

# COOLIDGE QUARTERLY

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## IMMIGRATION—THEN AND NOW

BY MATTHEW DENHART AND ROB HAMMER

*“There is ample evidence that, at the rate they have been coming, they cannot readily be assimilated. [...] American interests, not foreign influence, must prevail.”*

The preceding lines sound as if they were pulled from an immigration debate on cable news in the year 2018. But, in fact, the lines actually appeared almost a century ago in an April 1924 article of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* weighing the pros and cons of an immigration bill then attracting widespread support on Capitol Hill.

The bill soon became law as the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the “Johnson-Reed Act,” named for its sponsors Congressman Albert Johnson (R-WA) and Senator David Reed (R-PA). The law’s National Origins Quota greatly curtailed immigration generally and skewed the preference for the few available slots toward Western Europeans. Furthermore, the Act left in place earlier restrictions on immigrants from Asia and placed new explicit bans on immigration to the U.S. by the Japanese.

Johnson-Reed proved highly popular, passing the Senate with only a handful of dissenting votes and likewise clearing the House of Representatives 323 to 71. President Coolidge favored the law as a whole but expressed apprehension about the clause that excluded Japanese immigrants. He called this particular exclusion “unnecessary and deplorable,” and said that “If the exclusion provision stood alone, I should disapprove it without hesitation.”



*The drafters of the 1924 Immigration Act, Congressman Albert Johnson (left) and Senator David Reed (right). The “Johnson-Reed” Act greatly reduced the influx of immigration, particularly from Asia and Southern/Eastern Europe. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress)*

Today’s concerns with immigration in many ways echo the impulses that drove the restrictionist action of the 1920s. Three major concerns about immigration are evident in Coolidge’s era and our own. These include: fear of violent international unrest, a perception that immigrants would not assimilate, and concern that immigrants posed a threat to natives’ economic well-being.

First, Americans feared that international unrest of revolution abroad could spread to the U.S. This concern was understandable. By the time Coolidge appeared on the national stage, the Bolsheviks had just consolidated power in Russia, major labor strikes were taking place across America, and anarchists threatened cherished political institutions.

As governor of Massachusetts, Coolidge personally dealt with extremism. In 1919 Boston police abandoned their posts, declaring a strike. Chaos ensued. Coolidge responded forcefully, refusing to countenance the rehiring of the striking policemen and responding to American Federation of Labor (AFL) President Samuel Gompers, himself an immigrant, that there was “no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time.”

In May 1920, Italian-born anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti captured the attention of the country when they were arrested for murdering a shoe factory guard and a paymaster in Braintree, Massachusetts. Just a few months later, in September 1920, a bomb exploded on Wall Street, killing dozens and injuring more. The case was never solved, but Americans suspected Italian-born anarchists perpetrated this attack as well.

Deportation was seen as one solution. In September 1919, some 249 alleged anarchists and communists, including activist Emma Goldman, were loaded on the USAT Buford, dubbed the “Red Ark,” and deported to the Soviet Union.

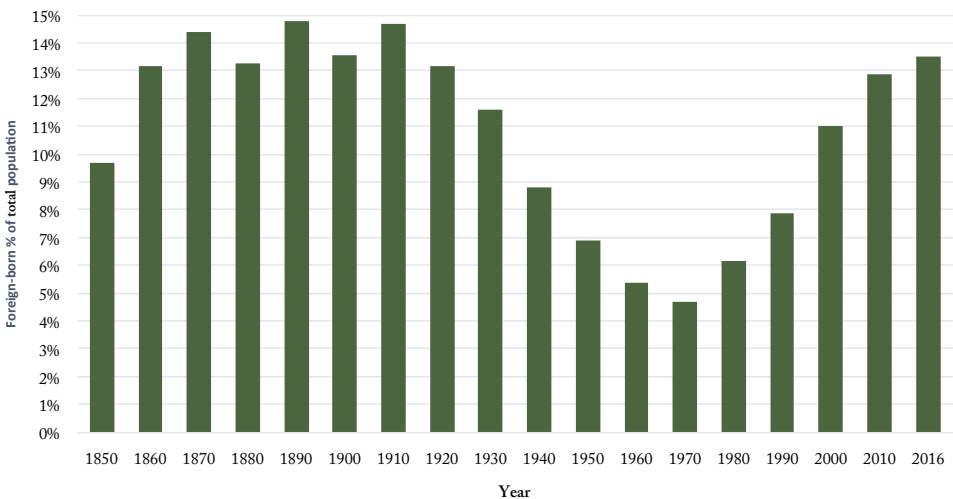
The second parallel between Coolidge’s time and our own is the broader fear that newcomers do not assimilate. This certainly was a concern of President Coolidge, who in his First Annual Message informed Congress that: “New arrivals should be limited to our capacity to absorb them into the ranks of good citizenship.” He continued firmly: “Those who do not want to be partakers of the American spirit ought not to settle in America.”

