup> The border appears orderly and under control,

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37. Andreas, *Border Games*, 85.

38. Andreas, “Borderless Economy, Barricaded Border,” 20.

39. Spotts, “U.S. Immigration Policy on the Southwest Border,” 617.

40. Andreas, “Borderless Economy, Barricaded Border,” 18.

while unauthorized crossings are more discrete and out of public view. Being out of public view also means that unauthorized crossings are more dangerous for immigrants. Andreas also argues that border controls “relegitimize the boundaries of the ‘imagined community,’” which is an effective tool for controlling precisely who is allowed admission to the United States and who *should* be allowed admission. Rhetoric surrounding tight border control measures distinguishes who can be a member of the ‘imagined community’ of the United States.

Clinton’s rhetoric surrounding enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border reflected his adoption of a strict stance on immigration. In a statement on senate action on immigration he stated:

Over the last 3 years, I have directed my administration to use every tool at its disposal to crack down on illegal immigration and to reintroduce the rule of law at the border and in the workplace. We have made illegal crossings at the Southwest border tougher than ever before by increasing manpower by 50 percent and employing state-of-the-art technology. We are deporting record numbers of criminal and other illegal aliens from the United States, and we have put teeth into our immigration laws in the workplace.<sup>41</sup>

Clinton references numbers of deportations as well as enforcement technology in order to maintain the image of the border as successful at deterring undocumented immigrants from crossing into the United States. His mention of enforcing the “rule of law” at the border as well as in the workplace indicates that these are both spaces that need policing, though most images associated with immigration control are primarily found at the border. The border certainly produces a more dramatic image for the public. In remarks from police headquarters in San Diego (distinct because of its status as a city near the U.S.-Mexico border), Clinton discussed

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41. William J. Clinton, “Statement on Senate Action on Immigration Legislation.” *Administration of William J. Clinton: Presidential Documents Book 01*. (U.S. Government Printing Office, May 2, 1996), 684. FDsys, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1996-book1/pdf/PPP-1996-book1-doc-pg684-2.pdf>.

special efforts made in border communities to lower the crime rate, and contended that his administration followed through on its promises to implement controls on immigration. He stated: “But think how far we have come in the last 3 ½ years. Three and a half years ago, many people believed that these problems were totally intractable, that drugs would always flow freely, that illegal immigration would always be rampant, that criminal immigrants deported for crimes they committed here in America would return the very next day to commit crimes again.”<sup>42</sup>

Statements about criminality in Clinton’s rhetoric justified the use of extreme and military-inspired enforcement technology, increased spending in border communities, and increased deportations. In the same remarks, he stated:

The crime bill gave us the weapons we need to do things that had not been done before to deal with the problems of criminal activities by illegal immigrants. As of January of last year, we have arrested more than 1,700 criminal aliens and prosecuted them on Federal felony charges because they returned to America after having been deported in the first place. We are changing the policy of this country on that problem. We are also making strides in getting control of our border. We’ve added Border Patrol agents, in San Diego alone increasing by 762 the number of agents who are working for you by the end of this year. In El Paso, our border guards stand so close together, they can actually all see each other. [*Laughter*].<sup>43</sup>

Clinton used the same techniques throughout these remarks to criminalize immigrants while he discussed additions to Border Patrol that would lead to successful apprehensions. He made light of the militarization of the border with his statement at the end of this passage that border guards in El Paso are so numerous that they can all see each other as they stand along the border, and this not only had the potential to alienate immigrants (documented and undocumented) but also

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42. Clinton, “Remarks to the Community in San Diego,” 886.

43. *Ibid.*, 887.



implied that the border was so tight that it could not possibly fail to eliminate undocumented immigration (which was not the case). In regard to the Clinton administration's public association with the border, Andreas writes:

Almost every indicator that Administration officials point to as a sign of success can also be read as a sign of failure, and almost every indicator that points to failure is either downplayed or interpreted by Administration officials as a sign of success. The ambiguity of the measures, combined with the heated political climate over immigration control, means that appearances matter enormously.<sup>44</sup>

The importance of appearance and signs of success are clear in Clinton's rhetoric about the border and increases in enforcement. Clinton responded to domestic pressures through tightening border security and his rhetoric stresses the image of a border that is successful in deterring undocumented immigration. His "tough" stance on the border meant a "tough" stance on immigration as well, which was an appealing place for Clinton to be in terms of reelection and cross-party alliances. The strategies implemented along the border were useful for the image of the border as a site for immigration control, but were not necessarily producing the desired result of their enactment.

