

WHAT MOTIVATES IMMIGRATION TO AMERICA?

By Patricia Hatch

Little is more extraordinary than the decision to migrate ... the accumulation of emotions and thoughts which finally leads a family to say farewell to a community where it has lived for centuries, to abandon old ties and familiar landmarks, and to sail across dark seas to a strange land ... There were probably as many reasons for coming to America as there were people who came ... Yet it can be said that three large forces – religious persecution, political oppression and economic hardship – provided the chief motives for the mass migrations to our shores. They were responding, in their own way, to the pledge of the Declaration of Independence: the promise of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”¹

President John F. Kennedy’s words summarize what migration theorists label “push” and “pull” factors that motivate individuals to leave their homelands. Religious persecution, political oppression and economic hardship are classic “push” factors. And, for many who fled their homelands over the past three centuries, the United States has offered the corresponding “pulls” of religious freedom, freedom of thought and speech, and economic opportunities.

Historical Motivating Factors

Religious Freedom: History affirms that some of this nation’s earliest settlers – the Pilgrims and Puritans in Massachusetts; Roman Catholics in Maryland; Huguenots in the Hudson River Valley and South Carolina; and Quakers in Pennsylvania, for example – were motivated to immigrate largely by their search for religious freedom.

A few centuries later, from the mid-1800s through the mid-1900s, several waves of Jewish immigrants fled religious persecution and political oppression in the Russian and German states and came to the United States. Under the Displaced Persons Act, approximately 85,000 Holocaust survivors were admitted to the U.S. after World War II.

Freedom from Oppression: Historian Chuck Wills, discusses political oppression as one of the “push” factors in immigration.

America, governed under the freedoms established by the Constitution, has been a sanctuary for people fleeing oppression. Dissidents, troublemakers, radicals, they have been labeled many things. They are those who have taken a stand against tyranny and injustice; those who have spoken out against inequality, often in the face of intimidation. Barred from their homelands as enemies of the state, they have come to America – a haven where their voices will not be silenced.²

British political activists of the early 19th century, the German “Forty-eighters” in the middle of that century, and Cuban and Hungarian dissidents in the 1950s, are examples of a few of the groups that tried to reform the governments of their homelands, but came to this land of unmatched constitutionally-guaranteed freedoms when their best efforts at home were thwarted.

More recently, others fled volatile conflicts such as those in Guatemala and El Salvador during the 1970s, ‘80s and early ‘90s.

Economic motivation: Economic hardship has been a powerful “push” factor for many groups. The Irish potato famine of 1845-47 is a good example. The famine led to the emigration of approximately 500,000 Irish to the U.S., accounting for more than half of all immigrants to this nation during the 1840s.

Beginning in the 1880s, extensive economic changes in Europe stimulated the “Great Wave” of immigration to the United States that would last until 1914. Population increased dramatically due in part to the wider availability of a variety of foods and better diet and life expectancy. Furthermore, agriculture was becoming commercialized, the factory system was developing, and new means of mass transportation such as railroads and steamships became more accessible and affordable. This excerpt from a text on the history of the times describes the situation:

The increasing need of growing cities like London, Budapest, and Berlin for foodstuffs encouraged farmers to acquire more land in order to expand production for distant markets. But commercial rather than mere subsistence farming stimulated the rise of large estates and increased the overall price of land. Small owners or aspiring owners found it increasingly difficult to acquire sufficient land to support themselves... With less land to transmit, young people had less reason to wait for the landed inheritance once needed to start a family... Earlier family formations, in turn, meant that women gave birth over a longer portion of their lives and more children were born. People of modest means then began to move in search of opportunities at home and in the United States...³

From the very earliest days, economic opportunity in America, even in the absence of economic hardship in the homeland, has been a “pull” factor. The 1607 settlement at Jamestown, Virginia, appears to have been a colonial economic experiment - an attempt to make a profit by exploring and exploiting the resources of the area, and exporting goods to the motherland.

