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Inside the Golden Door

Half a century ago, Virginia's Fairfax County was 90% white and 3.5% immigrant; today it's 50% white and 30% foreign-born.

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In 1965 the percentage of immigrants in the United States was only 4.4%. Today, thanks in large part to the Immigration Act of 1965—which abolished the discriminatory quotas that barred most immigrants from outside of northwestern Europe, increased family-based immigration and allowed for more legal immigration—it stands at 13%.

This demographic shift has had profound effects, and in “A Nation of Nations,” National Public Radio correspondent Tom Gjelten brings these changes to life by focusing on Fairfax County, Va. Half a century ago the county was 90% white and 3.5% immigrant; now it's 50% white and 30% foreign-born. He tells the story of five immigrant families adjusting to Virginia life, and how schools, the local government, Catholic Charities and the nonprofit Northern Virginia Family Services helped them integrate. The featured families come from countries as different as Libya, Bolivia and South Korea—a broad sampling of the post-1970 immigration wave. The biggest weakness of the book is that the author doesn't follow illegal immigrants or Mexicans, two often overlapping groups that have defined immigration in our time.

Mr. Gjelten picked families who didn't fit seamlessly into American life. They struggle with English and government regulations, and some raise national-security concerns. But within a generation each family does well enough that their children integrate and find careers. One is Alvaro Alarcon, who immigrated when he was 5 years old, attended community college and co-founded Sagan Entertainment, which supplied photo booths to weddings and other parties. Still, Mr. Alarcon is confused about where he belongs. “I can't say I'm Bolivian, because I don't know anything about the place, but I can't say I'm American, because I wasn't born here. So when people ask me where I'm from, I can't give a straight answer.”

Virtually every family in America has immigrant forebears who struggled in the same way. My paternal grandparents came from Iran and still tell stories of being tricked by co-workers, struggling with English or being generally confused—as when my grandmother thought a box of Betty Crocker cake mix contained an actual slice of cake, ruining my grandfather's lunch. The author's family came to North Dakota from Norway in the 19th century and had several setbacks before succeeding in business.

Mr. Gjelten points out that “no country on the planet would be as associated ideologically with immigration as the United States,” and much of his book is dedicated to relaying the history of U.S. immigration policy, with a special emphasis on the nativists who opposed liberalization.

The harsh immigration restrictions of the early 20th century were a tremendous departure from our founding ideology. Sixty percent of America's white population in 1790 was English—at most. Germans, Irish and other Europeans made up the rest of the white population, to say nothing of the African slaves and American Indians. From 1790 to 1875 there were virtually no federal immigration laws, only restrictions on naturalization. Over nine million immigrants arrived during that period, boosting the immigrant population to 14.4% of the U.S. population by 1870. In that year alone, 387,000 immigrants arrived, equal to over 1% of the entire U.S. population, a flow that dwarfs modern immigration.

A confluence of nationalism, eugenics-inspired racial animus and labor-union pressure pushed a barrage of restrictions that culminated with the Immigration Act of 1924 (also known as the “national origins system”), which capped annual immigration at 164,667 and virtually banned immigrants from any country outside of northwestern Europe and the Western Hemisphere. Prescott Hall, the co-founder of the Immigration Restriction League that concocted this scheme and lobbied for years on its behalf, wrote: “Do we want this country to be peopled by British, German, and Scandinavian stock . . . or by Slav, Latin, and Asiatic races, historically downtrodden, atavistic, and stagnant?”

Republican Rep. Albert Johnson, chief author of the national-origins system and chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, was also the head of something called the Eugenics Research Association. One of Johnson's key advisers on immigration was Madison Grant, author of the 1916 best seller “The Passing of the Great Race,” a tract that denigrated Asians and blacks and split Europeans into three different races: The superior Nordics were supposedly being overwhelmed by the inferior Alpines and Mediterraneans.

By the beginning of the civil-rights movement, there was tremendous pressure from groups like the American Jewish Committee, the YWCA and NAACP to replace this racist national-origins system. Cold Warriors were also eager to remove the shameful national-origins quotas because the Soviet Union used them to highlight American hypocrisy.

The most controversial portion of the 1965 act was the expansion of family-based or chain migration, and Mr. Gjelten's narrative traces how South Korean army veteran Sang Woo and his wife, Nam Soo, used her sister's U.S. citizenship to earn a green card through family reunification—a path unavailable prior to 1965. Many immigration restrictionists today blame Democrats for this policy, but the author notes that those who opposed repealing the national-origins system expanded chain migration. Since most immigrants at the time were Europeans, opponents of the 1965 act thought a new immigration system based on family reunification would mostly allow European immigrants to sponsor their family members—acting as a national-origins quota in all but name.

The word “nation” comes from the Latin root *natio*, meaning a tribe, race or people with a common ancestry. For early Americans and Europeans that is what it meant. But thanks to America's immigration-induced diversity, “nation” has become a synonym for “country.” Anyone who shares civic values, believes in hard work and learns English can call the U.S. home.

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