

Distinguished persons: They came to America — and saved us all

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The vaccines that will save potentially millions of lives and allow us to return to normalcy reached Americans this past week, providing hope for a post-pandemic world. But presidents and companies do not create scientific breakthroughs; people do. It is noteworthy who some of these life-savers are.

JTA News Service reports: “When Mikael Dolsten, the head scientist at Pfizer, heard the news that the COVID-19 vaccine that he has been helping to develop for the better part of a year was over 90 percent effective, he and his colleagues literally leapt with joy at a corporate office in Connecticut.” Dolsten is a recent immigrant from Sweden. And he shares something with other scientists and executives who are responsible for vaccines produced in record time:

Dolsten, who moved to the New York area from Sweden in 2004, is far from the only Jewish immigrant in his field. In fact, Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla is a Jew from Thessaloniki, Greece. The chief medical officer for Moderna, a competing drugmaker that announced that its COVID-19 vaccine was nearly 95 percent effective, is an Israeli immigrant named Tal Zaks (see story, front page)

The German biotech company that Pfizer teamed up with to create the vaccine, BioNTech, was founded and is still led by Turkish immigrants Ugur Sahin and Ozlem Tureci.

Success has a thousand fathers and mothers, but the critical role of scientific experts not born in the United States is significant. It is also emblematic of the American story in which new immigrants enrich, invigorate and improve our nation. We welcome immigrants not simply out of the goodness of our hearts, but because it is in our self-interest to do so. That should be apparent even to the xenophobic Republicans who have sought to erect barriers to legal immigration, reduce refugee admissions to historic lows, kick out “dreamers” who have lived in America since childhood and end the temporary status of thousands who fled disasters in their home countries.

It is not only immigrants themselves who contribute so dramatically to America, but also the children of those immigrants. In September, following the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the New York Times reported:

“Justice Ginsburg’s life was one of the many versions of the American dream,” Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. said during a ceremony inside the court where she served for 27 years before her death on Friday. “Her father was an immigrant from Odessa. Her mother was born four

months after her family arrived from Poland. Her mother later worked as a bookkeeper in Brooklyn. Ruth used to ask, 'What is the difference between a bookkeeper in Brooklyn and a Supreme Court justice?' Her answer: 'One generation.'

Officials in the Biden administration ought to keep these examples and thousands more in mind as they look to reverse the inhumane and counterproductive immigration policies of their predecessors. The Cato Institute has produced a list of 30 separate actions that could reform and expand legal immigrations: "The Biden administration will have to work around the clock to reverse the hundreds of regulations and executive actions that restricted the freedom of legal immigrants and Americans," Cato's David J. Bier writes. "But while it is reversing these negative actions, the administration should also 'build back better,' consistent with the president's campaign promises." He adds, "While the president should push Congress to improve the underlying immigration law, the president already has the authority to substantially improve the functioning of the current immigration system."

I heartily concur, and if President-elect Joe Biden needs evidence as to the contributions of immigrants, he should look no further than the scientists behind the covid-19 vaccines, or the daughter of a bookkeeper. For their service to the country, their innovation and their intellectual firepower, we can say, well done to those who came to America to save millions of lives and return the country back to something approaching normal.