

MUDDLED MASSES

Backlash against immigration ignores past realities

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IN 1906, THOMAS DARLINGTON, president of the New York Board of Health, complained that nearly half the spending at city hospitals went to treat the immigrant poor.

Such spending proportions are a far cry from today, when only about 6.5% of all Medicaid recipients are immigrants.

Schooling that lifted succeeding generations of new Americans to better economic circumstances drained budgets everywhere.

In the nation's 30 biggest cities, more than half the students in public schools were from immigrant families during the early years of this century.

Birds of Passage

At times, the homeward flow of these "birds of passage," as the itinerants were known, was huge.

In 1908, a time of world-wide economic depression, a quarter more Italians went home than arrived in the U.S. Those who did stay sent home 80% of what they earned, according to Italian estimates — attracting the wrath of Americans who accused them of draining the U.S. economy.

All this clashes with a romanticized picture of immigration, of Mayflower-like pilgrim arrivals and "huddled masses yearning to breathe free," in the poet Emma Lazarus's words. This image, "which has endured for generations, needs serious revision," says historian Caroline Golub.

Many American families today, for instance, are accidents of history. "A lot of people were planning to go back when World War I broke out," Ms. Golub says. "That was a great Americanizer."

Total welfare and other costs for immigrants weren't compiled at the turn of the century. But two respected analysts have tried to estimate public costs of today's immigration — with vastly different conclusions.

Jeffrey Passel and other analysts at the Urban Institute, a Washington-based think tank, found that immigrants are responsible for an economic net gain of \$27 billion.

But Donald Huddle, an economist at Rice University, found immigrants impose on taxpayers a yearly net burden of \$43 billion in expenditures. The latter figure has been seized on by increasingly vocal critics who advocate more limits on immigration. The two studies differ by about \$10 billion in the estimated costs immigrants impose on government programs.

A much wider gap, more than \$50 billion, results from different estimates of how much immigrants pay in taxes. (Neither calculation considers the costs of law enforcement, roads, defense or any other public services used by newcomers and natives alike.)

Whatever the cost of immigrants, they were as much a target of criticism a century ago as they are today. In 1880, in a charge that would echo exactly 100 years later in the Mariel boatlift when

And in New York alone, nearly three quarters of public-school students were the children of new arrivals. In Chicago, it was more than two thirds. The national burden today, estimated at a bit over 5%, is comparatively light.

Conventional wisdom that yesterday's immigrants came here seeking a permanent new home also doesn't always meet the test of historical accuracy. In reality, America for many wasn't a final destination at all, but instead was a temporary escape from a jobless and famine-ridden Europe.

Historians estimate that as many as a third of the nearly 30 million foreigners who arrived between the Civil War and World War I moved back to their native countries.

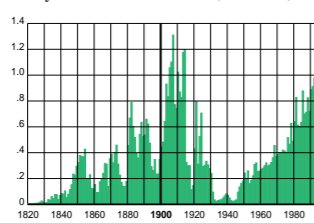
Cuban prisoners and mental patients were cast adrift to the U.S., the New York State Board of Charities said that Europe was sending its "blind, idiotic, crippled, epileptic, lunatic, and other infirm paupers, incapable of supporting themselves, in order thereby to avoid the burden of their support."

Bit by bit, through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, rules emerged requiring that new arrivals possess money, good health and literacy.

Finally the door slammed nearly shut. The 1924 National Origins Act and amendments soon after put a ceiling of about 150,000 annually on European immigration (or barely 10% of the peak inflow), barred most Asians and limited

Rising Tide

The number of immigrants coming to the U.S. each year has risen in the 1990s (in millions).



Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service

the entrance of national groups to their 1890 proportion of the population, effectively cutting off the flow from Eastern and Southern Europe.

The nature of immigration changed dramatically and, with the intervening years, so did the collective memory of its origins. Among other things, the changes imbued the immigration tale with an extraordinary and sweeping sense of success.

The Brain Drain

With legal changes in the 1920s, a huge flow of mostly unskilled immigrants came to a halt. Flight from Nazism, Communism and war brought a sizable chunk of Europe's intellectual elite to America. After the war, entrants from Western Europe and Canada dominated, and some countries worried about a "brain drain" as their best-educated citizens emigrated to the U.S.

In an era when the immigrant down the street was as likely to be a chemist as an unskilled laborer, perceptions of immigration changed. World War II and military service were a common cause in which Americans, native stock and newly arrived alike, had a part.

As better-educated immigrants arrived, unskilled immigrants from decades earlier and their descendants still were climbing far lower rungs on the educational and economic ladder.

Reaching Parity

On the whole, census data showed rising levels of immigrant education and income. But in the mid-1980s, economist George Borjas, now at the University of California at San Diego, noted a statistical conundrum: The accomplishments of mid-century immigrants masked a slower-than-expected rise by turn-of-the-century immigrants and their descendants. Mr. Borjas combined statistical analysis with 1980 census material to reach his conclusions.

