

Part II: U.S. Immigration in a Changing World

The surges in immigration, as well as major conflicts that took place during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, transformed the country. These transformations set the stage for decades of debate about how the United States should move forward.

While the immigration debates from the 1920s until the beginning of the twenty-first century varied, concerns about the economy, national security, assimilation, and the cultural effects of immigration each played a major role in shaping opinions. Immigrants, policymakers, activists, and the public debated these complex issues throughout the years. These debates shaped policy decisions, immigrant experiences, and the experiences of all people in the United States.

What was the 1924 National Origins Act?

By the 1920s, immigration had transformed the U.S. population dramatically. Some viewed the uptick in immigration positively, citing the ability of the United States to grow economically with the help of its large immigrant workforce. At the same time, others worried about the possible economic consequences of immigration, including reduced wages and job opportunities. Some people also drew upon xenophobic and racist ideas to argue that immigrants were a danger to the security and culture of the United States.

Amid these sentiments, the United States reassessed its immigration policies and passed the National Origins Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act. The act was built on a 1921 act that had established race-based immigration quotas based on nationality. The 1924 act reduced the immigration quota from each European country to 2 percent of that country's proportion of the U.S. population in 1890. These quotas favored Northern and Western European immigrants—who arrived in the United States in large numbers before 1890. It also limited immigration by Eastern and Southern Europeans—who had only begun arriving in the United States in large numbers after 1890. For example, in the 1910s, 1.23 million Italians came to the United States, but in the 1930s, the quota system only allowed 85,053 Italian immigrants to

Part II Definitions

Anti-Semitism—Hostility or discrimination directed at Jewish people.

Displacement—The forced removal or departure of people from their homes often due to disaster, war, or political violence.

Refugee—A person who leaves his or her country due to a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, political views, or membership in a particular social group. Many scholars believe that this legal definition is too narrow. They argue that people fleeing conflicts should generally be considered refugees because they are seeking refuge (safety).

arrive. The 1924 act also kept Asian immigration to a minimum.

“The essential characteristic of the post-war period in the United States is the nervous reaction of the original American stock against an insidious subjection by foreign blood.”

—André Siegfried, French scholar and commentator on U.S. politics, 1927

In order to strengthen relations with its neighbors, the United States exempted countries in the Western Hemisphere from immigration quotas. But, many territories in the Western Hemisphere were not yet independent countries. Of these dependent territories, most were majority black. The quotas in place for the colonial power ruling over these territories applied to those seeking to emigrate. As a result, black immigration from the Caribbean fell from twelve thousand in 1923 to less than eight hundred in 1924.

The quotas made immigration more difficult for all people. For example, the new system operated on a first-come, first-served basis. As a result, some immigrants traveled to the United States and were refused entry because the quota for their

country of origin had been met while they were en route.

How did people respond to the 1924 National Origins Act?

Many people agreed with the 1924 act, but others publicly opposed it. Religious groups, ethnic groups, organizations concerned with immigrant rights, and others spoke out in order to protect their interests. For example, predominantly Jewish labor unions, such as New York's garment workers, advocated for policies to increase Jewish immigration. Additionally, U.S. businesses involved in East Asia and U.S. Protestant churches with missions in Japan protested the act because they feared that it would hurt their work. Foreign governments, such as the governments of Italy, Japan, and Poland, also protested the quotas.

On the other hand, those who had hoped to see a more restrictive immigration policy also challenged the act. For example, some questioned the decision to exempt countries in the Western Hemisphere from quotas. In particular, some argued for a quota to limit Mexican immigration. They based their beliefs on racist and inaccurate ideas about Mexicans.

“To admit peons from Mexico... while restricting Europeans and excluding orientals is not only ridiculous and illogical—it destroys the biological, social, and economic advantages to be secured from the restriction of immigration.”

—Roy L. Garis,
anti-immigration
advocate and scholar, 1930

The Great Depression and World War II

Following the passage of the 1924 National Origins Act, U.S. immigration patterns began to shift. The act itself slowed immigration

significantly. In addition, other international and domestic factors also slowed immigration to the United States and influenced the experiences of those immigrants who did arrive.

How did the Great Depression affect U.S. immigration?

Beginning in 1929, the economies of countries around the world faltered, and the Great Depression began. Stock markets crashed, unemployment soared, and people found themselves homeless and jobless.

In the United States, the Great Depression greatly influenced views of immigration. Many supported the restrictive 1924 immigration policy, because they feared that immigrants might take the already scarce jobs or drive down wages.

While the number of immigrants to the United States did decrease during the Depression, immigration did not stop entirely. Despite U.S. economic troubles, some people from other countries who also faced economic hardship continued to seek admittance to the United States. Like others in the



A Polish American coal miner working in West Virginia, 1938. During the Great Depression, jobs were scarce. Both immigrants and U.S. citizens who could find work often worked long hours at demanding jobs with poor conditions.

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United States at the time, if these immigrants were able to find work, they often worked long hours for little pay.

“He would dig drainage ditches and get about thirty dollars a month. He’d take a couple of potatoes with him and make a fire, and that’s what he ate.... I thank him so much for having the courage to give us the opportunity to live here in this country.”

—Donald Roberts, an immigrant from Wales who came to the United States when he was twelve during the Great Depression, reflecting on his father’s experiences

How did anti-immigration attitudes shape immigrants’ experiences during the Great Depression?

