

OPINION: Immigration battle is about equality, human rights

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Every American should pay close attention to the present battle in Washington over immigration policy. Opponents of immigration claim it threatens America's national security and/or rule of law. Such reasons for opposition ignore, first, the unpleasant reality of closely allied anti-immigrant and racial views in the country; and second, how both views undermine America's revolutionary ideals of equality and human rights. The overriding impact of immigrants is to strengthen and enrich American culture, increase economic output, and raise American citizens' standard of living.

Anti-immigration hardliners, which include white nationalists, oppose as "amnesty" the DACA program that protects young undocumented persons from deportation. But more than anything else, key congressional Republicans and President Donald Trump seek a substantial reduction of immigrants allowed to live legally in the United States. Last year a Senate bill called for slashing legal immigration by 40 percent, especially from non-Western countries.

In January 2018, a House of Representatives bill proposed to reduce legal immigrants in 2019 by some 430,000, or 40 percent, with the number increasing thereafter. The bill would end diversity lottery and most family sponsorship programs; deport asylum seekers; and criminalize millions of unauthorized immigrants. An analysis of the measure by the conservative Cato Institute concludes, "This would be the largest policy-driven reduction in legal immigration since the awful, racially motivated acts of the 1920s."

Likely the bill will loom large in the immigration battle. The measure received Trump's blessing. In sustaining his presidency, Trump's oft-racially charged "America first" nationalism as well as anti-immigrant policies play a huge role with many supporters.

The House bill is called "Securing America's Future Act." It's well worth asking, "If enacted as law, what kind of American future would the measure — and other similar anti-immigration initiatives — secure?"

The answer is a continued white-majority America — one demographers forecast presently will end by 2040 — espoused by white nationalists and their sympathizers like Trump. White nationalists define the nation as non-Hispanic white Christians, long an absolute majority, who must protect ruthlessly the group's alleged racial and cultural supremacy and national dominance. This means exclusion or repression of feared "others," supposed non-equals — immigrants, refugees (especially Muslims), minorities — who look and/or believe differently than the superior race. Only a native-born white Christian is — and deserves rights of — an "American."

Such racial nationalism is rooted significantly in the US of a century ago. Then a widely accepted race-based concept of the country emerged, the product of a vulgarized Social Darwinism combining with historic claims of white supremacy. It defined the nation as a race — the country's majority white Protestants of northern European origin. National progress, it declared, depended on racial "purity," selective breeding, and an official socio-political policy useful solely to whites.

Consequently, in 1921 and 1924 Congress enacted laws that instituted massive cuts in legal immigration to keep out Italians and Eastern Europeans, specifically Jews. During the 1930s, the laws were used to prevent the entry of Jews seeking to leave Nazi Germany. Pseudo-scientific eugenicists, so-called racial hygienists, and other white supremacists believed such persons inferior racially and predisposed to criminality, poverty, alcoholism, and prostitution. Over 30 states enacted federally funded laws that allowed forcible sterilization of so-called unwanted — immigrants, people of color, poor people, unmarried mothers, criminals, and handicapped. During the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan surged in membership, attacking blacks, Catholics, and Jews.

In 20th century America, to discredit eugenics, xenophobia, and much vile racism it took revelations after World War II of the unimaginable extreme to which Nazi Germany had carried racial nationalism. Today, what will it take to discredit the present destructive forces seeking to deny immigrants the right to live legally in the US, enjoy liberty, and pursue happiness?