

How to make America great again.

The news is full of stories about the estimated two million migrants whom are trying to enter the country from Mexico. The people in Texas, Florida and Arizona are particularly unhappy. This has led their Governors, hard-core, MAGA, Republicans, to send bus loads of potential immigrants (some here legally) to Martha's Vineyard, Chicago, California and other Democratic strongholds. Of course this will not solve the problem, but it will help them get re-elected. It is an election year.

Other Americans, including President Biden are outraged over these moves. "This is not who we are" is the battle cry I hear the most. However, Biden, and other Democrats, offer no solution to this latest immigration problem. And the President is wrong about who we are. History shows us that hating on immigrants is what we do and who we are. What we say as a country, and what we do as a country, have always been at odds.



Americans have been conflicted on the immigration question for a long time. Some want to build a wall, send immigrants back where they came from, and close the borders. They feel that these folks are taking jobs from Americans, committing crimes, not paying taxes, while at the same time taking government handouts. They feel immigrants are a big burden and cost to the country.



Others point out that the Statue of Liberty has been in New York harbor since 1885. That the US has always been a melting pot, a country of immigrants and that some of our greatest achievements have come from immigrants like Einstein, Alexander Graham Bell, Elon Musk and countless others. This Mexican migrant problem is nothing new, we've been here before. Let 'em all in.

So what to do in 2022 about the Mexican migrants? Should our actions as a country follow who we say we are, or should they mirror what we've done in the past? To find the answer to that question, let's take a brief look at the history of immigrants in this country.

A History Lesson.

Before 1880, our borders were open, and the only problem with immigrating to the US was finding transportation. The 1790 Census shows us that the US population in 1790 was only 3.9 million (not counting the Indians of course). 3.2 million were white, of British heritage and Christian. Immigration was not a problem. We needed more people, not less. Someone had to do the work.

So around 1840, the **Irish** showed up. Running from the Great Potato Famine, over one-half of the population of Ireland immigrated to the US from 1840-1860. These Irishmen were not welcome. Insulted with slurs like **Micks, Pot-Lickers and Paddies** [1], the famine Irish were met widely with bigotry and hatred. Many Americans came to believe that an excess of Irish and Catholics would destroy the fabric of a blossoming democracy. Anti-Irish and anti-Catholic mobs attacked convents and Catholic schools throughout the Northeast. Riots erupted in Philadelphia and New York. Irish Catholics were shunned by landlords and shop owners and denied work in the factories.

Around the same time, the **Germans** came over the pond. Between 1840 and 1860 more than a million Germans arrived, running from civil unrest, severe unemployment and almost inconceivable hardships at home. With the vast numbers of Germans coming to America, hostility to them erupted. Derogatorily called **Huns or Krauts** [2], much of the reason for the opposition was religious. As with the Irish, most of the Germans were Roman Catholic. Other hostility occurred because Americans in low-paying jobs were threatened and sometimes replaced by Germans willing to work for almost nothing in order to survive.

Then the first large influx of non-white, non European, non-Christian immigrants arrived, the **Chinese**. Derogatorily tagged as **Chinks and Mooks** [3], over 300,000 Chinese workers migrated to the United States between 1850 and 1880, first recruited to work in the gold mines, but also to take agricultural jobs, and factory work, especially in the garment industry. In the 1850s, Chinese immigrants were particularly instrumental in building railroads in the American west [4]. As the numbers of Chinese laborers increased, so did the strength of anti-Chinese sentiment. As with the Irish and Germans, Chinese laborers who came to the United States would work for whatever wages they could. Advocates of anti-Chinese legislation therefore argued that admitting Chinese into the United States hurt American workers. Others used a more overtly racist argument for limiting immigration from East Asia, and expressed concern

about the integrity of American racial composition. This finally resulted in new legislation, the **Chinese Exclusion Act**, which banned all Chinese for ten years.

Then between 1880 and 1914, about 2 million Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi (European) **Jews** immigrated from communities in Eastern Europe, where repeated prosecution made life untenable. They clustered in New York City, created the garment industry there, and were heavily engaged in the trade unions. Slurred at and called **Kikes** [5], this Jewish influx renewed nativist sentiment. The result was the **Emergency Quota Act of 1921** which established immigration restrictions specifically on Jews and then the **Immigration Act of 1924** which further tightened and codified these limits [6].

The current problem with **Mexican** immigration is not new. Mexican migrants have entered the US legally and illegally for over 100 years easily crossing the long border between the US and Mexico to do the agriculture, road and construction work that US citizens are not willing to do.