Analysts have long believed it takes three generations on average for immigrants to reach educational and economic parity with natives. But according to Mr. Borjas's calculations, it takes four generations, or 100 years. "In the great scheme of things, that's not a very long time," he says. "But for Americans, it's half of this country's history."

According to Mr. Borjas's research, differences in education and skill levels among different national groups arriving near the turn of the century still are visible in their grandchildren today.

Though still hotly contested in some quarters, Mr. Borjas's interpretations are increasingly accepted in academic circles. That's both troubling and meaningful because today, as nearly a century ago, the nation's immigrant flow includes millions of low-skilled workers.

This time, economists and historians worry, these newcomers are colliding with an economy that increasingly requires highly skilled workers.

At the same time, the current backlash against these newcomers — and the legislative assault that these attitudes are spawning — may mean today's immigrants will receive even less help than their predecessors. ♦

Americas: 15.7 million total

Canada — Although nearly five million people have come to the U.S. from Canada since 1820, most of these immigrants have not been native-born Canadians. Instead, people from outside the U.S. and Canada went to Canada first, in order to avoid dealing directly with U.S. authorities.

Mexico — According to U.S. government estimates, nearly 5.2 million people from Mexico have come to the U.S. since 1820. But unofficially, this number is considered a low estimate, because millions of Mexicans entered — and left — the U.S. without being counted on official immigration dockets. Recent legislative changes have been aimed at getting a more accurate count of Mexican immigration to the U.S., and making Mexicans who illegally came to the U.S. eligible for U.S. citizenship.

Latin America — Since 1820, estimated "official" immigration figures for Latin America excluding Mexico — the regions of Central America (1.1 million), South America (1.4 million) and the Caribbean (3.1 million) — are low, although not as divergent as figures for Mexican immigration to the U.S. Emigration from Jamaica, Haiti, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic has steadily increased since 1968.

Asia-Pacific: 6.4 million

Korea and Philippines — Immigration from these two countries began accelerating in the late 1960s. Overall, about 715,000 people from Korea and 1,164,000 people from the Philippines have come to the U.S. since 1946.

Vietnam/Southeast Asia — Almost all immigration from Vietnam and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, Malaysia and Laos) has occurred since 1978.

South Asia — Immigration from South Asia (India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) has increased in the past two decades. Nearly 80% of people who have come to the U.S. from India and South Asia arrived after 1975.

China — The Chinese were America's first Asian immigrants. At least 300,000 came between 1854 and 1882 until the U.S. restricted Chinese immigration. In the past 25 years, nearly 950,000 people from China, as well as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau, have come to the U.S.

Japan — Two waves of immigration — one from 1891 to 1924, the other from 1952 until today — have resulted in 478,000 Japanese coming to America.

Europe: 37.7 million total

Great Britain — More than five million British, Scotch and Welsh people have arrived in the U.S. since 1820, with two million arriving between 1860 and 1890.

Ireland — Fleeing poverty, political oppression and a famine, nearly 1.2 million Irish came to the U.S. between 1847 and 1855. In all, 4.8 million Irish have come to the U.S. from Ireland since 1820.

Germany — People from Germany make up the largest immigrant group in U.S. history: More than seven million have arrived in the U.S. from Germany. The peak period was from 1850 to 1900, when nearly 4.5 million immigrants came to the U.S.

Eastern/Central Europe — Between 1900 and 1914, more than two million people from what now makes up Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and the former Yugoslavia came to the U.S. All told, 3.8 million people from this region have come to America.

Poland — More than two million people who claim Polish ethnicity have entered the U.S., mostly around World War I.

Italy/Southern Europe — Italians represent the second-largest number of immigrants to the U.S.: 5.3 million. And about 1.5 million other Southern Europeans from Greece, Spain and Portugal immigrated to the U.S. between 1820 and 1993.

Russia/Baltics — Revolution and religious persecution set off a huge wave of Russian immigration between 1890 and 1924. More than 3.1 million Russians (at least a third of whom were Jewish) fled Russia for the U.S. during this period. In all, nearly 3.7 million people from Russia and the Baltic states have come to the U.S.

Scandinavia and Northwest Europe — Most emigration from Scandinavia (Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland) occurred between 1869 and 1900, when 1.3 million Scandinavians entered the U.S. (In all, some 2.5 million Scandinavians have come to the U.S.) About 1.7 million people from Northwest Europe (France, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg and Switzerland) have immigrated to the U.S. between 1820 and 1993.

Other: 1.1 million total

Although people from Africa and the Middle East have arrived in the U.S. since the 1800s, half of the immigration from these regions has occurred in the past 12 years. Immigration from Oceania (Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands) has been sporadic and light since the 1870s. ♦

How to Read the Immigration Chart

Immigration has had a considerable impact on U.S. history. But why did so many people journey to America? How many immigrants came here, and from where did they come?

The three-dimensional graphic below presents answers to some of these questions.

The graphic assembles immigration data compiled by various U.S. government agencies since 1820, when immigration to the U.S. was first officially tracked.

