

GREAT DEBATES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Unit 8: What Should the Nation's Immigration Policy Be?

The Issue

Should the United States permit *any* foreigners to settle within its borders? Should certain immigrant groups be let in and others excluded? How many immigrants should the nation admit each year? At various periods of our nation's history, these questions have become the subject of intense public debate. One such period of debate occurred after World War I, following three decades of high immigration rates.

Background

Between 1890 and 1914 a new wave of immigrants—more than 16 million in all—entered the United States. Whereas most immigrants before this time were northern Europeans, a majority of these “new” immigrants came from the countries of southern and eastern Europe. Some Americans feared the cultural and religious differences of the new immigrants and associated them with the nation's growing urban problems: crime, disease, poverty, and political corruption. During and after World War I, the nation's mistrust of foreign influences increased, partly as a result of the war and partly in response to the Russian Revolution. Consequently, Congress passed a series of laws in the 1920s that set annual quotas on immigration. Although these new laws favored northern and western Europeans with high quotas, they made deep cuts into the number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and barred all Asians from settling in the United States.

The Readings

The following debate begins with an excerpt from *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916). In this book lawyer and writer Madison Grant compared the “new” immigrants from southern and eastern Europe to the “old stock” of immigrants from northern and western Europe. Grant's views were widely popular both before and after World War I.

Many immigrant organizations issued public statements about immigration legislation in the early 1920s. Louis Marshall, chairman of the American Jewish Relief Committee, wrote his letter to President Calvin Coolidge in the spring of 1924 in response to the recently proposed immigration bill.

Update

In 1965 the United States Congress replaced the quota laws of the 1920s with a new law that gave equal treatment to all countries. Since that date the number of immigrants entering the United States has doubled to more than one-half million per year, with the majority coming from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Few people are critical of immigration at these levels; however, while many recent immigrants have adjusted to life in America with ease, others have met with the same resistance and prejudice that earlier groups of immigrants experienced. Moreover, these legal immigrants have been joined by a growing number of illegal aliens. As a result, the issue of immigration restriction continues to stir debate.

What Should the Nation's Immigration Policy Be?

Madison Grant, lawyer and writer, wrote this passage in his 1916 book, *The Passing of the Great Race*.

The native American by the middle of the nineteenth century was rapidly becoming a distinct type. Derived from the Teutonic part of the British Isles, and being almost purely Nordic, he was on the point of developing physical peculiarities of his own . . . The Civil War, however, put a severe, perhaps fatal, check to the development and expansion of this splendid type, by destroying great numbers of the best breeding stock on both sides, and by breaking up the home ties of many more. . . .

The prosperity that followed the war attracted hordes of newcomers who were welcomed by the native Americans to operate factories, build railroads, and fill up the waste spaces—"developing the country" it was called.

These new immigrants were no longer exclusively members of the Nordic race as were the earlier ones who came of their own impulse to improve their social conditions. The transportation lines advertised America as a land flowing with milk and honey, and the European governments took the opportunity to unload upon careless, wealthy, and hospitable America the sweepings of their jails and asylums. The result was that the new immigration, while it still included many strong elements from the north of Europe, contained a large and increasing number of the weak, the broken, and the mentally crippled of all races drawn from the lowest stratum of the Mediterranean basin and

the Balkans, together with hordes of the wretched, submerged populations of the Polish Ghettos.

. . . these newcomers were welcomed and given a share in our land and prosperity. The American taxed himself to sanitize and educate these poor helots, and as soon as they could speak English, encouraged them to enter into the political life, first of municipalities, and then of the nation.

The result is showing plainly in the rapid decline in the birth rate of native Americans because the poorer classes of Colonial stock, where they still exist, will not bring children into the world to compete in the labor market with the

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Slovak, the Italian, the Syrian, and the Jew. The native American is too proud to mix socially with them, and is gradually withdrawing from the scene, abandoning to these aliens the land which he conquered and developed. The man of the old stock is being crowded out of many country districts by these foreigners, just as he is to-day being literally driven off the streets of New York City by the swarms of Polish Jews. These immigrants adopt the language of the native American; they wear his clothes; they steal his name; and they are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals, and while he is being elbowed out of his own home the American

looks calmly abroad and urges on others the suicidal ethics which are exterminating his own race.