Anti-immigration attitudes—fueled by concerns about culture, the economy, and security—prevailed during the Great Depression. In some cases, this resulted in devastating consequences for immigrants. For example, anti-Mexican sentiments rooted in economic fears and racism soared. In response, between 1929 and 1935, the U.S. government undertook measures to force people of Mexican descent to return to Mexico.

“We left on a train with many other people from Los Angeles. There were a lot of people at the train station and men, women and children were crying. I was crying. I didn’t want to leave Los Angeles especially since my mother had recently died and now I wouldn’t be able to visit her grave.”

—Emilia Castañeda, a U.S. citizen of Mexican descent who was deported to Mexico as a child in the 1930s

During this time period, about five hundred thousand people returned—some by choice but the majority by force—to Mexico. While some of these people had been born in Mexico, about 60 percent were U.S. citizens. Many were children.

“All of our neighbor’s kids were Anglo so we spoke nothing but English when we played. I found it very odd when we took the train from Idaho after being jailed with my siblings and parents for several days when we found ourselves on a train full of other Mexican American families. I had never been around so many other [U.S.] Mexicans.”

—Isidrio, a U.S. citizen of Mexican descent who was deported from Montana with his family at age six in the 1930s

Anti-immigration sentiments also negatively affected East Asians. They continued to struggle to gain entry to the country. Unable to pursue traditional channels of immigration due to U.S. policy, many continued to come as “paper sons” and “paper daughters” (using false papers that said their parents were legal residents of the United States). Upon arrival, East Asians continued to face long periods of detainment and interrogation.

“It is pretty tough, coming as a paper son. Actually it is illegal. But when you are a kid you are not intending to lie; you just follow what the grown-ups tell you to do.”

—Benjamin Choy, a Chinese immigrant who came to the United States in 1930 at age thirteen, reflecting on his experiences in a 2009 book

In addition, Jewish people faced challenges to their immigration processes during the Depression era. In the wake of World War I and with the rise of Nazism, conditions worsened for European Jews. Many who could fled. As a result, between 1933 and 1940, the United States admitted 127,000 Jewish people. But this was only a fraction of those who applied. Anti-Semitic attitudes, the desire to protect diplomatic relations with Germany, and immigration quotas led U.S. politicians to ignore the plight of the Jewish people.

At the same time, some criticized the United States for its reluctance to admit Jewish refugees in the years before World War II.

“[A] great power free to act has no alibi for not acting.... It is not a question of how

many more unemployed this country can safely add to its own unemployed millions. It is a test of civilization.”

—New York Times writer Anne O’Hare McCormick, July 4, 1938

Nevertheless, the economic, political, and social concerns of many in the country overpowered these calls for less-restrictive immigration policies during the Depression era.

How did World War II affect the migration of people worldwide?

In 1939, after years of worldwide tension and economic woes, World War II began. The United States became involved in the conflict in 1941 after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawai’i. There were two sides of the fighting: the Axis—led by Germany, Japan, and Italy—and the Allies—led by the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union.

During and after World War II, evacuations, forced displacement, and deportation perpetrated by both sides of the fighting affected millions worldwide. In various locations throughout East Asia and India, for example, the Allies expelled many Japanese people. In addition, Axis forces displaced and murdered millions of Jewish people and people of other backgrounds all over Europe.

Why did the U.S. government displace U.S. citizens and immigrants during the war?

During World War II, national security concerns and racist beliefs influenced many decisions about

U.S. policy. Fueled by the Pearl Harbor attack and deeply rooted anti-Asian racism, many people argued that people of Japanese descent could not be trusted. In response, the United States imprisoned U.S. citizens of Japanese descent and Japanese immigrants living in the United States. The U.S. government forcibly relocated Japanese Americans to concentration camps beginning in 1942.

“We saw all these people behind the fences, looking out, hanging onto the wire, and looking out because they were anxious to know who was coming in. But I will never forget the shocking feeling that human beings were behind this fence



A Japanese American boy awaits forced removal from Salinas, California, to a concentration camp, May 1942.

Public Domain, Russell Lee, Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Collection, Library of Congress, C-USF34-T01-072499-D.

