

The 1917 Immigration Act sought to exclude vast groups of "alien" people

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Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island in New York Harbor in 1931. Photo from: Wikimedia Commons

"America beckons, but Americans repel" is an old immigrant saying translated into many languages, says historian Alan Kraut. The political debate today over the flow of immigrants through U.S. borders merits a look back to exactly 100 years ago.

Back then, Congress overrode a presidential veto to pass the Immigration Act of 1917. It was the most sweeping immigration legislation the country had ever created.

The United States has always grappled with how to promote pluralism and protect its citizens at the same time. The fight from a century ago was no different.

Immigrants Brought "Alien" Cultures

In the years leading up to the act, millions of immigrants from Europe poured into the United States, with 1.3 million passing through Ellis Island in 1907 alone. During that period, the immigrants filled gaps in the still-developing industrial economy. They made up the majority of workers in the Pennsylvania coal fields, Chicago stockyards and New York garment factories.

However, Congress saw the matter differently. Many of its members were hostile to the "alien" cultures immigrants brought with them. They were also influenced by the new "science" of eugenics, which sought to improve the human population through selective breeding, and which claimed some racial and ethnic groups were inherently inferior. In addition, Congress was motivated by widespread fears that immigrants would take away jobs from native-born, English-speaking white Americans.

Three Presidents Vetoed The Act

Congress had attempted to pass laws curbing the flow of immigrants from Europe numerous times. A proposed English literacy test passed in the House of Representatives on five occasions and the Senate four times, but was twice vetoed by Presidents Grover Cleveland and William Howard Taft. The test was a part of the 1917 act, as was the expansion of a list of "undesirable" types, including those whose politics were considered to be too left-wing. The act also barred all immigrants from the "Asiatic zone." In addition, it levied an \$8 tax on every adult immigrant — the equivalent of about \$160 today.

Congress voted to override President Woodrow Wilson's veto of the act in 1916. Wilson himself had mixed feelings about immigration. Earlier on he had said, "We are going to keep our doors wide open so that those who seek this thing from the ends of the earth may come and enjoy it." However, he also agreed with some provisions of the act, and found fault mainly in one aspect of the bill. "I cannot rid myself of the conviction that the literacy test constitutes a radical change in the policy of the Nation which is not justified in principle," he said.

Alabama Congressman John L. Burnett, who was chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, reintroduced the literacy-test portion of the bill multiple times. Burnett also made up part of the Dillingham Commission, a four-year investigation of immigration that ended in 1911. The Commission concluded that immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe posed a serious threat to American society.

Targeted Exclusion's Origination

The 1917 act built on previous legislation, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Much of the justification for this targeted exclusion — particularly of Asians — was based on racism. It also drew on the questionable pseudoscience of eugenics researchers like Madison Grant.

Grant believed the "Anglo-Saxon branch of the Nordic race" was the most highly evolved of all racial groups. For this reason, he claimed, people of that ethnic background should lead the country and make up as much of its population as possible.

Eugenics was so widely accepted that the U.S. surgeon general and senior members of the Public Health Services — whose duties included medical inspections of new immigrants — were publicly aligned with it in 1914.

“Eugenics was something that very bright, intelligent people talked about in the same way that we talk about genetic engineering” today, Kraut says. Supporters of eugenics advocated “marriage patterns and sterilization so the best people, as they defined it, prospered and had many children, and that would make society better.”

Reading, Writing, And The Welcome Mat

The literacy test, while not as direct as the outright ban on Asians, also had its roots in eugenics and the desire for a “superior stock.” The original version of the literacy test required reading and writing a short passage of the U.S. Constitution. However, it was remarkably unsuccessful in weeding out newcomers. In practice, the test required reading only short passages in any language, and if a man was literate and his wife and children were not, they all still earned access to the country.

Supporters believed it would reduce the number of new arrivals — mainly from Eastern and Southern Europe — by more than 40 percent. In reality, only 1,450 people of 800,000 immigrants between 1920 and 1921 were excluded on the basis of literacy.

Due in part to the act’s failure to significantly reduce the flow of immigrants, a new system was put into place in 1921 and then revised in 1924. The new system relied on quotas for each country of origin. Only 2 percent of the total number of people of each nationality already in the United States as of 1890 could be admitted. This meant that more than 50,000 Germans could come to the country annually, but fewer than 4,000 Italians were allowed, compared with the peak of more than 2 million immigrants from Italy between 1910 and 1920. The law continued to completely exclude immigrants from East Asia.

As American As Apple Pie

Mixed feelings about immigration are almost as American as immigration itself, Kraut says. Americans recognize the contributions immigrants make, but there is also a sense of economic and cultural competitiveness.

“We’re constantly changing, expanding and contracting,” Kraut says. “Right now, Mr. Trump has us in a period where we seem to be looking inward and contracting.” However, Kraut sees the recent airport protests as a sign that the issue is as unsettled as ever.

Quiz

- 1 Read the first sentence of the article.

"America beckons, but Americans repel" is an old immigrant saying translated into many languages, says historian Alan Kraut.

What two words would BEST replace "beckons" and "repel" in this sentence?

- (A) entices; duel
 - (B) invites; resist
 - (C) demands; push
 - (D) dismisses; refuse
- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Targeted Exclusion's Origination."

The 1917 act built on previous legislation, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Much of the justification for this targeted exclusion — particularly of Asians — was based on racism. It also drew on the questionable pseudoscience of eugenics researchers like Madison Grant.

Adding which of the following sentences would help explain the meaning of "pseudoscience"?

- (A) Eugenics was widely accepted by scientists working with the Public Health Services.
- (B) Eugenics was also the basis for conducting a literacy test to assess immigrants.
- (C) Researchers like Madison Grant had a surprising number of intelligent supporters.
- (D) Researchers held racial beliefs that were not justified by the scientific method.

- 3 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST develops a central idea?
- (A) The United States has always grappled with how to promote pluralism and protect its citizens at the same time.
 - (B) They made up the majority of workers in the Pennsylvania coal fields, Chicago stockyards and New York garment factories.
 - (C) In addition, it levied an \$8 tax on every adult immigrant — the equivalent of about \$160 today.
 - (D) Burnett also made up part of the Dillingham Commission, a four-year investigation of immigration that ended in 1911.
- 4 Which option provides an accurate and objective summary of the Immigration Act of 1917?
- (A) The act was conceived by President Wilson to improve upon the policies of Cleveland and Taft, and had the full support of members of Congress. It was marked by unsuccessful literacy tests but did slow the flow of immigration.
 - (B) The act was put in place to protect the jobs and traditions of native-born Americans, and was based on excluding "undesirable" types through tests and taxes. It did not reduce the flow of immigrants.
 - (C) The act was passed by Congress despite having been justly vetoed by President Wilson because he believed it would be too expensive to implement. While it had great success at stopping immigration from Asia, it was a failure in other respects.
 - (D) The act was created as an outright ban on any person who did not come from a country possessing "superior stock" that could create a better American society. When the act failed, lawmakers were wise enough to not replace it.