Source: Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (Salem, NH: Ayer Co. Publishers, 1970).

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Louis Marshall, chair of the American Jewish Relief Committee, wrote this letter to President Calvin Coolidge in 1924.

ON BEHALF of many hundred thousands of citizens of the United States, both native-born and naturalized, who feel slighted by the terms of the Immigration Bill now before you for Executive action, and availing ourselves of your permission, we venture to state reasons justifying your disapproval of the measure.

. . . it is fitting to refer, as symptomatic of the atmosphere of racial hostility which permeates this proposed legislation, to the provision which is intended to terminate forthwith the so-called Gentlemen's Agreement with the Empire of Japan and to exclude from the quota privileges conferred by the act all subjects of that Government. . . .

. . . this bill, in the most offensive manner and in total disregard of the natural feelings of a sister nation, whom we have regarded as a political equal, inflicts a deep insult upon the national and racial consciousness of a highly civilized and progressive country. Such a wound will never cease to rankle. It will give rise to hostility which, even when not apparent on the surface, will prove most serious. . . .

The present bill, however, is avowedly discriminatory . . .

This is the first time in the history of American legislation that there has been an attempt to discriminate in respect to European immigration between those who come from different parts of the continent. It is not only a differentiation as to

countries of origin, but also of racial stocks and of religious beliefs. Those coming from Northern and Western Europe are supposed to be Anglo-Saxon or mythical Nordics, and to a large extent Protestant. Those coming from Southern and Eastern Europe are of different racial stocks and of a different faith. There are today in this country millions of citizens, both native-born and naturalized, descended from those racial stocks and entertaining those religious beliefs against which this bill deliberately discriminates. There is no mincing of the matter.

To add insult to injury, the effort has been made to justify this class legislation by charging that those who are sought to be excluded are inferior types and not assimilable. There is no justification in fact for such a contention. In common with all other immigrants, those who have come from the countries sought to be tabooed have been industrious and law-abiding and have made valuable contributions to our industrial, commercial and social development. They have done the hard, manual work which is indispensable to normal economic growth. Their children, educated in our public schools, are as American in their outlook as are those of the immigrants of earlier periods. . . .

What we regard as the danger lurking in this legislation is, that it stimulates racial, national and religious hatreds and jealousies, that it encourages one part of our population to arrogate to itself a sense of superiority, and to classify another as one of inferiority.

Source: Charles Reznikoff, ed., *Louis Marshall, Champion of Liberty: Selected Papers and Addresses*, Philadelphia, 1957, Vol. I, pp. 208-214.

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GREAT DEBATES WORKSHEET 8

Directions: Use the information in the Unit 8 debate to answer the following questions. If necessary, use an additional sheet of paper.

A. Comprehension

1. What ethnic groups is Madison Grant referring to when he uses the term *native Americans*? _____
2. List four ethnic groups that Grant feels are inferior to what he calls the "Nordic race." _____
3. Louis Marshall believes that the new law will be most offensive to which foreign country? _____
4. According to Marshall, how have the "new" immigrants contributed to the economy of the United States? _____

B. Critical Thinking

1. **Distinguishing Fact from Opinion:** Identify at least two opinions found in each reading. _____

2. **Recognizing Bias:** Each reading uses emotionally charged terms to refer to the new immigrants. List the positive and negative terms used in each reading. _____

3. **Recognizing Ideologies:** American society is based on the ideal that all people are created equal. List statements from the readings that either support or contradict this ideal. _____

4. **Testing Conclusions:** Evaluate the arguments on both sides of the debate. Which side's arguments are most effective and convincing? Use specific reasons and examples to support your position. _____

