

**A**s long as America has existed, there has been a tension between increasing and restricting immigration to the United States. Cultural differences between immigrants and Americans, variations in *the skills* and wealth of immigrants, and the shifting needs of the American economy have helped to sustain this tension. In 1753 Benjamin Franklin expressed an early version of this mixed reaction in a letter about German immigrants to Pennsylvania:

“Those who come hither are generally the most stupid of their own nation.... I am not against the admission of Germans in general, for they have their virtues. Their industry and frugality are exemplary. They are excellent husbandmen and contribute greatly to the improvement of a country.”

*Barry R. Chiswick*

# Immigration Policy for a



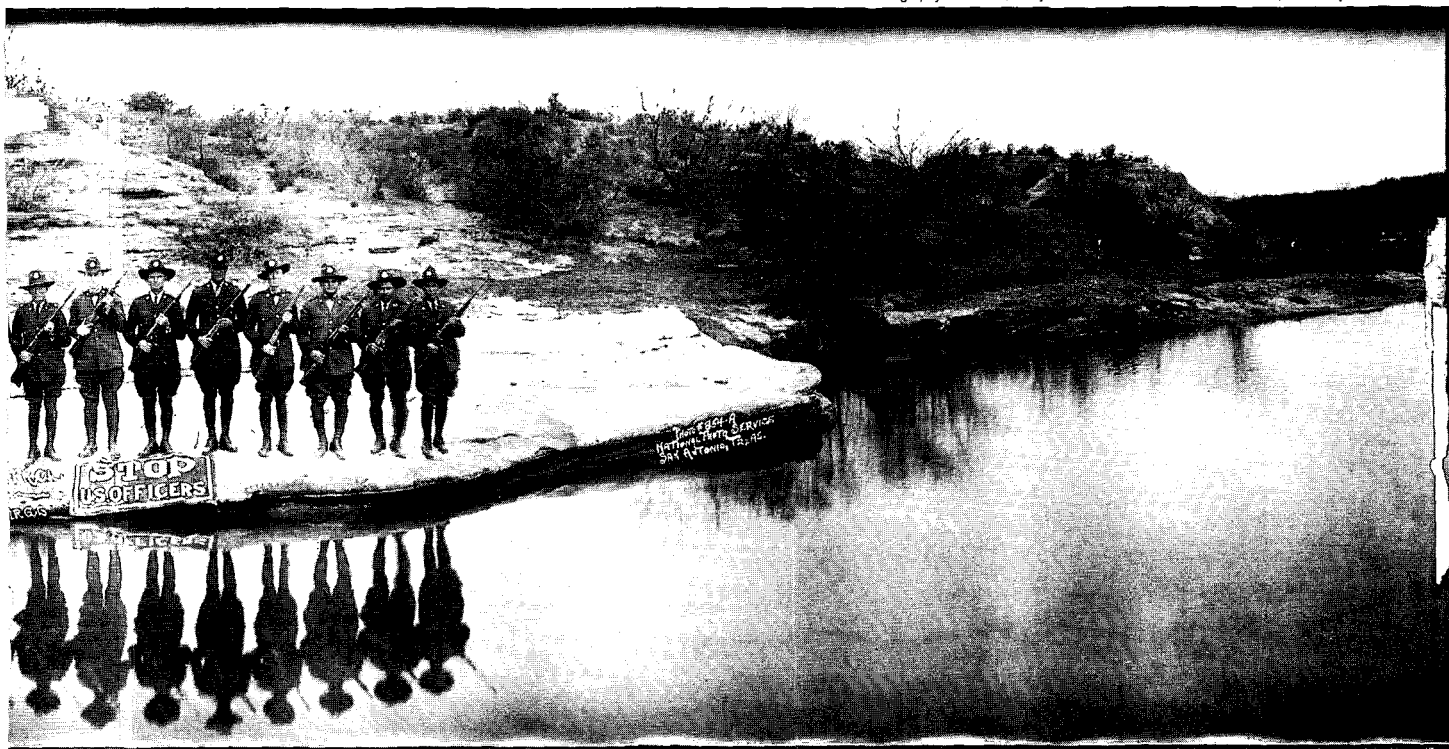
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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the United States celebrated itself as a land of immigration, as captured in the poetry of Emma Lazarus on the base of the Statue of Liberty welcoming the tired, poor, and huddled masses. Immigrants were filling newly created jobs in America's factories, mills, and mines. Yet at the same time, anti-immigrant sentiment was responsible for restrictive legislation against the "huddled masses"—first against Asians, then in 1917 against the illiterate, and in the 1920s against those of Southern and Eastern European origin through the introduction of the "national-origins" quota system.