When tobacco became the major colonial export, early settlers contracted with merchants to supply voluntary and involuntary indentured servants to work the fields. These servants, mostly from Europe, were offered the opportunity to become landowners after serving a number of years. On the other hand, Africans, who were brought forcibly to the new land, were considered the property of their employers, and few were accorded rights and opportunities. Ronald Takaki reports that 75 percent of the colonists came as servants during the 17th century.⁴

Shortages in the labor market have at times led American employers to recruit foreign laborers aggressively. For instance, during the mid- to late 19th century, Southwest growers and railroad companies sent paid agents into the interior of Mexico to offer free rail travel and cash advances

as incentives to local peasants to come north. This triggered a sizable rural labor outflow that eventually became self-sustaining.⁵

When news of the California Gold Rush reached China nearly 25,000 Chinese migrated to California, where they established themselves providing services to the miners as cooks, launderers and basic laborers. Later, many of them and their relatives found work on the Central Pacific Railroad.

Recent Immigrants

What motivates more recent immigrants to the United States? This question is especially important now that Congress is poised to consider making substantial changes to the U.S. immigration system. Efforts to establish a more secure and orderly system have a better chance of succeeding if reasonable avenues are provided for accommodating these motivations within the broader context of America's values, foreign policy and national interest.

Humanitarian Protection: A small percentage of each year's admissions – approximately 5 to 10 percent in any given year – continue to be persons seeking humanitarian protection from persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. These are the criteria set forth in the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act. After being interviewed by U.S. government officials abroad, those who are found to meet these criteria are granted legal refugee status prior to entering the country.

After the Vietnam War and in the years immediately following passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, most refugees came from Southeast Asia. Russian Jews were also granted refugee status in large numbers in the '80s and '90s. More recently, the refugee population has diversified considerably to include persons from Kosovo, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, Somalia and Myanmar, among others.

Individuals or families who request humanitarian protection at a port of entry or apply for such status while in the United States may be granted asylum if they are found to meet the criteria. Only a small percentage of those who apply for asylum are granted this status.

In 2005, 53,738 persons were admitted to the U.S. as refugees, and 25,257 others already present in the U.S. were granted political asylum. These numbers stand in sharp contrast to the 246,878 persons granted employment-sponsored visas in 2005 (22 percent of the total new immigrants in that year), and the 649,201 persons who obtained lawful permanent residence as family members of U.S. citizens or permanent residents (58 percent of the total admitted in FY 2005.)⁶

Family Reunification: In 1965, the Hart-Celler Act abolished race-based prohibitions to immigration and created a new policy that emphasized the reunification of immigrant families. It allocated 74 percent of available visas to spouses and children of legal permanent residents and adult children and siblings of U.S. citizens. Spouses, minor children and parents of U.S. citizens were exempted from the family preference category quotas. During the past ten years, more than 200,000 persons per year have been admitted to the U.S. as beneficiaries of family preference visas.

Family unity is one of the most powerful motivators among current immigrants. In practice, then, how effective is current policy at reuniting immigrant families? For spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens, the wait to reunite is often less than a year. However, many legal permanent residents (“green card holders”) are not so fortunate. These individuals, who have themselves waited for years to enter the U.S. legally, often precede their spouses and children to the U.S. in order to find work and housing and save money for air tickets for the rest of the family. They soon learn that family preference category visa quotas and processing backlogs can delay the legal reunification of their family in the U.S. for many years. For example, the spouse or minor child of a legal permanent resident from Mexico can expect to wait a more than a decade to receive a visa to enter the U.S.⁷

Faced with the prospect of being separated for more than a decade during their children’s formative years, some immigrant parents and spouses take desperate measures to try to reunite sooner. They would overstay visitor visas (before consular officials began routinely denying visitor visas to the spouses and children of legal permanent residents) or pay smugglers to bring the family members into the U.S., the latter often at great risk to the safety of the family. Few realize that this action will eventually force them to choose between remaining indefinitely in legal limbo or risking their family unity yet again; once the long-awaited visa becomes available they are required to return to the American embassy in their homeland to visa process, but another law prohibits the re-entry to the U.S. for ten years of anyone who has been in the U.S. out of status for one year or more.

