

THE TWENTIES**Issues Connector: U.S. Immigration Policy**

Immigration is defined as the movement of people from one nation to another. The United States itself is largely a "nation of immigrants." Except for Native Americans, virtually every American is either a recent immigrant or a descendant of immigrants who came here from other parts of the world.

Despite our diversity of cultural backgrounds, the United States has never been fully at ease with immigration. On one hand, America has always sought and made use of immigrant labor. In fact, more than 90 percent of immigrants throughout history have come to this country in search of jobs. By coming here and taking mostly low-paying and menial work, these people hope to build a better life for themselves and their families. Often, they succeed.

On the other hand, some Americans view immigration as a problem. Many of those born in the United States, even though their ancestors were immigrants, are uneasy about the presence of more recent immigrants. This is particularly true if the immigrants' native culture is markedly different from what American citizens perceive to be the norm.

Immigration during America's Colonial Period

The explorers who settled New England were America's earliest immigrants. Most settlers came because of the potential to accumulate wealth, although some came for religious reasons. Many early settlers were English men and women who had been convicted of minor crimes and sent to America as indentured servants.

The first Africans were brought to America in the early 1600s to provide labor on tobacco plantations. Eventually, England prohibited the American colonies from trading in slaves, but by then more than 600,000 Africans had been brought to the colonies and other parts of North America.

England placed no restrictions on the number of immigrants who could legally enter the colonies. From the time of the first settlers until America gained its independence, roughly 870,000 people immigrated to what would become the United States. These immigrants married and had families, and by the time the colonies formed a nation, the population was about 2.5 million people.

Limits on Immigration

After the nation gained independence, tens of thousands of immigrants moved here, many to escape political turmoil in their own countries. The federal government began regulating immigration in 1790, when Congress passed a law requiring a two-year residency before an immigrant could qualify for citizenship. Soon thereafter, the period was raised to five years. In 1798, Congress passed the Naturalization Act. This increased the waiting period to 14 years, while another act passed at the same time gave the president the power to expel any immigrant thought to present a threat to the interests of the nation. By 1802, these acts were no longer in effect.

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Congress passed a new series of immigration laws beginning in 1875. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was the first law to target a specific national group. More acts quickly followed. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was established in 1891, and in 1892 the INS opened an immigrant screening station at Ellis Island, New York. The station remained open until 1954.

The greatest influx of immigrants occurred between the mid-1800s and the 1920s. About 37 million immigrants arrived in the United States during this time. Most of them left their home countries because of poor economic conditions, although some left for religious or other reasons.

The first quota system for immigrants was established in 1921. For each nationality, no more than 3 percent of the number already in the United States could be admitted each year. In 1924, this percentage was reduced for countries whose immigrants were considered least likely to "fit in." The quotas for most European countries were far more generous than those for other parts of the world. Asians were least likely to be granted permission to immigrate to the United States.

A New Approach to Immigration

In 1965, restrictions were loosened, and a huge wave of immigration resulted. More than 4 million people became legal permanent residents during the 1970s. In 1978, the last of the quotas based on nationality was abolished and replaced by an overall annual worldwide quota of 290,000 immigrants. In the 1980s, more than 7 million people entered the country. During the 1990s, the number grew to more than 9 million. Almost 80 percent of these immigrants were from places other than Europe.

Many of these immigrants entered the United States illegally, without proper documents. In 1986, Congress mandated penalties for employers who hired illegal aliens. By 2000, however, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that nearly 9 million undocumented aliens were living here.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. immigration policy was tightened. The INS was abolished, and responsibility for immigration moved to the newly created Department of Homeland Security.

In 2004, President George W. Bush addressed the need for immigration law reform. He began to advocate a "guest worker" program, which would allow some immigrants to register to work legally for a fixed period of time before returning home. Such registration would not result in citizenship for them, nor would it provide amnesty for those who had entered the country illegally. President Bush also called for better border and worksite enforcement.

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They are imported by companies, controlled as serfs, worked like slaves, and at last go back to China with all their earnings. They are in every place. . . .

The father of a family is met by them at every turn. Would he get work for himself? Ah! A stout Chinaman does it cheaper. Will he get a place for his oldest boy? He can not. His girl? Why, the Chinaman is in her place too! Every door is closed.

—*“Appeal from California.”*
Indianapolis Times, 1878.

Key Points of the McCarran-Walter Act, 1952

- Continued the quota system favoring immigrants from northern and western Europe
- Provided system of loyalty checks for foreigners who wished to visit the United States
- Gave the Attorney General the power to deport immigrants or naturalized citizens who were members of Communist and Communist-supportive groups or who engaged in subversive activities

“We have a comprehensive strategy to reform our immigration system. We’re going to secure the border by catching those who enter illegally and hardening the border to prevent illegal crossings. We’re going to strengthen enforcement of our immigration laws within our country. And together with Congress, we’re going to create a temporary worker program that will take pressure off the border, bring workers from out of the shadows, and reject amnesty. . . .

—*President George W. Bush,*
November 28, 2005

“Today, we are protecting ourselves as we were in 1924, against being flooded by immigrants from Eastern Europe. This is fantastic . . . We do not need to be protected against immigrants from these countries on the contrary we

want to stretch out a helping hand, to save those who have managed to flee

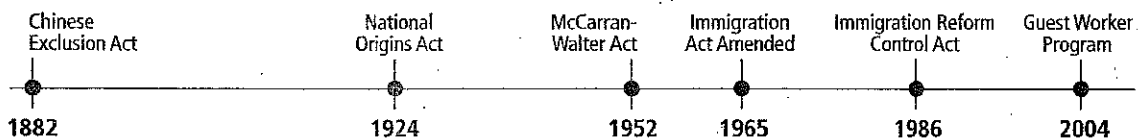
into Western Europe, to succor those who are brave enough to escape from barbarism, to welcome and restore them against the day when their countries will, as we hope, be free again . . .”

—*President Harry Truman,*
in a veto message on the
McCarran-Walter Act.

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That image of my mother destroying [the boat,] our last link to Vietnam, really stands in my mind to this day as to the incredible courage she possesses, but also the incredible lengths to which my parents, like so many other people, have gone to in order to find that promise of freedom and opportunity [in America].

—*Assistant Attorney General, Viet Dinh, 2001*



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Directions: Read the excerpts on the previous page and answer the questions below.

1. What immigration issue is the California Workingman's Party most concerned about?

2. What power did the McCarran-Walter act give to the Attorney General?

3. What did President Truman think about the McCarran-Walter Act?

4. Describe Viet Dinh's point of view on immigration.

5. What are the three parts of President Bush's plan to secure the borders of the United States?

6. **Synthesize Information** Over time, what common concerns have been expressed about immigration in the United States?