The border played a crucial role in Clinton's 1996 reelection, however misleading his rhetoric may have been. Andreas writes, "In the 1996 presidential race, beefed-up border controls provided Clinton with a powerful political shield against Republican attack, especially in the politically vital state of California."<sup>45</sup> Clinton took California in the election, and more significantly, he took Orange County, which is typically a Republican county.<sup>46</sup> Andreas

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44. Andreas, "Borderless Economy, Barricaded Border," 17.

45. Andreas, *Border Games*, 110.

46. Andreas, "Borderless Economy, Barricaded Border," 19.

discusses the border as a campaign tool more broadly as he writes, “For elected leaders, the campaign [for stricter border enforcement] has won votes and provided a politically costless method of signaling that they are ‘tough’ on illegal immigration.”<sup>47</sup> Clinton’s rhetoric proved a convincing campaign strategy. Immigrants were used in the 1996 election campaigns in ads, images, and rhetoric. The DNC and Clinton paired to produce images of detained and apprehended immigrants, signaling Clinton’s efficiency to control immigration at the border. To counter this, the RNC released an ad about increased spending on “illegals” with lower wages going to “typical” and documented workers.<sup>48</sup> There is irony in using undocumented immigrants and images of people waiting to be deported in a campaign for the presidency of a country from which those people are being excluded, but that is somewhat tangential. Clinton’s rhetoric during his 1996 campaign for reelection highlighted strict border enforcement and this proved his “tough” stance on immigration control to voters from both major political parties. The maintenance of a crafted image of the border was helpful for Clinton during the 1996 election and it was reflected in immigration legislation and reform passed during Clinton’s presidency.

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) passed easily in both houses in 1996, and the final version enhanced national border guarding, tightened asylum procedures, limited public benefits and access to resources for immigrants, required U.S. financial sponsors for immigrants, and included provisions for “criminal” and undocumented immigrants.<sup>49</sup> Specifically, it authorized hiring 1,000 new Border Patrol agents per year with the goal to have a total force population of 10,000 agents by the year 2001; it increased penalties and

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47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 284.

doubled sentences, implementing “mandatory minimum sentencing for those convicted of smuggling aliens for commercial gain;” increased and reinforced fourteen miles of fencing; and was written on the premise of a “prevention through deterrence” strategy.<sup>50</sup> Restrictionists believed that it appealed too much to special interests, even though it was certainly not an expansive bill in terms of admissions or immigrant rights.<sup>51</sup> The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 was also signed into legislation, and barred noncitizens from various welfare benefits.<sup>52</sup> Fragomen explains that Congress concluded that cutting public benefits for immigrants would deter undocumented immigration.<sup>53</sup> The introduction of policy that made it more difficult for immigrants to make a living in the United States aligned with the “prevention through deterrence” strategy implemented in IIRIRA. Tichenor writes, “President Clinton told the press that he was offended by the legislation’s harshness toward legal immigrants, but that he chose to sign the reform package because of his devotion to fundamentally restructure the larger welfare system.”<sup>54</sup> Despite Clinton’s hope that after he signed this legislation it would lead to a more widespread and lasting welfare system reform, Fragomen is not as optimistic about the changes that this legislation implemented nor is he

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50. Andreas, *Border Games*, 90-91; Spotts, “U.S. Immigration Policy on the Southwest Border,” 615.

51. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 284.

52. Ibid.

53. Austin T. Fragomen, Jr., “Welfare Bill Severely Curtails Public Assistance to Noncitizens,” in *International Migration Review* 30, no. 4 (The Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc.: 1996):1087.

54. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 284.

enthusiastic about the fact that Clinton signed the omnibus spending bill for the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 that incorporated IIRIRA. He writes:

Together, these bills completely overhaul a welfare system that has been in place since Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal was implemented. They not only end the guarantee of cash assistance to the country's poorest children and give states the power to run their own welfare and 'workfare' programs with lump sums of federal funds, they severely restrict the benefits for which legal, and illegal, immigrants are currently eligible.<sup>55</sup>

Fragomen claims that these bills change the immigration system in a negative way, countering Clinton's argument that they were worth the price paid by immigrants. Restrictions of benefits to immigrants as well as increased penalties for smuggling introduced as a result of the authorization of spending on these bills led to more organized means of smuggling and consequent additional increases in tough legislation, while immigrants were unable to access welfare benefits that could increase their quality of life in the United States. Clinton was fully aware of the compromise he was making in signing this legislation. He stated:

I am pleased that the Senate has endorsed our strategy with legislation that answers my administration's call for tougher penalties for alien smugglers, criminal aliens, and manufacturers and sellers of fraudulent documents. The Senate bill also supports our plan to continue to increase the size of our Border Patrol and provides the Justice Department with new tools to fight illegal immigration. While this bill strongly supports our enforcement efforts, it still goes too far in denying legal immigrants access to vital safety net programs which could jeopardize public health and safety. Some work still needs to be done. I urge the Congress to move quickly to finalize and send me this key legislation.<sup>56</sup>

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55. Fragomen, "Welfare Bill," 1087.

56. Clinton, "Statement on Senate Action on Immigration Legislation," 684.

Perhaps because Clinton's statement was made on Senate action on immigration legislation (and not a direct appeal to public sentiment) he was more frank in his concerns about denying welfare benefits to immigrants, though his continued reference to increasing border enforcement, and the positive effects of doing so, maintained that "tough" stance. Despite the adoption of stricter legislation through the passage of spending on these bills, a silver lining became clear mid-way through Clinton's presidency until its close through the increase of political participation of different generations of immigrants (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations, for example), specifically Hispanic Americans, in the United States.

Large numbers of naturalizations happened throughout the 1990s as a result of applications for IRCA and applications of beneficiaries of immigrants who were given legal status under IRCA, the growth of social networks of immigrants in the United States, and initiatives to increase naturalizations and maintain a positive image of the INS. Citizenship USA was an initiative announced in August of 1995 intended to reduce the major backlog of naturalization applications handled by the INS. An increase in the number of completed naturalization cases was crucial for this initiative to be effective.<sup>57</sup> Tichenor writes optimistically about this increase and consequent rise in political participation of naturalized immigrants. He writes:

The 1996 election left little doubt about two crucial facts: immigrants comprised the nation's fastest growing voting bloc and Democrats were the immediate beneficiaries of their unexpected electoral clout... At the same time that unprecedented numbers of aliens petitioned for naturalization in the wake of mid-1990s restrictions on public benefits for

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57. "The Implementation of CUSA: an Overview." *U.S. Department of Justice*, <http://www.justice.gov/oig/special/0007/implementation.htm>.

noncitizens, President Clinton instructed the INS to implement the so-called Citizenship USA initiative of 1995.<sup>58</sup>

The initiative streamlined naturalizations and the increase in numbers of naturalized immigrants was ideal for Clinton and other Democratic Party members seeking reelection. More Latino voters, specifically, showed up to polls and voted specifically for Democrats, because they were angered by restrictionist propositions that were written and supported largely by right-wing individuals. Tichenor notes that Asian Americans also increased their political support for Democrats.<sup>59</sup> Tichenor continues, "...Proposition 187, IIRIRA, and welfare reform motivated record numbers of new immigrants and kindred ethnics to make the most of their naturalization opportunities and voting rights."<sup>60</sup> Democrats specifically benefited from motivated voters. In the 1996 presidential election and the 1997 LA city elections, Latino voter turnout percentages exceeded non-Latino voter turnout. Clinton won 71 percent of the Latino vote in 1996, and immigrants are also credited with the reclamation of the California House in 1996. The Speaker and the floor leader in the California House were both Latino.<sup>61</sup> Clinton and other democratic leaders benefited from rhetoric that appealed to this growing constituency of voters, and voters were deterred from electing restrictionist-identified candidates. While Clinton's rhetoric was not always clear, nor lacking ambiguity and contradiction, nor free from strict and aggressive language, it did not blatantly alienate immigrants as a constituency of voters and this was important for his reelection and presidency.

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58. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 285.

59. *Ibid.*, 286.

60. *Ibid.*, 287-88.

61. *Ibid.*, 286.

