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IMMIGRATION

Francisco Nuno

International Business
Thomas Kelly High School, Chicago, Illinois

In the dark of June, 1993, the Golden Venture, a 150-foot rusting freighter, began dropping its passengers into the cold surf off Rockaway Peninsula in Queens. The trip, which had begun four months earlier in Thailand, was not supposed to end this way for the 296 Chinese who had paid up to $35,000 a piece for the promise of a safe entry into America.

The Golden Venture was scheduled for a May 17 rendezvous with a smaller ship that would ferry its passengers past immigration authorities and slip them into New York harbor. But the smaller ship never arrived, and desperate to bring their long journey to an end, the smugglers masterminding the trip decided their best alternative was to sail the Golden Venture as close to shore as possible, then release their passengers.

It was a risky decision under the best of circumstances. In the dark it turned into a disaster when the Golden Venture struck a sandbar. Ten of the ship's passengers died trying to make it to shore. Only luck and heroic rescue efforts by the police and Coast Guard saved more from drowning in the fifty-three degree Atlantic waters.

The Rockaway beach where the Golden Venture hit a sandbar was ironically just two hundred yards from Jacob Riis Park. In his 1890 book, *How the Other Half Lives,* the Danish-born Riis provided America with a

picture of life in the slums meant for most poor immigrants, but one hundred years later there was no Jacob Riis waiting to do the same for the passengers of the Golden Venture. Nor was there a massive public outcry to let them stay. In the nation's editorial columns, the story of the Venture became instead an occasion for choosing up sides: for arguing about who should and who shouldn't be allowed into the country. As the television pictures of the shivering passengers of the Venture faded from memory, it also became clear what would have happened if their trip had gone as planned. A nation that has absorbed an estimated five million illegal immigrants during the last ten years would have taken in several hundred more, and nobody would have been the wiser.

It was Israel Zangwill, a contemporary of Riis, who in a 1908 play that opened in Washington popularized the idea of America as a melting pot. David, the hero of the play, is a young Russian Jew composer who falls in love with another immigrant, Vera, the daughter of a Russian army officer. Their American marriage defies the "blood hatreds" of old Europe and reflects David's belief that "America is God's melting and reforming" (Morrison 12). Zangwillis metaphor comes from steelmaking in America.

In the America of the l990s, nobody talks about melting pots very much, let alone uses the kind of patriotic language that prompted Theodore Roosevelt to declare, "Either a man is an American and nothing else, or he is not an American at all" (Ueda 45).

Not since the turn of the century has immigration been so controversial. At a time when identity politics, with its emphasis on race and ethnicity, shapes national elections as well as grade school curriculums, few believe that our newest immigration, over 80 percent persons of color, are going to blend easily into American society (Heller 220). Still fewer are so secure that they are above fearing that their jobs or their tax rates may not be adversely affected by this latest wave of immigrants. In a 1993 Time/CNN poll, 73 percent of those questioned favored strict limits on immigration (Heller 220).

In his classic study of immigration, *Send These to Me,* historian John Higham divides America's earlier immigration into two broad periods. What he calls the First Immigration was primarily an eighteenth-century movement, comprised predominantly of English-speaking, mainly Protestant Europeans. By contrast, the Second Immigration, which began in the 1820s and lasted until the immigration restriction laws of the 1920s, was, Higham notes, a more diverse and controversial phenomenon (Morrison 42).

If we apply Higham's analysis to the present, it makes sense to think of today's newcomers as part of Third Immigration that began in the late 1960s. What they have done is extend the patterns of the Second Immigration. With their Asian and Hispanic roots, today's immigrants are, relative to America's overall population, more diverse than any previous wave. They are also a group few anticipated would come in such numbers, 8.6 million in the 1980s alone, according to the U.S. census figures (Fernandez 82).

The decision that paved the way for the massive immigration we are now experiencing goes back to the immigration reforms of 1965. For the preceding forty-one years, immigration to America had been reduced dramatically by the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 (Cose 25). Passed at a time when anti-immigration feeling was running high, the Immigration Act of 1924 set a yearly limit of 150,000 on immigration from outside the Western Hemisphere and then divided the number into quotas (Cose 25).