In the late twentieth century, tension has again arisen between those who favor more open immigration policies and those who favor tighter restrictions. Depending on

# Post-Industrial Economy

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whom you believe, immigrants either “accept jobs that natives will not do” and contribute more to the public purse than they take out, or else “take jobs from natives” and draw more from government services than they pay in taxes.

In the face of all this contradictory clamor for either decreased or increased immigration, the possibility that there is a third choice—neither more nor fewer immigrants, just somewhat *different* ones—seems to have been overlooked. In the midst of critical changes in our economy and culture, Americans ought to be selecting their newcomers,

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in whatever numbers, much more carefully. The aim might be thought of, in shorthand, as Designer Immigration, and what follows are some suggestions for altering U.S. admission criteria.

Since the abolition of the “national-origins” quota system in 1965, the cornerstone of American immigration policy has been family reunification. Although the United States is the first country of choice of almost all immigrants, it has chosen not to compete internationally for the best and the brightest. Instead we have withdrawn to the sidelines and let other countries have their pick of the considerable brainpower and physical capital that now flows with great mobility across national boundaries.

There should be little controversy over whether U.S. immigration policy should continue in its two main humanitarian purposes—the reuniting of immediate family members (which accounts for approximately 250,000 of our annual immigrants) and the acceptance of at least some significant numbers of threatened refugees (approximately

125,000 individuals arrive yearly in this way). The main question is whether we should be selecting roughly half-a-million other immigrants each year in the way we currently do—namely, by accepting lots of more distant relatives, and lots of special interest groups, and then choosing only a relatively small number of individuals (about 75,000) on the basis of their occupational skills and gifts. Is this the wisest way for us to sift through the almost unlimited number of individuals who would like to become Americans in order to pick who will staff our economy and fill our neighborhoods?

Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have successfully implemented more meritocratic measures for selecting immigrants using skill-based point systems. We would do well to follow suit. The reality of the twenty-first century is that we will be in sharp competition with other nations in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere. We need a radical reform of our immigration laws to assure we are as well equipped as possible to thrive in the face of this competition, as well as the rapid economic and technological change that will accompany it. Specifically, we need to shift away from today’s immigration policy based on nepotism to one that evaluates applicants on the basis of skills.

This would not only increase national productivity and competence; it would also moderate the national distribution of in-

#### 1993 Immigrants by type

Category	Number
Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens	255,059
Secondary relatives	226,776
Refugees	127,343
Employment-based immigrants (EBI)	72,226
Spouses and children of EBI	67,786
Legalized under 1986 amnesty	79,622
Other immigrants	68,480
<b>Total</b>	<b>904,292</b>

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

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come. One economic result of today's largely "humanitarian" criteria for immigrant selection is the admission of large numbers of low-skill immigrants. This increases job competition at the bottom of the income ladder of a time when low-skill wages are already being depressed by changes in technology and world trade. Current immigration policy is not causing major dislocations in the American economy, but it is probably having some undesirable marginal effects. And a revised immigration policy could capture many economic bonuses that we currently let slip away.

In 1993, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service issued 904,292 permanent immigrant visas (see Table). Of that total, only 147,012 visas, or 16 percent, were issued under one of several "employment-based" immigration categories—and nearly half of that group were actually for the accompanying spouses and children of principals who were selected specifically because of occupational talents. Moreover, because of the present lack of a methodical way of ranking desirable occupational qualities, significant numbers of the "employment-based" immigrants are less than highly skilled. Only about 45,000 of the 904,000 total immigrants we admitted in 1993 were technical, professional, or managerial workers. We can surely do better than that in choosing immigrants who have top level economic skills to contribute to our country.