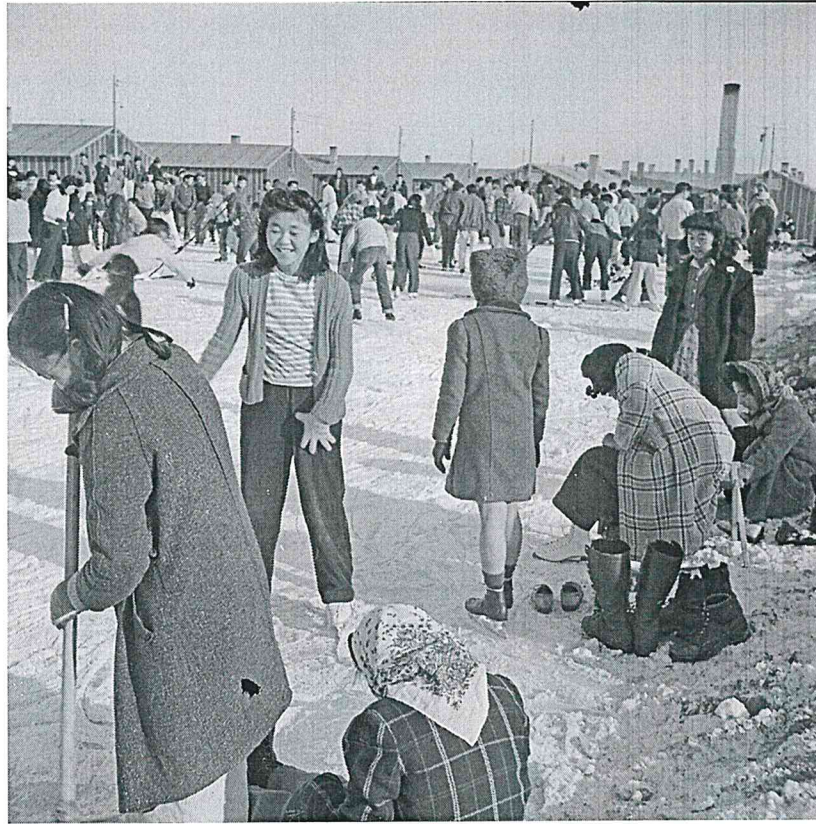
like animals. And we were going to also lose our freedom and walk inside that gate and find ourselves...cooped up there.... When the gates were shut, we knew that we had lost something that was very precious; that we were no longer free."

—Mary Tsukamoto, a Japanese American educator and activist who was imprisoned at a U.S. concentration camp during World War II, reflecting on her experiences in the 1980s

Of the more than 110,000 people of Japanese descent incarcerated, most were from the West Coast. Around 62 percent were U.S. citizens. No evidence supported claims that Japanese Americans posed a security threat. In reality, these policies were based on racist ideas, not legitimate security concerns.

Life in the concentration camps was difficult. They were located in isolated areas in the western part of the United States. People resided in cramped barracks with little

privacy or freedom. Jobs available to people living in the camps were often physically demanding and paid little.



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Although life in concentration camps was difficult for Japanese Americans, people adapted to their new surroundings in a variety of ways. For example, these incarcerated people in a concentration camp in the early 1940s in Utah made an ice rink to enjoy in the winter months.

U.S. Concentration Camps

A concentration camp is a facility where people (such as political prisoners, prisoners of war, or refugees) are detained or confined. During World War II, Japanese Americans were confined in U.S. concentration camps. "Concentration camp" was the term used by the U.S. government at the time. These concentration camps should not be confused with the death camps operated by Nazi Germany in World War II. Concentration camps are not necessarily death camps that function to exterminate a population. U.S. concentration camps during World War II were sites of mass violations of civil rights. They were not sites of mass killings.

U.S. concentration camps have also been called internment camps. But, internment actually refers to the confinement of "enemy aliens." It was one of many euphemisms (or, words that soften or disguise meaning) used to describe the incarceration of Japanese Americans. Because the majority of the ethnic Japanese incarcerated were born in the United States and were U.S. citizens, "concentration camps" is a more accurate term. The U.S. government also used the euphemism "relocation" instead of "forced mass removal."

**“Under the scorching sun
on and on I curse
the arrogant country.”**

—Itaru Ina, an incarcerated Japanese American, August 6, 1945

Despite these conditions, detainees worked to continue on with their lives, educating their children in camp schools, working at camp jobs, and organizing and participating in recreational activities.

In addition to its mistreatment of Japanese Americans, the U.S. government also imprisoned some people of German and Italian descent as well as nearly one thousand native Alaskans. The U.S. government claimed that they—like Japanese Americans—posed security threats. At the conclusion of the war, many displaced people could not return to their former homes because they had been vandalized or taken over by other people.

How did international conversations about immigration change after World War II?

In addition to displaced U.S. citizens and residents, the war also displaced millions of people worldwide. Some scholars estimate that the war

displaced sixty million Europeans alone. This crisis forced governments around the world to reassess their immigration policies.

Governments struggled in particular with how to respond to the plight of European Jews. After pressure from some government officials and members of the U.S. Jewish community, the U.S. government and Jewish organizations worked to provide refuge to Jewish people. They also assisted those who resettled in the United States.

“Our work was with the immigrants who came here who didn’t have anybody to take care of them, and some of the officials wanted to send them back. Our job was to intervene and take responsibility for them.... People used to come in, crying and crying. They all had their share of heartache, and you tried to do the best you could for them.”

—Sadie Guttman Kaplan, who worked with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society during the 1930s and 1940s

In addition to providing assistance to Jewish refugees, the U.S. Jewish community lobbied once more for policies to admit more displaced Jews. In



Jewish activist Louise Waterman Wise addressing the War Emergency Conference of the World Jewish Congress in 1944. Wise, and many other activists, argued that the United States should accept more Jewish refugees and provide aid to Jewish people in need.

World Jewish Congress (CC BY-SA 3.0).

response, Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. It allowed for the admission of more than four hundred thousand people left homeless by World War II and Soviet communism in Eastern Europe. But critics claimed that the law did not do enough and favored European Christians.

“When you get an American visa...you are told you have ninety days to reach American shores. And my father realized as time was going by that there was no way in which he could get his family to the U.S. within the time frame. I guess I could say it’s not thanks to Uncle Sam that I am sitting here today.”