Some family preference categories are so incredibly backlogged that family members may die before a visa becomes available. Siblings of U.S. citizens currently wait for more than a generation, 16 to 30 years, for visas.

Jobs and a Better Standard of Living: Wage disparities and buying power in their homelands as compared to those levels in the U.S. provide strong motivation for many who seek to come here for employment. Nancy Foner points this out in her history of immigration to New York City.

America holds out the promise of political and cultural freedom – and material abundance. The magnet for professionals as well as the less skilled is the chance to earn higher wages and maintain a better standard of living than was possible at home... Consumer goods that are taken for granted by people at all class levels in the United States, like telephones, refrigerators, and automobiles, are beyond the reach of the... lower class and not a certainty for the middle class either.⁸

In the earlier centuries, individuals in other nations had limited knowledge of life in America. Today, the pervasiveness of mass communication and mass marketing has made those in the developing world acutely aware of amenities that are out of their reach in their homelands.⁹

Furthermore, the internet and social networks based on earlier immigrants provide information about work opportunities in the U.S. that entice the ambitious.

According to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), one out of every seven people working in the United States in 2004 was born elsewhere; a decade earlier only one in ten was foreign-born. Furthermore, the CBO projects a slowdown in total labor force growth triggered by the retirement of the native-born baby-boom generation.¹⁰

If the American economy needs immigrant workers in addition to native-born workers to sustain healthy growth and national prosperity, and if there are tens of thousands of workers eager to emigrate, how does the current U.S. immigration system make it possible for American businesses to hire these willing workers?

As of January 2007, an employer applying for a typical worker who does not hold an advanced degree or have demonstrated ability in one of the designated “shortage occupations” (Schedule A Workers and Priority Workers) would need to wait a minimum of four and a half to five years after all paperwork is approved by three government agencies successively (Department of Labor, Department of Homeland Security, Department of State) before visa processing could begin. The causes for this lengthy delay are quotas and backlogs.¹¹

This particular timeline assumes that there are no delays for post 9/11 mechanisms. A routine FBI name check, for example, has been known to sideline applications for two to three additional years. It also fails to take into consideration an overwhelmed bureaucracy with multiple incompatible databases and no accountability.

All this, of course, presupposes that the prospective immigrant and prospective employer have found each other. A typical worker without an advanced degree or skill in a shortage occupation has no legal way to enter the U.S. to seek employment other than through the sponsorship of an employer.

Because few businesses are able to anticipate their workforce needs five years in advance, the cumbersome labor certification process is ill-suited to the needs of American business or to the motivation of potential immigrant workers.

Frustrated by lengthy delays in the legal process, many businesses in need of workers have connected outside the parameters of the law with unauthorized immigrant workers in search of employment in the U.S. Author and researcher, Michele Wucker indicates what she sees as the crux of the problem:

America’s problem is not immigration itself, but how immigration occurs – that is, whether people come desperately across the border or give up in disgust at the failure of our bureaucracy and laws, or whether they can reasonably expect that

the United States will make it feasible for the workers we need to comply with its immigration laws and to welcome them into our society as they work hard and participate in the civic life of their adopted communities.

The current immigration system is inefficient, with little accountability, and contradicts itself at every turn. Many businesses are forced to choose between breaking the law and closing down. Congress can pass laws that take months or years for immigration authorities to put into effect. The body of law is so big that even few immigration officers fully understand it, so it is almost impossible to apply without running afoul of some technicality. As a result, too many applicants have to file repeatedly, wasting everyone's time and energy. Furthermore, decisions made by harried, overworked consular officers may be capricious yet are not subject to review...

