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Commentary

Don't slam door on immigrants

The nation has benefited in the past from an open, flexible immigration policy

Thomas Costello

As a white guy of Irish heritage who practices law, coaches hockey and runs a diversity organization, I have many thoughts about the current attacks on immigrants in our nation and state.

I say immigrants as a whole because there is little doubt the current clamor by political candidates for stepped up police-state checks of people's "papers" is not just about illegal immigration. It's part of a long ugly history of anti-immigration feeling -- tinged with more than a little racism.

As a white guy, having cops routinely stop people to request immigration papers -- or even a driver's license -- won't affect me. I won't be stopped. I enjoy the benefits of male white privilege. But if my skin color were a little darker, I'd have a lot of concerns.

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Anti-immigrant feeling has long roots in the United States. In the mid-1800s, the "Know-Nothing" movement argued too many Irish and German families were arriving, damaging the nation's culture. Sound familiar?

Fortunately for the Costello family, politicians rejected the Know-Nothings. When the Costello family came through Ellis Island like millions of other families, they faced a medical examination, a check to see if they were criminals, a couple of cursory questions, and within one day legal entry into the land of opportunity. Only 2 percent of those who arrived at Ellis Island were refused entry.

That changed in the 1920s. As stated by the libertarian Cato Institute, "Spurred on by the Ku Klux Klan and bizarre eugenics theories about the racial inferiority of certain ethnic groups, in 1924 Congress enacted the 'national origins' quotas that severely restricted the number of immigrants from certain nations, effectively barring those who

were Asian born."

The door for Irish slammed shut in 1925, with an annual quota of 28,567 Irish. For those labeled "swarthy" Italians, the quota was just 4,000.

Compare the process my family enjoyed to a family trying to enter legally today. First, there is a quota: Only 226,000 families can obtain an immigrant visa each year; 140,000 can obtain employment based green cards.

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Activists In California protest Arizona's new law giving local police officers authority to check the status of suspected illegal immigrants. (Justin Sullivan / Getty Images)

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To apply for this visa, you need to have a U.S.-based employer sponsor, or family members who are U.S. citizens.

My family, like most of those reading this article, would be locked out today.

From 1900 to 1910, America absorbed about 10.4 immigrants for every 1,000 residents. Today, legal immigration is just 3.1 immigrants for every 1,000 residents.

In my role as the leader of the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion -- and as a hockey coach -- I look at the Detroit Red Wings as an example of immigration making us stronger.

Fans cheer for Datsyuk (Russia), Draper (Canada), Filppula (Finland) and Nicklas Lidstrom (Sweden). In fact, only 6 members of last year's roster are listed as coming from the U.S. I hear few complaints about these players "taking American jobs."

Instead of posturing for voters by calling for roundups of "illegal" immigrants who are simply seeking the same opportunities their own families sought when arriving before today's quotas were installed,

Michigan's political leaders should stand up for a rational immigration policy.

As the Red Wings show, diversity makes us stronger.

Let's embrace immigration and move forward, not revert to the political pandering of our history.

Thomas Costello is president and CEO of the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion, a non-profit civil rights organization. www.miroundtable.org

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