Clinton's immigration rhetoric reflected strategic appeal to public sentiment, to constituencies with political power, and to his political allies. The way Clinton appealed to constituencies provided him with support for reelection in 1996. Characterized by a shift to a strict stance on immigration, language that gave the border an image of complete control, and the combination of language alluding to the "nation of immigrants" and simultaneous "nation of laws," Clinton's rhetoric often contradicted the real effects of border enforcement and restrictive legislation. Its ambiguity may have proved productive for Clinton politically and measured by public sentiment, but its contradictions and lack of acknowledgment of real effects meant that his rhetoric failed to result in productive legislation and immigration reform.

## CONCLUSION

My fellow Americans, we are and always will be a nation of immigrants. We were strangers once, too. And whether our forebears were strangers who crossed the Atlantic, or the Pacific, or the Rio Grande, we are here only because this country welcomed them in, and taught them that to be an American is about something more than what we look like, or what our last names are, or how we worship. What makes us Americans is our shared commitment to an ideal – that all of us are created equal, and all of us have the chance to make of our lives what we will.  
– Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Immigration,” Nov. 20, 2014<sup>1</sup>

The development of presidential immigration rhetoric on the basis of President Reagan’s precedent shows the ease with which immigration can be spoken about in contradictory and unproductive ways. Language that emphasizes the “nation of immigrants,” in which diversity is accepted and promoted as the foundation of the U.S. as a “melting pot,” has been used to justify and counteract statements suggestive of restrictionist attitudes for the past three and a half decades. Contradictory, ambiguous, ambivalent, and abstract language employed by Reagan and Clinton has prohibited immigration reform from passing and functioning in productive and meaningful ways for immigrants in the United States, and the effect of this type of immigration rhetoric has persisted through the language employed by President Obama in his contributions to immigration discourses.

Because there is a clear continuation of rhetoric on the precedent of Reagan’s response to the fourth wave of immigrants to the United States, attention to current rhetoric from Obama and his administration is crucial to exploring how presidential immigration rhetoric has developed. A brief exploration of Obama’s November 20, 2014 speech in regard to executive action on immigration provides insight into the development of presidential rhetoric on the topic of

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1. Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Immigration,” The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, November 20, 2014.



immigration. Following the patterns of Reagan and Clinton, Obama began his speech by alluding to the “nation of immigrants” before he approached his main points. Obama stated, “For more than 200 years, our tradition of welcoming immigrants from around the world has given us a tremendous advantage over other nations. It’s kept us youthful, dynamic, and entrepreneurial. It has shaped our character as a people with limitless possibilities – people not trapped by our past, but able to remake ourselves as we choose.”<sup>2</sup> After he introduced his conversation with positive rhetoric about the democratic traditions of the land of opportunity, Obama diverted to the “comprehensive reform” discourse. He stated, “our immigration system is broken -- and everybody knows it.”<sup>3</sup> Obama defended his executive order by first stressing the need for a “comprehensive reform” to match the national character of the United States, and this discourse on reform drove the remainder of his speech.

Obama discussed how the border has been tightened during his administration and that there are currently more Border Patrol agents than at any other point in history. Further, he discussed the record-low number of border crossings during his administration, and the calming of the large rise in unaccompanied minors entering the U.S. He did not address that during his administration the U.S. has deported more immigrants than at any other point in the nation’s history. Yet, he argued, the broken system remained. After discussion of improvements, he stated, “Meanwhile, I worked with Congress on a comprehensive fix, and last year, 68 Democrats, Republicans, and independents came together to pass a bipartisan bill in the Senate. It wasn’t perfect. It was a compromise. But it reflected common sense.”<sup>4</sup> Bipartisan effort

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2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

seemed important to Obama throughout his speech, though the unique nature of issuing an executive order meant that he did not need to appeal directly to Republican legislators in this speech.