By the 1920s, economic opportunities had pulled eastern and southern Europeans to America’s growing industrial centers. These immigrants came from different cultures, spoke different languages, and in many cases held different religious and political beliefs than previous waves of immigrants, who came primarily from Western Europe. Americans wondered if these newcomers would learn English and come to respect and support America’s political and cultural institutions.

The third parallel is an especially poignant one: the economy and employment. According to economists Timothy Hatton and Jeffrey Williamson, immigration was accompanied by significant capital investment flows from Europe

### Too Much, Not Enough, or Just Right?

Foreign-Born Proportion of the U.S. Population, 1850-2016



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-2000*; U.S. Census Bureau, *2016 American Community Survey*

prior to 1913, which helped offset wage reductions from increased labor supply and probably blunted anti-immigrant sentiment. This slowed during and after World War I, and research by Harvard economist Claudia Goldin suggests that as American wage-growth stagnated, political support for immigration restriction grew.

Immigrants were not the only threat that American workers perceived. The turn of the century witnessed immense technological innovation both in the city and on the farm. While these changes measurably improved people's lives, dispersion of capital innovations also rendered certain kinds of labor obsolete and made others easily replaceable. For the average native-born factory worker, immigrants not only threatened their wages, but also their collective bargaining power by providing cheap labor to break strikes. Similar resentment fueled an often-violent animus toward African-Americans arriving from the South in search of work.

\* \* \*

Against this backdrop, restrictive legislation had been a long time coming. The House and Senate both passed immigration restrictions in 1897, 1912, and 1915. It was only through vetoes by three separate sitting presidents (Cleveland, Taft, and Wilson) that restrictive

immigration policy remained at bay. This all changed, however, when Congress overrode President Wilson's veto of the Immigration Act of 1917. This law required immigrants to pass a literacy

test and, through its Barred Asiatic Zone provision, forbade nearly all Asian immigration. Soon afterward, in 1921, the Emergency Quota Act put national restrictions on immigration and laid the blueprint for the 1924 Act.

Thus, Johnson-Reed was the apogee of a number of largely bipartisan legislative efforts aimed at restricting immigration. The effect of the 1924 Act was tremendous. Between the 1920s and 1930s, immigration decreased by 84%. In fact, annual immigrant arrivals would not surpass the 1924 level (706,896) until 1989, a 65-year period when world population more than doubled.

\* \* \*

With the benefit of hindsight, what should one make of the concerns Americans expressed about immigration during Coolidge's time?

The concern about revolution in the U.S. proved exaggerated. Yet, considering that Soviet-containment and the Cold War dominated America's foreign policy for much of the twentieth century, the threat was certainly not unreal.

## IMMIGRATION ACT OF 1924

The Immigration Act of 1924 curtailed yearly immigration to the United States by extending and making more restrictive the nationality-based quota system already in place under the Immigration Act of 1921. Under the 1924 Act, the annual number of new immigrants from any one country was capped at two percent of that nationality's representation in the 1890 Census. This formula was to remain in effect until July 1927. Thereafter, another clause of the 1924 Act was to come into effect placing an 150,000 annual cap on the total number of new immigrants and tying the country-specific yearly quota calculation to 1920 population estimates. The implementation of this clause was delayed and instead became effective in 1929.

In addition, the 1924 Act explicitly barred Japanese immigrants and maintained the ban on immigration from most Asian countries that had been in place since the Immigration Act of 1917. The Act allowed continued unrestricted immigration from countries in the Western Hemisphere.



*Immigrants disembark from a ferry at Ellis Island circa 1920 in the hope of a better life. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress)*

The concern about assimilation proved exaggerated as well. Assimilation can be difficult to measure, but one indicator is the percentage of immigrants in the U.S. who become naturalized citizens. By this indicator, the U.S. was indeed at something of a low point in the 1920s, when fewer than 50% of immigrants were naturalized citizens, down from rates closer to 65% in the late 1800s. Today, as in the 1920s, only around half have achieved naturalization.

Despite this, the broader evidence suggests that the immigrants of Coolidge's era indeed adopted the American way of life. While some first-generation immigrants struggled to learn English and adapt to American culture, their children, born and raised in the U.S., quickly and naturally assimilated. Nobody today questions whether families whose ancestors came from Italy or Poland in the early 1900s are sufficiently "American."