—Hessy Levinsons Taft, a Jewish World War II refugee, describing her family’s journey to the United States via France and Cuba

The newly formed United Nations addressed concerns about displacement with the 1951 Refugee Convention. The Convention defined the term “refugee,” discussed the rights of the displaced, and legally obligated countries to protect refugees. It defined a refugee as a person who leaves his or her country due to a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, political views, or membership in a particular social group. The law made responding to refugees an issue that governments around the world would have to consider when designing immigration policies.

In addition to changes related to European refugees, the end of World War II also brought about changes in U.S. treatment of Asian immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act had been repealed in 1943, because China was an important war-time ally of the United States. But it was not until 1946 that the United States allowed Asians from other countries, such as the Philippines and India, to become citizens.

The Cold War

As the world began to recover from World War II, new ideas about what the relationship should be between immigration, the economy, national security, and culture arose. World War II lifted the U.S. economy out of the Great Depression. The United States emerged from the war as the most powerful country in the world. By the late 1940s,

U.S. leaders had taken on a new range of international commitments to thwart the growing threat of the Soviet Union. The deepening Cold War—a global struggle for political and military domination between communist bloc countries (led by the Soviet Union) and capitalist, democratic countries (led by the United States)—redefined the U.S. role in the world. Fear of communism and Cold War tensions led to shifts in policies and attitudes on immigration.

How did the Cold War affect immigration policy?

The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 was followed in the 1950s and 1960s by a number of bills designed to offer refuge to people from communist countries. While these bills did not actually state that they were meant to favor those fleeing communism, in practice, they did. The wave of Cuban immigration that took place at this time is perhaps the best example of how the United States used immigration policy to further its Cold War goals.

How did Cold War interests shape U.S. immigration policy on Cuba?

Massive Cuban immigration to the United States began in 1959 after the communist revolutionaries fighting under Fidel Castro overthrew Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Despite Batista’s violent and oppressive rule, the United States supported his government.

In response to the communist takeover, in the 1950s, Cubans began to flee to the United States in unprecedented numbers. Hoping to hinder the growth of a communist Cuba, the United States enacted policies that allowed large flows of Cuban immigration to continue. Hundreds of thousands of Cubans left for the United States. Once they arrived, the majority of Cubans settled in Florida. Many arrived with few resources.

“It was difficult for [my father] to see his kids not have everything they needed. Because we had a lot in Cuba compared to the rest of the population. When we came here we started out from zero. Nothing.”

—Edel Rodriguez, a Cuban American who came to the United States, reflecting on his experiences

Cuban Americans created cultural and community centers to assist new arrivals and preserve Cuban cultural practices in the United States. They aided new immigrants in obtaining their government papers, finding schools for their children, and seeking out other social services.

Other groups of immigrants facing similar conditions as Cubans were not welcomed in the same way, further demonstrating how powerfully Cold War interests dictated U.S. immigration policy. For example, like Cubans, Haitians fleeing government persecution often attempted to reach the United States by boat. Unlike Cuba, the United States supported Haiti's government. In addition, others also suggest that race influenced U.S. policy at this time, as the majority of people in Haiti are black. While hundreds of thousands of Cubans came to the United States, the U.S. government denied asylum to thousands of Haitian arrivals. Thousands of others were intercepted at sea, held in detention centers, or sent back to Haiti. This trend would continue throughout the decades to come.

How was 1965 a turning point in U.S. immigration?

In 1952, the Immigration and Nationality Act relaxed restrictions against immigration from Asia. Otherwise, the system created in 1924 remained in place until the 1950s and 1960s. Activism from immigrant advocacy groups, the civil rights movement, and shifting foreign relations concerns forced lawmakers to re-examine the national origins quotas. These concerns resulted in the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

“This system violates the basic principle of American democracy—the principle that values and rewards each man on the basis of his merit as a man.”

—President Lyndon B. Johnson, criticizing earlier U.S. immigration policy at the signing of the 1965 act

The act created the conditions that allowed for another great wave of immigration. It was enacted during a time of strong economic growth, a vibrant period for activism, and continued Cold War tensions. In response to a growing international movement against racism and racist laws and in

order to compete with the Soviet Union, the United States replaced its race-based quotas.

“Just as we sought to eliminate discrimination in our land through the Civil Rights Act, today we seek by phasing out the national origins quota system to eliminate discrimination in immigration to this nation composed of the descendants of immigrants.”

—Representative Philip Burton (D-CA) to Congress, August 25, 1965

The 1965 act prioritized family reunification and attracting skilled workers. In addition, for the first time, U.S. immigration policy afforded immigrants from around the world more equal consideration for relocation to the United States. All of these provisions would lead to major changes in U.S. immigration.

How did the 1965 act change patterns of U.S. immigration?

The act immediately boosted immigration for the nationalities that the previous quotas restricted. In 1960, nearly 75 percent of all immigrants were European. By 1980, that number dropped to 37 percent. Asian, Latin American, and African immigration increased. The 1965 act's emphasis on family reunification also set up a system that would affect future immigration patterns. The preference system enabled those with citizenship status to sponsor the immigration of their spouses, children, and siblings.

While some people praised the 1965 act for abolishing race-based quotas, others criticized it. Although no longer racially discriminatory in writing, critics would go on to argue that immigration debates and policies still unfairly targeted certain groups of people in other ways long after the 1965 reform.