...the only way to end illegal immigration is to implement a system that allows the people our economy needs to come here legally. An increase in legal immigration – not indiscriminate, but based on a carefully thought-out approach to matching legal immigration with our country's needs – will reduce the number of people coming illegally. By taking business away from clandestine traffickers and eliminating the tremendous waste of energy that undocumented workers put into getting around obstacles, such a policy would rechannel labor and resources into productive economic activities here and in immigrants' home countries.¹²

Network-Driven Immigration: Portes and Rumbaut suggest that development of immigrant networks that establishes new expectation:

To the extent that migration abroad fulfills the goals of individuals and families, the process continues to the point that it becomes normative. When this happens, going abroad ceases to be an exceptional affair and becomes the “proper thing to do,” first for adult males and then for entire families. At some moment, networks across international borders acquire sufficient strength to induce migration for motives other than those that initiated the flow. People then move to join families, care for children and relatives, or avail themselves of social and educational opportunities created by the ethnic community abroad...

Networks are established not only between migrants and their kin and friends in countries of origin but between migrants and their employers. Every time a building contractor or a restaurant owner approaches one of his migrant workers for a referral, every time the manager of a corporate chain contacts one of his cleaning subcontractors for additional services, they mobilize networks running deep into Mexico, Central America, and other sending nations.

The fit between the needs of thousands of U.S. firms for manual labor and the motivations of Mexican and Central American workers to take these jobs as a means to fulfill their life aspirations is so strong as to defy any attempt at repression. Build fences at strategic places in the Mexico-U.S. border, and the

*flow just moves elsewhere, braving the desert and death, if necessary; deport an unauthorized worker with a stable job, and he will find a way to return to it.*¹³

Conclusion

Given the multiplicity of powerful motivations driving immigration to the U.S., effective restructuring of the U.S. immigration system is challenging. The “push” factors of religious persecution, political oppression and economic hardships in many “sending countries” persist. But, if the first six years are any indication, the “pull” factors of family reunification, economic opportunity and well-established immigrant networks will be the dominant motivations of the 21st century. Congress needs to develop and Homeland Security needs to implement an immigration policy that creates orderly, dependable, accountable and timely channels for acknowledging these strong motivations within the broader context of America’s values, foreign policy, and national interest.

Patricia Hatch, LWV-Howard County, MD, is a member of the LWVUS Immigration Study Committee

¹ John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants* (New York, Harper and Row, 1964)

² Chuck Wills, *Destination America* (a companion volume to the Public Broadcasting System documentary series by the same name) (New York, DK Publishing, 2005)

³ *The Reader’s Companion to American History*, Ed. E. Foner and J.A. Garraty (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1991)

⁴ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror* (Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1993) p. 54.

⁵ Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, 3rd edition. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006)

⁶ “*Legal Immigration to the United States Increased Substantially in FY 2005*,” Migration Policy Institute, October 2006

⁷ *State Department Visa Bulletin*, April 2007,

http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/bulletin/bulletin_3169.html Note: In order to get a more accurate picture of the true length of wait for visas, it is necessary to check the advance of priority dates in each category over a period of months. For instance, the priority date for spouse of a legal permanent resident from Mexico is not advancing even a week in a month’s time; therefore the wait may be four times the seven years that viewing one month’s bulletin alone might suggest.

⁸ Nancy Foner, *From Ellis Island to JFK* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000)

⁹ Portes and Rumbaut, p. 355

¹⁰ “*Role of Immigrants in the U.S. Labor Market*,” Congressional Budget Office, November 1, 2005.

¹¹ *State Department Visa Bulletin*, January 2007,

http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/bulletin/bulletin_3100.html

¹² Michele Wucker, *Lockout: Why America Keeps Getting Immigration Wrong When Our Prosperity Depends on Getting It Right* (Cambridge, Perseus Books Public Affairs, 2006), pp. 231, 234.

¹³ Portes and Rumbaut, p. 277