The result has been a national backlash against immigration. We like the idea of a restored Ellis Island because we can sentimentalize the nineteenth-century immigration struggle it represents. But increasingly we are at home with the comparison between past and present immigration that former Colorado governor Richard Lamm, author of *The Immigration Time Bomb,* recently drew when he noted, "Immigration has been good for America; but the public policy of immigration was made when we were an empty continent and could absorb unlimited amounts of unskilled labor" (Hammerback 52). In a 1993 *Newsweek* poll 59 percent of those asked said past immigration was good for the country, but only 29 percent said that was true today. Sixty percent replied that immigration was now harmful (Hammerback 66).

Despite this backlash, since the 1980s legislative efforts to deal with immigration have only added to the number of immigrants America takes in each year. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act is a classic case of a law that has done just that. Passed after years of wrangling over the best way to halt illegal immigration, IRCA was designed to mix compassion for illegal immigrants with job protection for American citizens. Any illegal immigrant who entered the United States before 1982 and lived here continuously since then was granted amnesty. In turn employers who hired illegal aliens were now subject to fines and, if a pattern of hiring illegal could be found, jail sentences as well. IRCA offered amnesty to an estimated 3.7 illegal immigrants (2.6 million accepted amnesty), and for the first two years, there was a drop in the number of illegal immigrants entering America. But it soon became clear that the employer sanctions of IRCA had no teeth and that its safeguards were easily avoided. By the late 1980s illegal immigration began to rise

again. The chairman of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform acknowledges that as many as 500,000 illegals now enter the country each year.

In happier times the prospect of taking in a million or more immigrants per year might not cause such a public outcry. The current influx of immigrants is much lower than the 1900-20 peak when considered as a percentage of our population. Immigrants were one percent of our population then. They are approximately one third of one percent now. Even the percentage of foreign-born living in America is not what it used to be (Morrison 50).

Despite these facts, Americans have both celebrated and feared immigration. On the one hand, many Americans can recall with pride their immigrant forebears. Many others bear a profound respect for the Statue of Liberty's famous lines, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" (Paz 80). On the other hand, many Americans have a nagging fear of the world's huddled masses, now billions strong, many of whom are jostling to become American residents. Immigration analyst Chuck Lane writes, "While there were many Americans who wanted to heed the Statue of Liberty's poetic injunction to open a 'Golden Door' to immigrants, there were even more who wanted to lock the 'Golden Door' and throw away the key" (Shafer 20).

Immigration is nothing less than the continuing re-enactment of the "American Dream" (Fernandez, Nage and Nariage 10). The American Dream, in this view, is the vision all immigrants share of a better life in the U.S. John F. Kennedy argued that immigration thus becomes essential to defining what America is: "This was the secret of America: a nation of people with the fresh memory of old traditions who dared to explore new frontiers, people eager to build lives for themselves in a spacious society that did not restrict their freedom of choice and action" (Heller 105). Yet for some people immigration is an American nightmare. Public support for immigration has subsequently eroded since 1965, when the U.S. liberalized its immigration laws. Only 33 percent of the country wanted fewer immigrants that year, but disfavor grew to 42 percent in 1977, 49 percent in 1986, and it hit 65 percent in 1993 (Heller 20).

Many Americans past and present have reacted to immigration with fear: fear of unemployment and lower standards of living, fear of different religions and races, fear that immigration was spoiling the U.S. for those already here.

President Clinton has promised to beef up border security, revising an earlier budget proposal that actually would have cut ninety-three agents

from the Border Patrol. Moreover, he used illegal immigration as a selling point in presidential election debates. California Governor Pete Wilson and Presidential candidate Bob Dole also jumped on the immigration bandwagon.

While most Americans hold opinions somewhere between these two extremes, immigration remains a controversial and profound issue that deserves careful and just thinking. Despite the presence of a mass of laws, regulations, and court rulings controlling immigration, we are shaky on the largest questions that have to be answered in determining an immigration policy: what number should we admit, of what nations and races, on what basis should we make these decisions, and how should we enforce them? It is a serious question whether the American political system is capable of giving any coherent response to these questions. Indeed, I could argue that we have not been capable of a coherent response since the key decision, now execrated in all quarters, of the 1920s.

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