Grouping this data by indi-

vidual nations and global regions shows the flow of known immigrants to the U.S. from each part of the world.

The most striking feature of this chart is the irregularity of immigration from different nations and regions.

The peaks and valleys in the chart represent immigration waves that occurred at various points in history.

Immigration totals for each country are represented by a series of bars; each bar shows

data for one year. You can see the annual volume of immigration by comparing the colors on each bar with the immigration-volume indicator in the upper-right corner of the graphic.

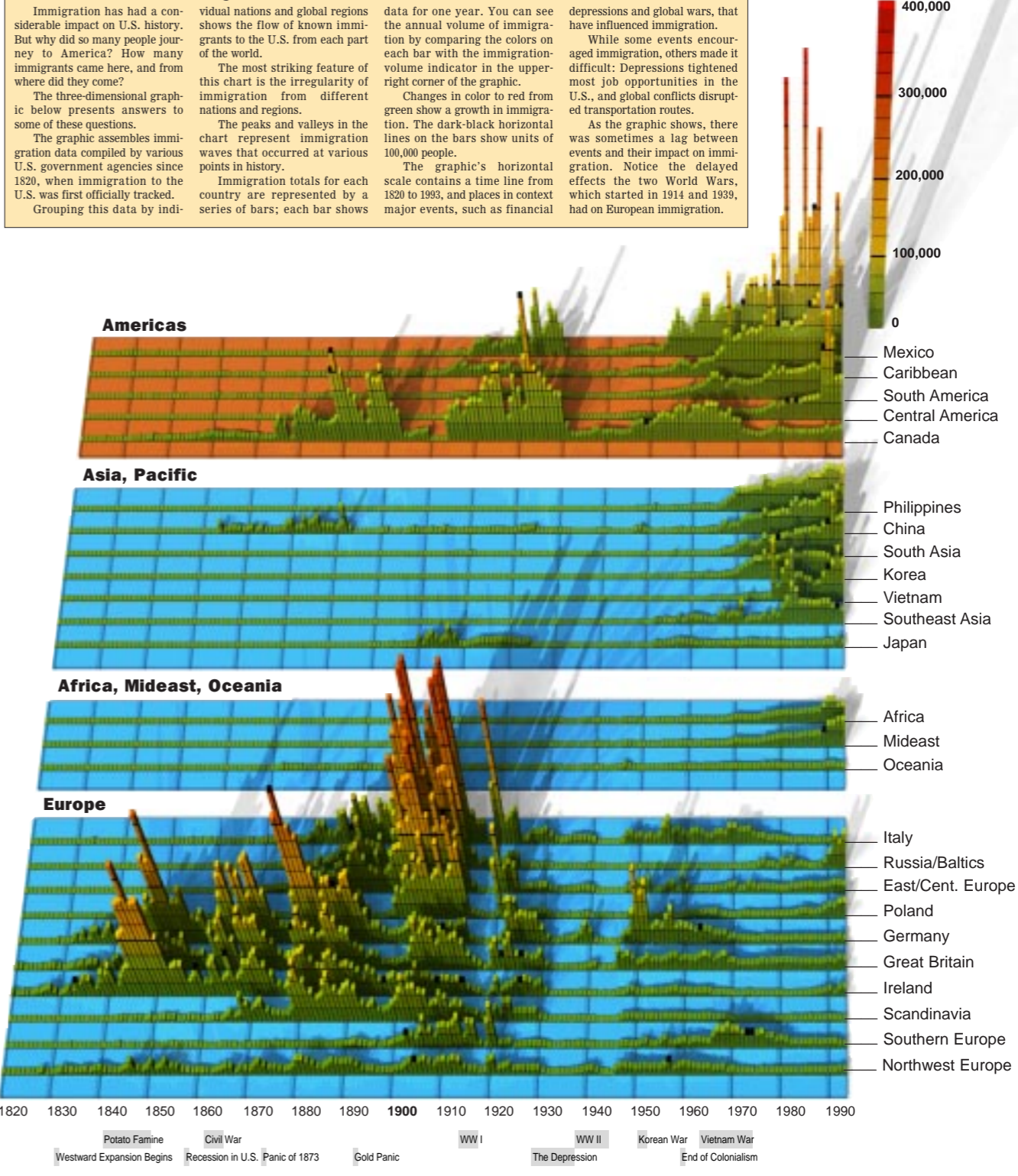
Changes in color from green to red from green show a growth in immigration. The dark-black horizontal lines on the bars show units of 100,000 people.

The graphic's horizontal scale contains a time line from 1820 to 1993, and places in context major events, such as financial

depressions and global wars, that have influenced immigration.

While some events encouraged immigration, others made it difficult: Depressions tightened most job opportunities in the U.S., and global conflicts disrupted transportation routes.

As the graphic shows, there was sometimes a lag between events and their impact on immigration. Notice the delayed effects the two World Wars, which started in 1914 and 1939, had on European immigration.



Karl Hartig Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service