Obama's executive order, he explained, called for the ability for undocumented immigrants to stay in the country temporarily without fear of deportation under the following conditions: the immigrant has been in the United States for more than five years, has children who are citizens or legal permanent residents, goes through the registration process for the temporary documented status, goes through a background check, and pays taxes. Obama responded to possible critics:

I know some of the critics of this action call it amnesty. Well, it's not. Amnesty is the immigration system we have today – millions of people who live here without paying their taxes or playing by the rules while politicians use the issue to scare people and whip up votes at election time. That's the real amnesty – leaving this broken system the way it is. Mass amnesty would be unfair. Mass deportation would be both impossible and contrary to our character. What I'm describing is accountability – a common-sense, middle-ground approach: If you meet the criteria, you can come out of the shadows and get right with the law. If you're a criminal, you'll be deported. If you plan to enter the U.S. illegally, your chances of getting caught and sent back just went up.<sup>5</sup>

Obama avoided a rhetorical grey area with the use of “accountability” to describe his order, rather than “amnesty.” Accountability is a more useful term, as it implies adherence to law and also to the “nation of immigrants.” Obama continued, anecdotally speaking about hardworking immigrants in the U.S.: immigrant fathers working three jobs, family members sacrificing for each other, and other similar examples. He rhetorically posited several questions for the audience, and asked whether the character of the nation should compel people living there to show compassion for non-criminal immigrants trying to “make it” in America.

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5. Ibid.

Obama acknowledged failed prior policies, and his rhetoric reflected the unique power of the president to enact an executive order without necessary appeals to opposing constituencies through rhetoric. His desire to redefine “amnesty” and explain the difficult circumstances immigrants face is encouraging coming from the president. Despite positive interpretations of the content of Obama’s address, rhetorical precedents set at the beginning of the current wave of immigration shape his language. The acknowledgment of the continuation of rhetorical patterns in public presidential discussion of immigration is important because its persistence has real implications for immigrant populations and the legislation that can shape their experience in the United States.

Examining presidential immigration rhetoric using a gendered lens would provide a crucial addition to this project. Do specific issues that are gendered determine immigration rhetoric? Gendered rhetoric was evident in examining how women were specifically affected by IRCA, but that could be expanded more fully to other presidential immigration rhetoric and that rhetoric’s potential to shape the experiences of women immigrants. With the potential for a woman to be in office with Hillary Clinton’s April 2015 campaign announcement, studying presidential rhetoric also has the potential for new research questions. Will a woman candidate’s rhetoric embody the hallmarks of the “modern” president’s rhetoric that Lim describes? Or will the characteristics of a “modern presidency” take on a new shape? How would this change the way that immigration is spoken about at an executive level, if at all? Some research exists on the rhetoric of women politicians and could inform this realm of research. In a case study examining Hillary Clinton’s campaign rhetoric in 2008, Bligh et. al write:

First, all of the research indicates that the office of the president is intertwined with notions of masculinity, and this is likely to pose significant problems for any female presidential candidate. Second, findings in social psychology suggest that it is difficult

for females in leadership positions to garner positive evaluations on the two dimensions (warmth and competence) identified as being essential to effective leaders. A linguistic style and choice of words that conveys strength and competence in a male leader may result in a female leader being labeled as “cold,” but a more caring/maternal style may signal the female leader lacks the strength necessary to handle crises.<sup>6</sup>

Perceptions of women in politics, based on concepts of adequate leadership and masculinity, shape how those women present themselves. Because there are so few women candidates for the presidency from which to draw data, research on this topic, and particularly the topic of immigration rhetoric, is still limited. A study on a woman president’s immigration rhetoric would add to the body of research on presidential rhetoric, if the occasion arises in 2016. A study on Hillary Clinton’s campaign rhetoric and the way it might or might not contribute to immigration discourses would prove useful as well.

Patterns found through Reagan, Clinton, and a small sample of Obama’s language suggest that presidential immigration rhetoric has developed on the basis of Reagan’s precedent over the past thirty-five years and has reached a stagnant place of compromise that appeals to multiple constituencies while promoting American values. Rhetoric has often been contradictory, ambiguous, and consequently unproductive. Bipartisan efforts to pass immigration legislation are trapped in this compromise, and the effects of the lack of productive legislation – immigrants resorting to dangerous travel through deserts on the Southwest border and exploitation in the workplace, for example – are felt directly by immigrant communities in the United States. Until presidential immigration rhetoric can move away from this place of stagnancy and allusion to the

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6. Michelle Bligh, Jennifer Merolla, Jean Reath Schroedel, and Randall Gonzalez, “Finding Her Voice: Hillary Clinton’s Rhetoric in the 2008 Presidential Campaign.” In *Women’s Studies* 39, no. 8 (2010): 827.

“melting pot,” understandings of the immigrant experience will continue to be shaped by narrow discourses that prohibit productive, *truly* comprehensive immigration system reform.

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