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Trump's destructive plan to stop immigration

Richard North Patterson

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BY ATTACKING LEGAL IMMIGRATION, President Trump is transforming the face America presents to the world — and America itself.

No doubt immigration quotas should reflect our capacity to absorb legal entrants. But Trump's draconian plan to slash legal immigration in half is bigoted and destructive.

His means? Chiefly by curtailing immigration by those whose families already reside here, and eliminating a lottery that broadens diversity among immigrants. His aim is not only to limit new Americans, but also to change their racial composition.

His message? Legal immigration weakens America morally and economically — admitting terrorists, criminals, and underpriced undesirables who take jobs from native-born Americans.

These are distortions and outright lies. A study by the conservative Cato Institute showed that lottery visa holders — and immigrants overall — commit far less crime than natives. Nor, in general, do immigrants displace American workers. But beneath this is a truth through which Trump animates racial anxiety — today's immigrants are mostly minorities.

Thus Trump's immigration policy neatly fuses his inherent racism with white identity politics aimed at his base. His own views are sulfurous. Haitians "all have AIDS." Nigerians will never "go back to their huts." Nonwhite immigrants are from "shithole countries." The village bigot is now America's leader.

But a visceral racist knows how to play racial politics. Our demographics may be changing, but older whites vote in disproportionate numbers. In the last decade, immigration has become politically polarized — in 2016, 78 percent of Democrats had a positive view of immigration, but only 35 percent of Republicans. For a man obsessed with short-term political gratification, this is catnip.

Never mind that immigrants in the lottery program are carefully vetted, not admitted willy-nilly — Trump's real problem is that the lottery benefits African immigrants. Just as "chain migration" reunites legal Mexican immigrants — another disfavored group — with close family members.

Trump asserts that he prefers "merit-based" immigration, which favors the highly skilled. But our need to fill jobs extends far beyond Silicon Valley, and countless accomplished Americans

come from immigrants one to three generations back whose education, or even literacy, was minimal. Those modest people hungered to achieve — as does the current cohort of African immigrants, whose education levels, on average, exceed that of those born here.

Trump notwithstanding, immigrant workers of varied skills are essential to our economic growth. Between 2000 and 2013, the number of native-born workers fell by 1.3 million, while working immigrants rose by 5.3 million. Over the last decade, the population of native-born American workers expanded by less than 0.2 percent — a rate expected to diminish.

Immigrants must fill the void. A 2017 study by J.P. Morgan Chase found that "reducing immigration would have greater negative consequences for the overall economy, starving [it] of working-age persons at a time when the retirement of the single 'baby boomers' is contributing to slower economic growth." Speaking for South Carolina, Senator Lindsey Graham said Trump's proposal would be "devastating to our state's economy" — citing low-tech "hotels, restaurants, golf courses, and farmers."

Moreover, ending family reunification could impede high-tech businesses trying to recruit foreign talent. Whereas under the current system, The New York Times noted , "of the 87 privately held companies currently valued at more than $1 billion, 51 percent had immigrant founders."

What of strains on public finances? While first-generation immigrants benefit the federal budget, but may be costly to state and local governments — chiefly because their children go to school — the next generations benefit government at every level. And, in the great majority of cases, low-skilled workers do not replace native-born Americans. The exceptions are those whose own skills are minimal — to whom Trump offers nothing but throttling immigration.

Therein lies the Democrats' dilemma. They still lack a message that persuasively addresses blue-collar economic anxieties, let alone the merits of legal immigration — now Trump threatens to deport Dreamers as vengeance for Democrats' refusal, thus far, to pass his anti-immigrant wish list.

In this divisive time, Trump's myopic and soulless view of America has the floor. For a nation of immigrants, this will not do. America's ongoing renewal requires that to be American is not merely an accident of birth, but also an invitation to the hopeful and the brave.

Democrats must insist that immigration has never been an act of charity, but an essential part of America's self-definition. Then Ronald Reagan's words will resonate once again: "America represents something universal in the human spirit. . . . Anybody from any corner of the world can come to America to live and become an American."

As did so many of those who came before us.