In order to make room, though, for more talent-selected immigrants, we'll first have to reduce the current policy emphasis on "family reunification." In the past, immigration often meant severing all close ties with relatives who remained behind, beyond perhaps occasional letters. This could be a gut-wrenching experience, and so provisions were drawn up in American immigration law to make it relatively easy for settled immigrants to bring near and not-so-near relatives into the country. Of course this set in motion a never-ending chain of migrations, with each new group of "family-reconstruction" arrivals soon finding their own set of in-laws or blood relatives to bring in under the privileged category.

Now that falling transportation and communication costs ensure that close contact can be maintained even with relatives who live in other countries, this exaggerated emphasis on family reunification no longer makes sense. Phone calls, letters, packages, videotapes, faxes, and inexpensive visits mean that becoming a U.S. immigrant no longer means losing a

family back home. Anyone visiting an international air terminal around the holidays sees these family-visit trips first hand.

Refugee policy also needs to return to its first principles. The United States cannot, alone or in conjunction with others, provide refuge for the millions around the globe who wish to flee war, insurrection, anarchy, famine, or economic deprivation. Offers of temporary asylum in the United States are attractive in principle, but recent experiences suggest that "temporary" immigrants often become permanent ones. Refugee policy was intended to be a

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selective, individual policy rather than the mechanism for mass migration it has recently become. Refugee admissions should be limited to applicants in immediate jeopardy from undemocratic regimes because of political activity. Merely wanting to leave an undemocratic nation or other dangerous or unpleasant situation should not constitute sufficient grounds for admission.

A revised immigration policy would keep the humanitarian elements of family unification and refugee assistance, but it would also scale them down considerably through sensible limits. Automatic family reunification admissions, for instance, could be reserved solely for spouses, minor children, and, perhaps after 5 years in the United States, aged parents of a U.S. citizen. (Today, far more distant relatives qualify.) The person sponsoring relatives should be held financially responsible for their support. And except for schooling and emergency medical care, the sponsoring party should be liable for a period of time for any public expenditures necessary to support or care for admitted relatives.

Beyond close family members and bona fide refugees, the majority of U.S. immigrants should be selected on the basis of what the

applicant can contribute to the U.S. economy. This contribution may be in the form of capital for investment in job creation, with a limited number of immigrant visas being auctioned off.

Perhaps the most important part of a revised immigration policy would involve selecting immigrants on the basis of their skills. Based on research on immigrant assimilation, the candidates with the most-needed skills would be young adults, with high levels of schooling or technical training, who are fluent and literate in English.

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Immigrants tend to adapt quickly, and there is no need to try to match them with employers prior to immigration. The labor market responds far better than any government agency in determining where immigrants "should" be employed.

The "occupational preferences" in the 1965 Amendments and in the 1990 Immigration Act were based on a "targeted labor" approach that required a specific employer to petition on behalf of a particular alien for an exact job slot. This has not worked well, however, and it has proven vulnerable to industrial manipulation and bureaucratic inflexibility.

A far more appropriate policy would follow the Canadian and Australian skill-based models. There, applicants are evaluated on the basis of their specific training and job qualifications, with points awarded for desirable characteristics in the areas of youth, schooling, apprenticeship or vocational training, technical skills, and language proficiency. Applicants receiving more than a threshold number of points re-

ceive a visa for themselves, their spouses, and minor children. It would make sense to give an applicant extra points if one of these family members who are part of the "package deal" also has scoreable traits. It would also make sense to credit some points when there is a successful relative already in the United States who is willing to accept financial responsibility for the new entrant.