Of course assimilation is a two-way street. In a 1926 speech dedicating a statue of the Swedish-born inventor John Ericsson, Coolidge explained: "None of those who come here are required to leave

any good qualities behind, but they are rather required to strengthen and fortify them and supplement them with such additional good qualities as they find among us." Just as immigrants in Coolidge's day came to partake in American culture, America itself has adapted and evolved thanks to immigrants.

The economic concerns too were overstated, especially when considering the big picture. To be sure, the large inflow of foreign-born workers likely introduced labor market competition that put negative pressure on American citizens' wages. Even so, economists today find that immigrants tend to increase productivity and contribute to economic growth.

Finally, given the productive nature of immigrants and their children, one wonders what America lost from restrictive immigration policy. After all, icons such as Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, and Irving Berlin were all either children of immigrants or immigrants themselves. How many Fords did America forego? Unfortunately, that is a question to which we will never have an answer.

It goes without saying that immigration has dominated headlines in recent years, inflaming the passions of Americans on both sides of the debate. Perhaps this is unsurprising. After all, the immigrant share of America's population, today at 13.5%, is inching back toward a level not seen since Coolidge's era.

As Americans weigh the pros and cons of immigration, they would be wise to heed the lessons of the past as they dissect the many issues that make immigration a topic of such enduring debate.

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# COOLIDGE AND IMMIGRATION

BY DAVID PIETRUSZA

Calvin Coolidge spoke consistently on immigration.

Though Coolidge favored immigration restrictions, he was not anti-immigrant. In fact, Coolidge recognized the many benefits immigrants bestowed on America. Remarks made in his acceptance of the 1924 GOP presidential nomination summarize his view:

Restricted immigration is not an offensive but a purely defensive action. It is not adopted in criticism of others in the slightest degree, but solely for the purpose of protecting ourselves. We cast no aspersions on any race or creed, but we must remember that every object of our institutions of society and government will fail unless America be kept American....

Those who toil have always profited from Republican control of Government. Under the policy of protection and restrictive immigration no deflation of wages has occurred.

## THE SAME BOAT

“WHETHER ONE TRACES HIS AMERICANISM BACK THREE CENTURIES TO THE MAY-FLOWER, OR THREE YEARS TO THE STEERAGE, IS NOT HALF SO IMPORTANT AS WHETHER HIS AMERICANISM OF TODAY IS REAL AND GENUINE. NO MATTER BY WHAT VARIOUS CRAFTS WE CAME HERE, WE ARE ALL NOW IN THE SAME BOAT.”

Calvin Coolidge to the  
American Legion Convention,  
Omaha, Nebraska, 1925

In his March 1925 Inaugural Address, Coolidge credited his administration's immigration policies for the nation's prosperity and well-being:

Under the helpful influences of restrictive immigration and a protective tariff, employment is plentiful, the rate of pay is high, and wage earners are in a state of contentment seldom before seen.



*President Coolidge with members of the Italian Republican League of New York in February 1927.  
(Image Courtesy of the Library of Congress)*

In May 1924, Coolidge had signed the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act further restricting immigration and solidifying the newly-established system of national quotas. The national mood was overwhelmingly restrictionist. That year's Republican platform, no doubt reflecting Coolidge's views, declared that post-war mass immigration:

would have seriously disturbed our economic life. The law recently enacted is designed to protect the inhabitants of our country, not only the American citizen, but also the alien already with us who is seeking to secure an economic foothold for himself and family from the competition that would come from unrestricted immigration.



Democrats, perhaps even more so than Republicans, favored restrictions. The 1924 Democratic platform addressed the immigration issue solely in these sixteen words: “We pledge ourselves to maintain our established position in favor of the exclusion of Asiatic immigration.”

In 1924, Japanese-American relations were remarkably cordial. Japan appreciated Americans’ generous response to Coolidge’s 1923 appeal for funds to ameliorate the effects of that year’s devastating Japanese earthquake. The year before, Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes had achieved immense success with Japan in limiting naval armaments.

The Johnson-Reed Act’s Japanese exclusion provisions undid such goodwill, something both Hughes and Coolidge—though not the Congress—recognized. Complicating the matter was an ill-advised protest by Japanese Ambassador Masanao Hanihara, which American legislators (led by Henry Cabot Lodge) hysterically denounced as a “threat.”

As Hughes biographer Merlo Pusey noted:

Coolidge attempted to avert the ‘grave consequences’ of the

incident by suggesting, while the immigration bill was in conference, that application of the exclusion clause be delayed for two years. In that period the State Department would negotiate with Japan a treaty so effectively restricting immigration that drastic legislation would not be necessary. Congress refused. Coolidge then bid for a one-year postponement, and was again rebuffed. Ultimately the President signed the exclusion measure because it was part of a comprehensive immigration bill and because a veto in the face of such overwhelming congressional support would have been a futile gesture. For the same reasons, Hughes had not requested a veto.

