

Immigration is the Ultimate Security

Tim Kane

July 2020

The state of human affairs became clearer in the year 2020: the thin veneer of law that sustains civil society literally burning in protest against injustice, the illusion of calm security that was torn away by global panic over what amounts to the mildest pandemic in human history. There is a fragility to globalization, a newfound awareness of how easily the modern world can retreat from exuberant connectedness. It may be that the centuries-long industrial migration from country to city found its peak in 2020 and that the ultimate effect of the digital revolution will be to reverse the trend. People can now Zoom, e-mail, download, and share culture and ideas remotely, from their safe estates on the edges of smaller towns. What about migration between nations? What about refugees in an uneven world?

“What about it?” says the nationalist. The utmost duty of the government is national security, and in this new world, if immigration’s economic benefits come at the cost of security, then it’s no longer worth it.

The watershed break in globalization in the year 2020 is much more profound than immigration. Tourism, education, and business travelers outnumbered migrants by roughly 100 to 1 in recent years as of this summer, 126 countries are completely closed to outsiders meaning that only returning citizens may enter. Another 64 are partially closed, leaving fewer than 30 countries with no travel restrictions. The second wave of COVID-19 infections is coming and will only harden this new reality.

Whether you or I or the top epidemiologist think these barriers make sense doesn’t matter. This is a populist era, and people are terrified. Security first.

Rather than resist the priority given to security over other concerns, immigration advocates would do well to co-opt it for two reasons. The first is pragmatism. Lecturing the public that your ideals are more important than theirs is a losing argument. The second is that immigration benefits national security far more than it costs. Indeed, the main benefit of immigration is security. It’s about time that hawks align with openness as a security imperative.

Many conservatives are worried, rightly, that some foreigners who travel to the United States are terrorists. Twenty years on, the emotional resonance of the 9/11 attacks still holds the social imagination. It feeds an irrational fear of immigrants, a fear reinforced by the Boston Marathon bombers in 2013, the coordinated suicide bombings and shootings in Paris in 2015, the cargo truck rampage that killed 86 pedestrians in Nice during the summer of 2016, and multiple vehicle and knifing rampages in London during the spring of 2017. Islamic terrorism all. Unfortunately, these episodes obscure the much larger security advantages of immigration.

Consider the 9/11 attacks again. Those terrorists came into the country on student visas, not as migrants. Nearly 3,000 people were their victims, including 372 foreign citizens. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice remarked during a fifth-anniversary remembrance at the State Department that “Among the many innocent victims of September 11th were hundreds of citizens from over 90 countries,” including Egypt, Israel, Vietnam, and China.

Among the American victims, scores were naturalized citizens. There was Chin Sun Wells, born in South Korea in 1976, who played basketball and softball as an Oklahoma high schooler while working at the local Wal-Mart before enlisting in the U.S. Army in 1998. There was Sergeant First Class Jose Calderon-Olmedo from Puerto Rico, in his 20th year on active duty in the Army, a man who served multiple tours of duty overseas. There was Dong Chul Lee, an immigrant from South Korea who came to the U.S. in 1968 to study computer science, later working for the National Security Agency for 14 years after a stint in the U.S. Air Force. There was Amgen scientist Dora Marie Menchaca, researching medicines to treat cancer and pneumonia, wife and mother, killed at the age of 45 on her way home. Dora scribbled a note that was recovered from American Airlines Flight 77 that crashed into the Pentagon: “Dear Earl, I love you. Please take care of Imani and Jaryd for me. Dora. 9/11/01 7:15 AM PST (I think).” She was born in Mexico and raised in Texas.

Immigrants did not attack America on 9/11. Rather, they were attacked.

If People are the Ultimate Resource

“They say that population is national power,” wrote the editors of the Korea Times in 2011.¹ “Korea is heading toward a declining stage as it is one of the fastest aging societies with a low birth rate.” Geographically isolated between its traditional rivals China and Japan, and incessantly poised for war with communist North Korea, the leaders in Seoul are acutely aware of the dangers of a relatively small population. Their concern typifies the classical understanding of power from the writings of Herodotus to Hans Morgenthau, defined in terms of resources. The modern scholar most respected for his analysis of power, Joseph S. Nye, Jr. believes that the measurement of power will always prove somewhat elusive yet is ultimately founded on it begins with resources: “population, territory, natural resources, economic size, military forces, political stability, among others.”²

Mao Zedong said that “power grows out of the barrel of a gun” at the beginning of the Chinese Civil War in 1949. His full quote, it should be noted, is that “political power” grows from the gun, suggesting he realized there were deeper levels to grand strategy than brute force. Yet Mao often observed that the Chinese people comprised “one-quarter of humanity.” Contrary to concerns that excess density weakened the nation, he wrote in 1949: “Even if China’s population multiplies many times, she is fully capable of finding a solution; the solution is production,” adding that, “Of all things in the world, people are the most precious.”³

Policymakers of today face the same question. The implications for choosing an open or a closed immigration approach will define America’s size and strength in this century as much as any other policy. The options were made rather plain in a report published by the U.S. Census in early 2020:

“Higher international immigration over the next four decades would produce a faster growing, more diverse, and younger population for the United States. In contrast, an absence of migration into the country over this same period would result in a U.S. population that is smaller than the present. Different levels of immigration between now and 2060 could change the projection of the population in that year by as much as 127 million people, with estimates ranging anywhere from 320 to 447 million U.S. residents.”⁴

Bravery and Brains

Brawn is only one of three strategic advantages that a nation of immigrants has over ethnically homogenous powers. Bravery and brains are the other two.