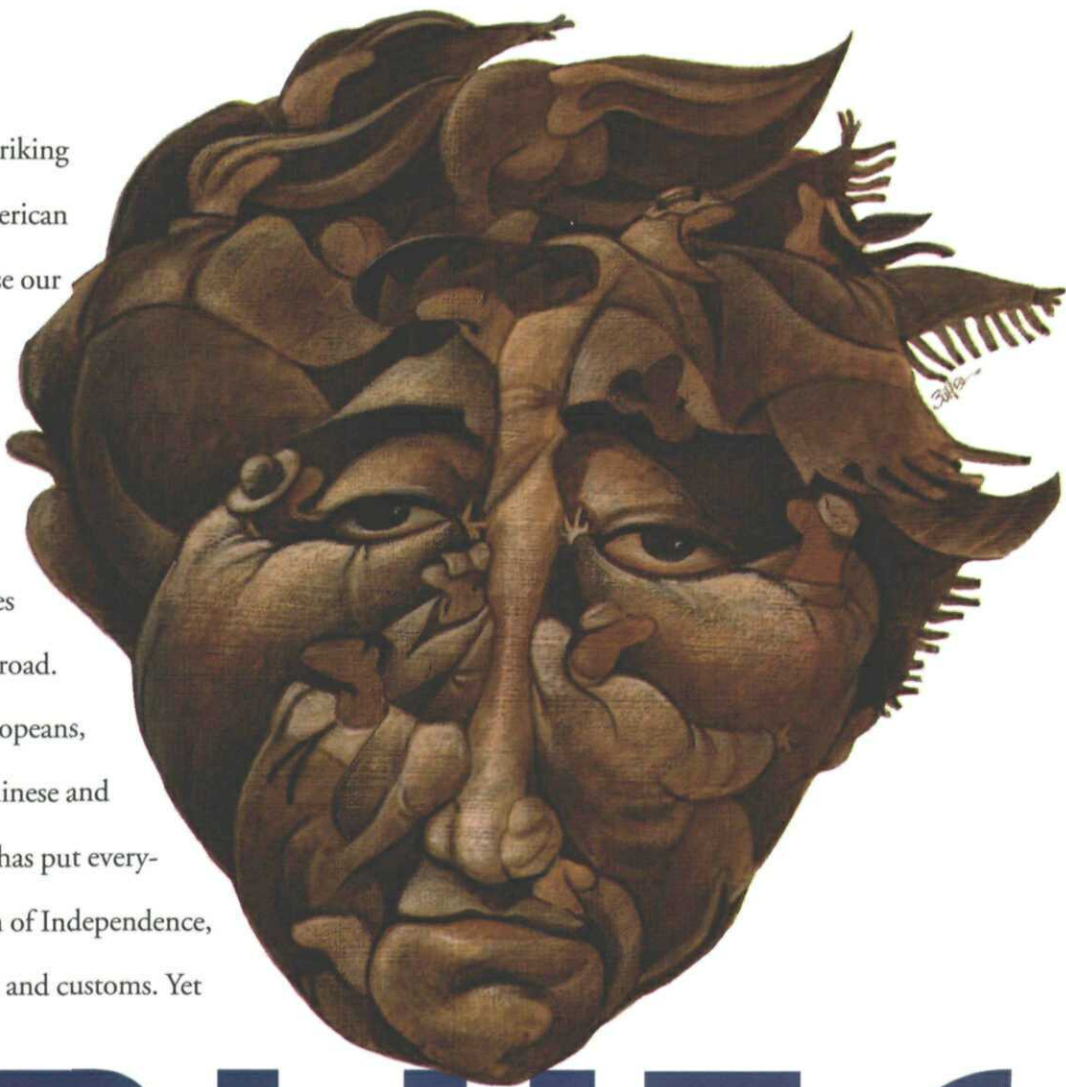
At the end of each year's scoring process, the available entrance slots could be filled simply by accepting, in order, the top scorers off the list. A system like this would provide a fair and rational way of selecting unusually high-quality and productive immigrants. It would be neutral with regard to country of origin or race/ethnicity. It doesn't foolishly presume that the government knows where labor market bottlenecks are. And by permitting immigration across a broad range of high-level occupations it is less subject to occupation-specific lobbying efforts by self-interested businesses and labor unions.

U.S. immigration policy badly needs to be reconciled to the changing needs of our economy in the twenty-first century. A skill-based point system that replaces overly broad extensions of our core family-member and refugee standards for selecting immigrants would bring immediate dividends in our productivity, our investment levels, our patterns of innovation, and our educational achievement. In the process, this approach would also mute the public dissatisfaction that has understandably grown up around our current system for selecting new Americans.

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by Stanley Crouch

People who are in some striking way unlike us are an American obsession. That is because our history has demanded that we address and learn from the "other,"—either to enrich this culture's resilience or to wage struggles against adversaries within our borders or threats abroad. Absorbing the influences of Europeans, Indians, Negroes, Mexicans, Chinese and others into our national corpus has put everything to a test—our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our local laws and customs. Yet we have succeeded.



# THE ONE OUT OF MANY BLUES

Illustration by Ralph Butler