## NPG Footnote

## **Huddled Excesses**

By Michael Lind

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Sooner or later America must face reality. It is going to be painful. ... What America is fighting is a piece of poetry. ... The poetry is thrilling. It is on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...." The trouble is that huddled masses need jobs.

## Patrick Buchanan?

No, Richard Strout, the eminent liberal journalist who wrote this column for several decades. Since Strout wrote those words in 1980, more than 10 million people have immigrated to the United States legally. The number of new immigrants and their higher-than-average birthrate recently forced the Census Bureau to revise its 1989 estimate of U.S. population in 2080 [sic: should be 2050] upward, by an additional 100 million – to 400 million.

But it is not numbers alone that should convert liberal immigration defenders. As Strout observed, the "huddled masses need jobs." According to a 1995 Bureau of Labor Statistics study, competition with immigrants has accounted for roughly half the recent decline in wages among unskilled American workers. According to University of Michigan demographer William Frey, competition for jobs with poorly paid Latin American and Asian immigrants is driving low-income whites and blacks out of highimmigration states like California and high-immigration cities like New York. No wonder Steve Forbes and Dick Armey favor high levels of immigration, and The Wall Street Journal has proposed a fiveword amendment to the U.S. Constitution - "There shall be open borders." It's great for business.

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But not so great for poor Americans. And they're not the only ones under threat. U.S. companies can legally hire 140,000 *skilled* foreign workers each year. Business lobbyists have claimed that the

U.S. computer industry needs a never-ending supply of East Asian and Indian scientists because there are not enough Americans able to do the work. Really?

To add insult to injury, the laid-off workers, on pain of losing severance pay, were forced to train their foreign replacements for sixty days.

Why can't American industry train native and naturalized citizens for high-tech jobs? Some companies do the reverse. In 1994, the American International Group Insurance Company fired more than 250 American computer programmers and replaced them with Indian workers brought in under the H-1B visa program (which allows firms to pay only the foreign prevailing wage plus a living allowance). To add insult to injury, the laid-off workers, on pain of losing their severance pay, were forced to train their foreign replacements for sixty days.

The greatest gain in income by the American middle and working classes, both white and black, took place during the era of immigration restriction, from the 1920s to the 1960s. Not coincidentally, this was also the heyday of union membership, which is inevitably hampered when mass immigration produces a workforce divided by ethnicity. And, of course, it was the golden age of public support for universal entitlements and anti-poverty efforts. Coincidence? Not likely. The most generous and egalitarian countries in modern times have been culturally homogeneous nation-states admitting few or no poor immigrants, like those of northern Europe and Japan (where corporate paternalism substitutes for social democracy). The equation of social justice and national solidarity seems much less compelling in the modern U.S., where immigrants overall are much more likely than native-born Americans to receive welfare benefits. (In Chinese-speaking Asia, one widely distributed book tells potential immigrants how to obtain SSI and other benefits of the American welfare state.)

There is, then, a liberal case for immigration restriction that has nothing to do with the absurd and offensive claims of some conservatives that growing numbers of nonwhites threaten our civilization (Patrick Buchanan) or our gene pool (Charles Murray). What's more, the obsession with illegal immigration on the part of politicians like Pete Wilson evades the main issue. Each year, 300,000 to 400,000 illegal immigrants arrive in the U.S. to stay, a fraction of the roughly 1 million legal immigrants who take up permanent residence each year. We can and should crack down on illegal immigration - with a stronger border patrol, fences and a computerized national employment verification system - but legal immigration represents the greater threat to American wages and unions.

## Even a slight majority of Hispanics, according to a Roper poll commissioned by NPG, support reducing immigration to less than 300,000.

Reducing legal immigration is a perfectly legitimate liberal cause - if "liberal" means protecting the interests of ordinary wage-earning Americans. Unfortunately, for thirty years the Democratic Party has not acted like a liberal or social-democratic party. It has acted as a coalition of ethnic patronage machines (each seeking to enlarge the number of its group eligible for affirmative action) and affluent white social liberals (whose lifestyle in many cases depend on a supporting cast of low-wage Latin American maids and nannies). Unlike free-market conservatives, who can at least invoke a principled libertarian viewpoint, pro-immigration liberals have no theory, merely the "piece of poetry" of which Strout wrote – and the N-word (nativist). But now that majorities of black Americans and even a slight majority of Hispanics, according to a Roper poll commissioned by Negative Population Growth Institute [sic], support reducing immigration to less than 300,000 a year, it will no longer do to accuse all supporters of immigration reform of racism and xenophobia.

As Strout concluded in a critique of immigration policy back in 1981, "people must face facts, whether

they like them or not." A brave minority of liberal Democrats, including Wisconsin Congressman David Obey, have done so, signing on as cosponsors of the immigration reform bills introduced by Alan Simpson in the Senate and Lamar Smith in the House. Though the bill wisely cut back on extended-family reunification – a Ponzi scheme that has resulted in escalating immigrant numbers – they would reduce legal immigration by only a third, to about 700,000 a year.

That's still much too high. The numerical cap envisioned by the original Kennedy-Johnson reform in 1965 – 290,000 a year – would do more to bring U.S. population growth in line with other developed countries and to raise U.S. wages, particularly at the bottom of the income scale. Yet there would still be room for plenty of humanitarian refugees, spouses and children of Mexican-American citizens, Taiwanese grad students and English journalists. Though the U.S. would no longer take half the world's legal immigrants, we would still have the world's most generous immigration policy.

TRB was right. Genuine liberals should unite with populist conservatives to reform an immigration policy that benefits few Americans other than exploitative employers. It is easy to talk in poetry. But it is necessary to govern in prose.



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