Although skeptics worry that ethnic diversity yields a less unified and patriotic people, history has proven the opposite time and time again. Of the soldiers in the U.S. military during the Civil War (1861 to 1865), 43 percent were immigrants or the sons of immigrants, compared to only 13 percent of the total population being foreign-born. In contrast, there were few migrant soldiers among the rebels. Why not? The simple answer is that most immigration flows had been to northern states. There were more immigrants in ten square miles of lower Manhattan than in over 770,000 square miles of the Confederacy.⁵

Not only did American immigrants volunteer for the military in disproportionately high numbers, but they were also awarded a disproportionately high number of medals. In the U.S. military,

the highest award for valor in action against an enemy is the Medal of Honor. In all, 1,522 Medals of Honor were awarded to soldiers and sailors who served during the Civil War, 369 of them were awarded to immigrants, mostly from Ireland and Germany.

When the U.S. entered World War One, 1.7 million foreign-born “aliens” registered for the draft. Military historians Alexander Barnes and Peter Belmonte estimate that 800,000 immigrants served in the Army during the war. All told, 18 percent of the American military in WWI was foreign-born, although only 14 percent of the total U.S. population was.

The Pentagon today is acutely aware of the critical value of its immigrant servicemembers. Military leaders do not passively wait for foreign-born citizens to volunteer but follow the founding tradition of welcoming foreign citizens to enter the ranks. More than 760,000 noncitizens have enlisted and obtained U.S. citizenship in the past century. Eastern Europeans were actively recruited between 1950 and 1959 thanks to the Lodge Act, designed to help gain an advantage if NATO came to blows with the Warsaw Pact. Over 100,000 noncitizens have joined the ranks of the U.S. military since the 9/11 attacks, and over 10,000 since 2008 through a special program focused on recruiting particularly skilled individuals through the Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI) program.

As for brains, the immigrant advantage is stark when it comes to Nobel prizes, patents, and startup companies. In every category, naturalized citizens are disproportionately adding more to the U.S. economy than native-born citizens.

In 2015, five out of the nine U.S. Nobel Prize recipients were living outside of their country of birth, and in 2014, four out of nine U.S. recipients were immigrants. The story of Nobel Prize-winning immigrants is, in fact, an excellent proxy for the long history of the migration of talent to the United States. Foreign-born actors and performers, professional athletes, leaders in business and technology, and even noteworthy politicians migrate to the U.S. in droves to enrich their careers. Yet the dominance of immigrants at the 2016 Nobel Prize Ceremony stands out. In that year, all six of the U.S. Nobel recipients in the hard sciences were foreign-born.

No story could make the impact clearer than that of Albert Einstein, one of the thousands of Jewish people who fled Europe and ultimately helped the allies develop the atomic bomb. “The Jew wants to create contradictions everywhere and to separate relations, so that preferably, the poor naïve German can no longer make any sense of it whatsoever,” wrote physicist Philipp Lenard, an earlier German recipient of the Nobel and leader of the Deutsche Physik movement in the 1930s who claimed Einstein’s theories of relativity were a corruption. The Nazi regime embodies the polar opposite of ethnic diversity that the United States represents. In April 1933, Hitler’s regime passed the first anti-Jewish ordinance that stripped one-quarter of Germany’s physicists from their jobs. Einstein could have migrated anywhere, but he chose the United States.

In 1939, a year before he would pass his American citizenship test, Einstein wrote a letter to President Roosevelt detailing the capabilities of a potential nuclear bomb, warning that Germany

could be in the process of developing their own such weapon, and urging the United States to adopt a nuclear program. This famous letter prompted the Manhattan Project.⁶ Then, following the war, the White House authorized a military operation to recruit thousands of German rocket scientists, even those with Nazi backgrounds, in order to gain a research advantage over Soviet Russia. Similarly, today, the U.S. is in a “brains race” for Artificial Intelligence talent and may already have more Chinese-born scientists than Beijing has. Can the nation afford to lose that race?

Increased Immigration Improves National Security

These are the facts. Having the facts on your side doesn't mean you will win the argument, of course. But the facts do point to the unavoidable conclusion that national security will be enhanced by greater, not less, immigration. COVID-19 has let loose an irrational fear of foreigners in all countries, causing an abrupt collapse in globalization that may become permanent. And yet this strange time offers an opportunity. The United States will become stronger than ever, and far stronger than China, by embracing its heritage of exceptional openness.

Tim Kane is the JP Conte Fellow in Immigration Studies at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University where he specializes in economic growth, immigration, and national security.

The Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University is a university-based academic research center that explores the scientific foundations of the interaction between individuals, business, and government.

The Immigration and Economic Recovery Symposium explores what role immigrants play in the economic recovery of the United States post-COVID crisis.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University or the views of Utah State University.

References

- 1 “Population is national power,” *Korea Times*, May 31, 2011, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2013/08/202_88043.html#.
- 2 Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 80, (1990): 178, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580>.
- 3 Xing Lu, *The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong: Transforming China and Its People*, (University of South Carolina Press: Columbia, 2017), 2.
- 4 Sandra Johnson, “A Changing Nation: Population Projections Under Alternative Immigration Scenarios.” *U.S. Census Bureau*, Report P25-1146, February 2020, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1146.pdf>.
- 5 Tyler Anbinder, *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 207.
- 6 “Einstein’s Letter,” U.S. Department of Energy Office of History and Heritage Resources, accessed June 19, 2020, https://www.osti.gov/opennet/manhattan-project-history/Events/1939-1942/einstein_letter.htm.