In addition to conversations about policy, discussions about the benefits and threats of immigration also continued after the passage of the 1965 act. For example, some discussed the economic and cultural benefits of welcoming educated and skilled professionals, regardless of their race. Others took a less favorable view of increased immigration from



White House Photo Office, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum, A1421-33a, 10-03-1965.

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act on Liberty Island in New York. The act signified the end of race-based immigration policies in the United States.

non-European countries, justifying their views with economic rationale or discriminatory concerns about culture and national security.

“Are we prepared to embrace so great a horde of the world’s unfortunates?... Whatever may be our benevolent intent toward many people, [the bill] fails to give due consideration to the economic needs, the cultural traditions, and the public sentiment of the citizens of the United States.”

—Myra C. Hacker, vice president of the New Jersey Coalition, in her testimony at a Senate immigration subcommittee hearing, February 10, 1965

In the 1970s, immigration law faced new challenges as immigrants began to enter the United States in the largest numbers in half a century. Legal controls on immigration were tighter than in the early 1900s. No more than twenty thousand immigrants from any one country could enter the

United States annually. The law also limited the total number of immigrants to be admitted annually to 290,000. (The immediate relatives of U.S. citizens were exempt from this limit.)

Despite the strict regulations, many immigrants entered the country outside of traditional routes, either as refugees or as undocumented immigrants. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of backlogged applications clogged the conventional channels of immigration. This encouraged undocumented immigration by those looking to meet U.S. demands for labor or escape dire conditions in their countries of origin.

How did U.S. policy abroad affect immigration from Southeast Asia?

In the years following the passage of the 1965 act, renewed concern about refugees began to dominate debates about immigration. U.S. actions abroad have often led to displacement. Many of these displaced people then seek refuge in the United States. They are sometimes met with resistance.



Public Domain. U.S. Marines in Japan.

South Vietnamese refugees arriving by helicopter to board U.S. Naval vessels in 1975 and head to the United States.

For example, beginning in the late 1970s and the 1980s, in the aftermath of U.S. efforts to eradicate communism from Southeast Asia—especially in Vietnam—many Southeast Asians were forced to flee. Laws passed in 1975 and 1976 allowed four hundred thousand Southeast Asian refugees to relocate to the United States. This further transformed the immigrant population.

Once in the United States, refugees faced many difficulties. Refugees met these challenges in various ways.

“Of course just like everyone else, our family had to start all over again. We lost everything. We’ve lost our country. We’ve lost our freedom. We’ve lost our identity. We’ve lost the life that we used to know.”

—Van Lan Truong, a Vietnamese-American who came to the United States as a refugee after the Vietnam War, reflecting on her experiences in 2015

U.S. resettlement plans tended to disperse Southeast Asian refugees into communities throughout the country. For the most part, the government resettled these refugees into communities that were majority working class and of color. Some refugees stayed in the communities into which they were resettled. Many others moved to other parts of the country to be closer to people from similar ethnic backgrounds and to seek economic opportunities.

The early waves of Southeast Asian refugees consisted of educated and financially well-off people. Those who made up later waves of immigrants often had lost nearly all of their resources in the war or were from poorer backgrounds. Many did not speak English. This made adjusting to life in the United States complex.

“Suddenly, we was excited to be able to breathe and live on American soil. But with apprehension, not knowing what to expect. And also because of the lack of English language as well.... But there

are some people there who are very helpful to me. Instrumental. I remember the librarian named Mrs. Levine. U.S. American.... About a week after I attend Hackett Middle High, she asked me to come to the library one hour before school start.... And she would, everything she would teach me, volunteered to teach me, the basic of English language....”

—Tan Dinh, a Vietnamese-American refugee, reflecting on his experiences in 2015

While many people worked to support refugees, others discriminated against them. Some perpetrated hate crimes against refugees or made assumptions about them based on their race. Others argued that refugees damaged the U.S. economy and culture. In the face of such mistreatment, refugees and activists continued to protest against discrimination.

What was the Refugee Act of 1980?

Prompted by growing concerns about Southeast Asian refugees, the U.S. government passed the Refugee Act of 1980. The act allowed fifty thousand refugees to enter the country annually. It also allowed for increased admissions in times of crisis. In addition, the act outlined resettlement policies for refugees. As a result, the United States was able to accept a greater number of refugees without needing to decrease the number of other types of immigrants admitted to the country.

Why did some people criticize the U.S. response to refugees?

Earlier policies toward refugees tended to favor those from communist countries. The 1980 act no longer based refugee status on whether a person was fleeing communism. But, some people once again argued that Cold War concerns led the United States to more freely grant refugee status to those leaving communist countries than to persecuted people from other places. For example, people from El Salvador and Haiti at this time—countries with oppressive, U.S. backed governments—were generally denied refugee status. The U.S. government instead tended to grant refugee status to people from communist countries, such as Cuba and the Soviet Union.

“[President George H. W. Bush] rightly decided that it was far better to return all Haitians than to encourage, deliberately or not, tens of thousands of people to take to the open ocean in unseaworthy, overcrowded boats.... When the Haitians sense the door has been cracked open, they will once again prepare their rag-tag armada and set sail for the land of plenty—America.”

—Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV), in response to U.S. policies on Haitian refugees, May 10, 1994

In fact, many members of these communities today continue to live in a legal limbo, with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) granted by the U.S. government. This is a temporary status granted to people from countries with ongoing conflicts, environmental crises, and other circumstances that prevent them from returning. Temporary Protected Status does not lead to legal permanent resident status.

How did activists respond to the U.S. refugee practices?

Acting on criticisms of U.S. refugee policy, activists began to assist the vast number of people fleeing violence who struggled to get refugee status. For example, one social movement—the Sanctuary Movement—was a religious and political movement dedicated to offering refuge to Central Americans. The movement also brought attention to the harm caused by U.S. policies in Central America. Those involved in the movement assisted undocumented Central Americans by providing legal aid, financial aid, and a safe place to settle.

“The Rabbinical Assembly endorses the concept of Sanctuary as provided by synagogues, churches and other communities of faith in the United States.”

—The U.S. Rabbinical Assembly, in an official statement endorsing the Sanctuary Movement, 1984

By 1987, more than four hundred groups nationwide had joined the Sanctuary Movement. Once reaching the communities that provided them with safety and assistance, those who had

fled spoke publicly about the conditions in their countries of origin. This further raised awareness of the dangers that they had faced.

As had taken place throughout history, debates about immigration and responses from various stakeholders took many shapes during the Cold War era. This trend would continue into the last decades of the century.

Immigration in a Diversifying United States

Beginning with the 1965 immigration act and continuing throughout the rest of the century, the immigrant population in the United States became more diverse. As the Cold War ended, concerns—such as those about immigration policy and the economy—continued to inspire debate. Additionally, people discussed other questions with greater frequency and intensity—such as those about assimilation, social services, and the rights of undocumented people. All of these concerns would shape the immigration debates of the last decades of the twentieth century.

“I consider myself as African American Indian, I guess, ‘cause I was born in Africa, my ancestors are from India, and I’m living in America. So I guess African American Indian. All three of them, and I like it.”

—Fatima Durani, who came to the United States from Tanzania in the 1990s, reflecting on her experiences

What was the Immigration Reform and Control Act?

Undocumented immigration had been a major issue in the immigration debate in the years leading up to the 1990s. The U.S. government responded to increasing concerns about undocumented immigration with a new policy—the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Policymakers intended for the act to slow undocumented immigration. But some activists saw its effects as somewhat positive for undocumented people. It imposed penalties on employers who knowingly hired undocumented workers. It also provided amnesty and a pathway to citizenship for

many undocumented people. The act failed to slow undocumented immigration from Central America and Mexico. Between two and three million undocumented immigrants gained legal status. Still, not all undocumented immigrants who qualified were actually able to obtain legal status.

Why did immigration increase in the 1990s?

Overall, immigration dramatically increased in the 1990s. A number of factors contributed to this. The strength of the U.S. economy attracted many. Some people came to work in specialized fields. Others came seeking refuge from oppressive governments. Still others came to be reunited with family already living in the United States.

The majority of new immigrants in the 1990s came from countries in the Americas followed by Asia, Europe, and Africa. In 1990, the largest country of origin for U.S. immigrants was Mexico. By the end of the decade, Mexico was the country of origin of 30 percent of all U.S. immigrants, followed by the Philippines with 4 percent, and India, China, and Vietnam each making up around 3 percent. Immigrants settled throughout the country, but regions with historically small immigrant populations—such as the Southeast, the Midwest, and the Rocky Mountain region—saw especially large increases.

What types of immigration increased during the 1990s?

Part of the increase in immigration in the 1990s occurred in the form of legal immigration. For example, in 1988, 641,346 legal permanent residents entered the United States. By 1991, that number jumped to 1,826,595 and continued to grow throughout the decade.

In addition to legal immigration, some people could not attain legal U.S. immigration status. Continuing earlier trends, during the 1990s, undocumented immigration also increased. In fact, in 1998, more undocumented than legal immigrants arrived in the United States.

Undocumented immigration increased throughout the 1990s for a number of reasons. Undocumented people came from many countries. Like other groups of immigrants, undocumented people sought economic opportunities, reunifica-

tion with family, educational opportunities, and a place of refuge from oppressive regimes.

The largest group of undocumented immigrants residing in the United States came from Mexico. In 1990, 2.05 million undocumented Mexicans lived and worked in the United States. By the end of the decade, this number had risen to 4.45 million. In addition, the number of undocumented people from Asia increased from 250,000 in 1990 to 1.05 million in 2000. The number of undocumented Central Americans rose from 525,000 in 1990 to one million in 2000.

How did increases in immigration shape life in the United States in the 1990s?

The huge increases in immigration that took place throughout the 1990s influenced life for immigrants and U.S. citizens alike. As has been the case historically, upon arriving in the United States, immigrants faced a new series of challenges and conditions. Some settled in ethnic enclaves or in cities with large populations of people from similar backgrounds. For example, many Korean immigrants chose to settle in Los Angeles in or near the city's Koreatown—an ethnic enclave with economic opportunities in shops, legal offices, bookstores, restaurants, and other businesses. In addition, organizations in these enclaves assisted new immigrants with the logistics of resettlement. They also often offered language and cultural events and classes. Immigrants sometimes chose to settle in ethnic enclaves in order to escape anti-immigrant discrimination from U.S. citizens.