The escalation of Mexican immigrants came during WW II. With the need for labor critical, Congress quickly enacted **The Bracero Program**. Providing the ideal, pliable and cheap workers American employers desired, over 219,000 Mexican **braceros** [7] came to the US between 1942 and 1947 working in twenty-four states. The majority were concentrated in California agriculture; but about a third of all braceros were employed by railroad companies. These Mexicans, invited into the country by the US government at the request of US companies were treated poorly. Derisively called **wetbacks** [8], braceros experienced exploitative work and living conditions. As much as 10% of wages never made it to the workers; paid to the Mexican government, as part of the program.

American employers were all too eager to offer Mexicans work and encouraged Mexicans to enter the country without inspection or authorization [9]. Mexicans were a good, plentiful, tractable, and cheap labor source, easily exploited, and effortlessly deportable whenever they acted up, demanded higher wages, better work conditions, or tried to organize unions. They were expendable wetbacks who could be criminalized as illegal aliens, further eroding their status and heightening their vulnerability to exploitation and deportation. This was precisely what American employers wanted, a labor force deemed criminal, ever vulnerable to deportation for the slightest insubordination, and one they could defraud of their pay.

Thus ends the history lesson.

The history lesson illustrates that the US, in 2022, still does not have a cohesive immigration policy. The unwritten policy of the US since 1790 appears to be “invite immigrants in when needed, then lock the gate and kick them out when we don’t.” I wonder if we should engrave those words on the Statue of Liberty?

After our first policy on Immigration, the Naturalization act of 1790, passed congress, George Washington weighed in with his thoughts on the subject:

“The bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions; whom we shall welcome to a participation of all rights and privileges, if by decency and propriety of conduct they merit the enjoyment.”

And a Republican president, Ronald Reagan, spoke eloquently on the subject of immigration in his farewell address to the nation in 1989:

“... the shining city in my mind (is) a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. If there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. ... a beacon, a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.”

So what to do about the Mexican migrants? What to do about immigration? The other immigrants still to come? Should we sink the Statue of Liberty? Or should we allow others to come to “our shining city?”

Seems to me that George Washington gave us direction in 1790, and Ronald Reagan concurred in 1989. Perhaps using Washington’s words on immigration as our mission statement, Reagan’s affirmation for direction, and the Statue of Liberty as the guidepost, we can finally come together and establish an inclusive immigration policy. A policy that addresses current problems while matching our actions with our words. A policy that recognizes when immigrants have been allowed to assimilate into US culture, it is those immigrants that have made America great. Finding a path for the Mexican migrants in 2022 to assimilate is what will make America great again.

That's all I'm sayin'

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Footnotes:

[1] **'mick'** originated because many Irish names begin with Mc, or Mac, **'pot lickers'** refers to the time of the potato famine many Irish licked pots clean to get every morsel of food. **'paddy'** is a derogatory slur referring to the Irish's love of St. Patrick.

[2] **'huns'** was coined by William Kaiser II after the Germans quelled the boxer rebellion. **'krauts'** is short for sauerkraut, a popular German food.

[3] **'chinks'** is a derivation of the word China and means you have very small eyes. **'mooks'** refers to the Chinese word 'mook junk' which is a wooden dummy used in Kung-Fu. It means ineffectual, foolish or a contemptible person.

[4] the term that a person does not have a **'chinaman's chance'** refers to the practice of lowering Chinese immigrants on ropes down the mountains, strapped with dynamite to carve out railroad tunnels.

[5] **"kike"** was born on Ellis Island when there were Jewish migrants who were also illiterate (or could not use Latin alphabet letters). When asked to sign the entry-forms with the customary 'X,' the Jewish immigrants would refuse, because they associated an X with the cross of Christianity. Instead, they drew a circle as the signature on the entry-forms. The Yiddish word for "circle" is kikel (pronounced KY - kel). Immigration inspectors then started calling anyone who signed with an 'O' instead of an 'X' a kike.

[6] With the ensuing Great Depression, and despite worsening conditions for Jews in Europe with the rise of Nazi Germany, this legislation allowed less than 100,000 Jews, fleeing from the Nazi's during WWII, to immigrate to the US. These quotas remained in place with minor alterations until the ***Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965***.

[7] **'braceros'** comes from the word 'brazo,' in Spanish means arm; braceros were men who worked with their arms, mostly as farmhands.

[8] **'wetbacks'** because some Mexicans had swum across the Rio Grande, entering the United States literally wet, and without inspection.

[10] Nevada's Senator Pat McCarran summarized the issue succinctly when he declared that "a farmer can get a wetback and he does not have to go through the red tape."