Anti-American hatred swept Japan. A distraught Hughes visited Coolidge in his sickbed, mourning that the incident “was enough to make a man resign.”

“Don’t you ever think of leaving your position,” Coolidge snapped, “I agree with you in everything that you’ve done.”

**DAVID PIETRUSZA** is a National Advisory Board member of the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation. Pietrusza has written or edited over three dozen books, including *Silent Cal’s Almanack: The Homespun Wit and Wisdom of Vermont’s Calvin Coolidge* and *Calvin Coolidge: A Documentary Biography*. His next book is *TR’s Last War: Theodore Roosevelt, the Great War, and a Journey of Triumph and Tragedy*.

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## FAMILY REUNIFICATION

In April 1928, Rep. Robert Green (D-FL) decried current calls for reuniting separated immigrant families as “sentimentalism” and “bunk.” Coolidge felt differently. In his December 1925 Third State of the Union Address, he posited:

... our immigration law is on the whole beneficial. It is undoubtedly a protection to the wage earners of this country. The situation should however, be carefully surveyed, in order to ascertain whether it is working a needless hardship upon our own inhabitants. If it deprives them of the comfort and society of those bound to them by close family ties, such modifications should be adopted as will afford relief, always in accordance with the principle that our Government owes its first duty to our own people and that no alien, inhabitant of another country, has any legal rights whatever under our Constitution and laws. It is only through treaty, or through residence here that such rights accrue. But we should not, however, be forgetful of the obligations of a common humanity.

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## AN UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY

In Coolidge's January 1914 "Have Faith in Massachusetts" address, he famously urged "Give administration a chance to catch up with legislation." His attitude on immigration followed the same principle—allow for America to meaningfully absorb what immigrants it already possessed before accepting more. He expressed this to a group of foreign-born citizens visiting the White House in October 1924:

"It has been found necessary to inquire whether ... we can be sure of finding employment for the diverse elements and enormous numbers of new immigrants that are offered to us. We are all agreed, whether we be Americans of the first or of the seventh generation on this soil, that it is not desirable to receive more immigrants than can reasonably be assured of bettering their condition by coming here. For the sake both of those who would come and more especially of those already here, it has been thought wise to

avoid the danger of increasing our numbers too fast. It is not a reflection on any race or creed. We might not be able to support them if their numbers were too great. In such event, the first sufferers would be the most recent immigrants, unaccustomed to our life and language and industrial methods. We want to keep wages and living conditions good for everyone who is now here or who may come here.

"As a Nation, our first duty must be to those who are already our inhabitants, whether native or immigrants. To them we owe an especial and a weighty obligation. They came to us with stout hearts and high hopes of bettering their estate. They have contributed much to making our country what it is. They magnificently proved their loyalty by contributing their full part when the war made demand for sacrifices by all Americans."

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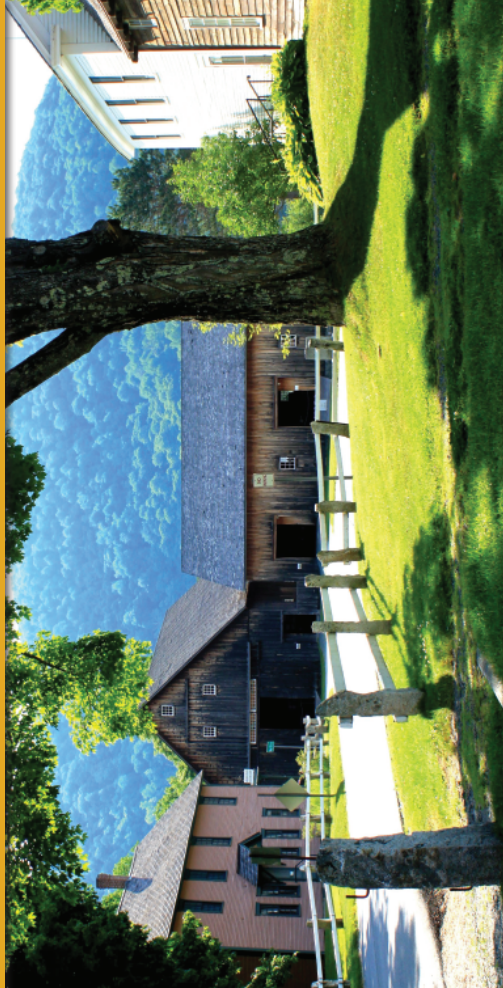
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