Public Domain. United States Coast Guard.

A crew member on a U.S. Coast Guard vessel gives instructions to Haitian immigrants intercepted at sea in 1991. Between October and December 1991 alone, nearly fifteen thousand Haitians were intercepted and detained until the United States determined their legal status. Despite hardships in Haiti and many Haitians' fears of persecution and violence, the United States has historically been reluctant to grant Haitians asylum.

Other groups of immigrants arriving in the United States in the 1990s settled outside of ethnic enclaves. For example, immigrants with specialized skills and professional degrees often opted to live in primarily non-immigrant, wealthy or middle-class neighborhoods in regions throughout the country. For these people—many of whom spoke English upon arrival, had some familiarity with U.S. culture, and were of a wealthier background than other immigrants—settling in middle to upper

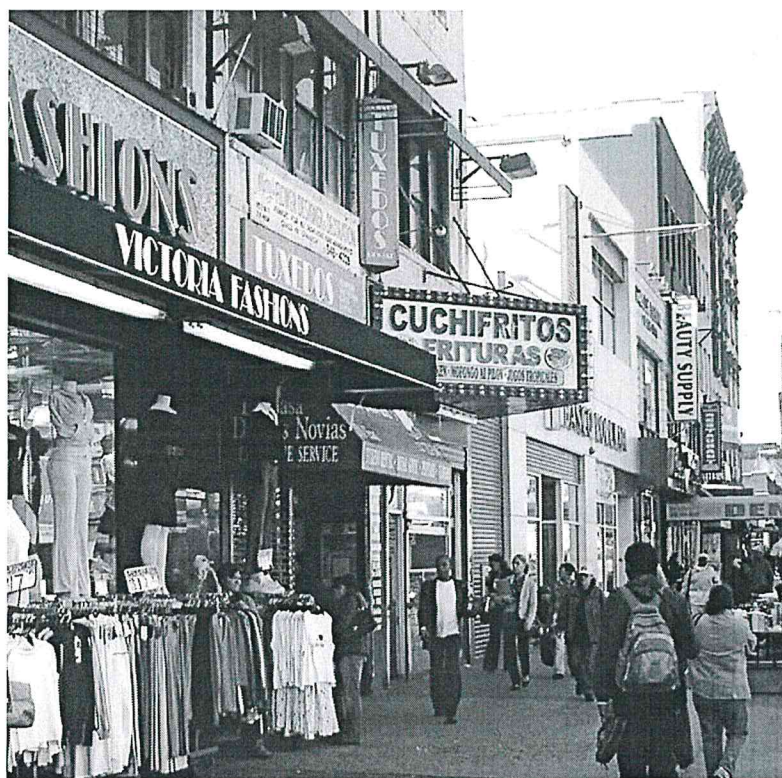
class neighborhoods made more sense for their needs.

All immigrants in the United States face questions about assimilation and preserving cultural practices from their countries of origin. Many immigrants who did not speak English before moving to the United States took classes to learn the language. Others learned more about their new country by joining the workforce or engaging in their local communities. In addition to learning about the United States, immigrants and ethnic communities worked to provide spaces in which people could learn about and practice elements of the culture of their country of origin. For example, some members of ethnic communities sent their children to weekend classes to practice the language spoken in their country of origin. Others continued to engage with their cultural roots by participating in community events or classes.

“Even though I want to be an American, I won’t forget my own culture, my own Chinese traditional things. Chinese culture is part of my heart. I think it will stay there forever. I like them both, which is the American way and the Chinese way. They both make my life better.”

—Michael, a Chinese-American immigrant who came to the United States in the 1990s, reflecting on his experiences in a 2011 PBS documentary

Increased immigration also shaped the experiences of U.S. citizens in the 1990s. For example, many citizens enjoyed the businesses that immigrants started, worked closely with and learned from immigrants in the workforce, and learned about other cultures and languages from immigrants.



El Barrio in New York’s Spanish Harlem where many Puerto Rican and Dominican immigrants have historically chosen to live and work. Many other groups of people also live in this area.

In addition to those who embraced the benefits of immigration, others continued to hold anti-immigrant viewpoints in the 1990s. In particular, opponents argued that immigrants would damage the economy by taking jobs from U.S. citizens and cause an increase in taxes through their use of social services. Some opponents continued to espouse xenophobic and racist ideas to spread fear about immigration.

How did people respond to anti-immigration sentiments in the 1990s?

People responded to anti-immigrant attitudes in the 1990s in various ways. In some cases, people joined activist movements that called for immigrant rights.

Latino activists in particular worked to promote various forms of civic engagement among both immigrants and U.S. citizens of Latin American descent. They sought to engage voters and immigrants in debates about the future of immi-

gration policy and to encourage citizens to vote for pro-immigration laws.

“Wake up, Chicanos, wake up, let’s get involved, wake up you sleeping giant, we’ll get our problems solved. No more mañana [tomorrow] syndrome, we have the antidote. We’re going to get the hell out and register to vote.... We’re Mexican Americans, or Latinos, take your choice. Hispanos, let’s raise our voice. Wake up, Chicanos...the only way to change things is to register and vote.”

—Lalo Guerrero, a Mexican-American composer and activist who wrote songs to encourage Latino civic engagement in the 1990s

In addition, some activists reminded the U.S. public of the role that immigrants played in defending and shaping the United States.

“I rescued many American pilots, and I feel I am worthy of American help. When the American troops pulled out, we had to run for our lives. We came here not by choice but by death.”

—Nhia Lor Vang, a Laotian veteran who fought for the United States in Southeast Asia, arguing for increased benefits for immigrants and refugees, 1997

Despite calls for greater equality, others continued to voice concern about one type of immigration during the 1990s in particular: undocumented immigration.

How did state policies during the 1990s address undocumented immigration?

Debates were most intense in states with large undocumented populations. In California, as the economy faltered in the early 1990s, politicians and the public began to demand new laws—such as Proposition 187. Supporters of Proposition 187 wanted to deny social services, including education and healthcare, to undocumented people and refuse citizenship to the children of undocumented people born in the United States. Supporters of

Proposition 187 argued that their concerns about immigration were economic, but many supporters’ statements were xenophobic.

“I have no intention of being the object of ‘conquest,’ peaceful or otherwise, by Latinos, Asians, blacks, Arabs or any other group of individuals who have claimed my country.”

—Ruth Coffey, a leader of Stop Immigration Now, an anti-immigration group that supported Proposition 187, 1994

Immigrant activist groups challenged Proposition 187 and other laws like it. For example, some helped register Latino U.S. citizens to vote because they believed this would help in their fight against restrictive policies that targeted undocumented immigrants.

“Su voto es su voz.

Your vote is your voice.”

—Motto of the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project in the 1990s

How did national policies during the 1990s address undocumented immigration?

At the national level, policies also reflected changing ideas about undocumented immigration. A new law in 1996 added to the provisions of the immigration law passed in 1990. (The 1990 law increased the number of legal immigrants with highly desired job skills allowed into the country.) The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act focused on curbing undocumented immigration. It streamlined procedures for deporting undocumented people and rejecting asylum claims. Deportations doubled as a result. In addition, immigrant detention centers became mandated. In the next two years, the number of detained immigrants nearly doubled. Over the next decade, this number would increase from around 8,500 people to over thirty thousand.

“All Americans...are rightly disturbed by the large numbers of illegal aliens entering our country. The jobs they hold might otherwise be held by citizens or legal

immigrants. The public services they use impose burdens on our taxpayers.... We are a nation of immigrants. But we are also a nation of laws. It is wrong and ultimately self-defeating for a nation of immigrants to permit the kind of abuse of our immigration laws...and we must do more to stop it."

—President Bill Clinton, State of the Union address, January 1995

In another attempt to slow undocumented immigration, the U.S. government began to dedicate more resources to controlling the country's borders. The majority of these resources went toward fortifying the U.S.-Mexico border. Anti-immigrant groups applauded these efforts, often using racist or xenophobic language to voice their opinions.

“An invasion is spreading across America like wildfire, bringing gangs, drugs and an alien culture into the very heartland of America.”

—Anti-immigration activism group the Voice of Citizens Together, in their 1999 video, “Immigration: Threatening the Bonds of Our Union”

The number of undocumented immigrants apprehended along the border increased greatly as a result, setting a trend for the years to come. Crossing the border had always been a dangerous process, and it became even more hazardous with the added security. Undocumented people often relied on smugglers—called *coyotes*—to cross isolated portions of the border late at night. The weather could be extreme, and people often lacked water, food, and shelter. Many died, and others were arrested and detained. Nevertheless, undocumented people continued to seek entrance to the United States for many reasons.

How did NAFTA affect immigration?

In addition to new immigration laws, the United States also enacted economic policies that it hoped would slow undocumented immigration. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—a 1994 agreement to encourage increased economic relations between Canada, Mexico, and the United States—greatly affected

undocumented immigration. Some people predicted that NAFTA would strengthen the Mexican economy and drive down undocumented immigration. In reality, it created economic conditions that resulted in even greater undocumented immigration from Latin America, especially from Mexico. For example, NAFTA made it more difficult for Mexican producers and farmers to stay in business, forcing many to seek opportunities elsewhere after their businesses failed or their jobs disappeared.

How did attitudes about immigration change by the end of the decade?

While many people continued to support restricting immigration, activist efforts and the strong economy of the late 1990s both contributed to more positive views of immigration by the end of the decade. In 1993, 65 percent of U.S. citizens supported reducing immigration levels, but this number shrank to 36 percent by 1997. As the turn of the century approached, more people had begun to recognize the economic and cultural benefits of immigration.

“A couple of years ago, people were advocating building a wall around the country. That’s no longer the case. Before, we heard only one side of the immigration issue. Now, we get to talk about some of the positive contributions immigrants have made.”

—Senator Spencer Abraham (R-MI), speaking on shifts in public debates about immigration, 1998

In Part II, you have read about how immigration and the immigrant population of the United States transformed drastically from the time of race-based immigration quotas in the 1920s to racially and economically diverse waves of people arriving in the decades leading up to the turn of the century. While the makeup of the immigrant population itself changed, many of the issues facing policymakers, immigrants, and the U.S. public—economics, security, and assimilation—continue to hold relevance in the twenty-first century. As you read Part III, try to notice what issues remain relevant and what has changed about immigration in the twenty-first century.