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Clayton McCleskey: A bite-sized portion of immigration reform

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[MUNICH](#) – As a can't-do spirit sweeps over America, Washington has bumped immigration reform to the back burner.

Last November, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano declared that immigration reform would be a priority for the [Obama](#) administration. Fast-forward to the State of the Union, and the president barely mentioned it.

Comprehensive immigration reform now seems highly unlikely this year. The hot-button issues of illegal immigration and border security are so divisive, there just isn't political will to tackle them.

But the contentious debate over illegal immigration often overshadows an issue the U.S. can easily address: highly skilled immigration.

Each year the U.S. awards only 65,000 H-1B visas to highly skilled immigrants such as an engineer from Munich or a computer scientist from [Shanghai](#). Demand for the visas is higher than the supply, so we end up turning away thousands of smart, driven would-be immigrants who are key to economic growth.

"If Congress wants to create jobs, it should raise or eliminate the absurdly low cap on H-1B workers," explained Daniel Griswold, director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the [Cato Institute](#) in Washington.

He said that on average, every H-1B worker creates five jobs in the U.S. So concerns that such immigrants take jobs away from Americans are misguided – companies do not fire a worker from [Dallas](#) and then recruit someone from [New Delhi](#) to do the same job.

They're also a net gain as far as taxes are concerned; they tend to pay lots of taxes while collecting very little from the government.

Other countries have realized how important highly skilled workers are, and a global competition for knowledge and brains is raging. While our government shuts out many skilled workers, others are aggressively recruiting them.

"We are losing the competition for highly skilled workers because our government policies are woefully out of step with the 21st-century high-tech economy," warned Griswold.

As an example, the [European Union](#) continues to develop new programs to make [Europe](#) more attractive for highly skilled immigrants.

"Americans needs to realize that Europe is making efforts to compete with the USA. Europeans understand that these people are extremely important for development," said Steffen Angenendt, an immigration expert at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in [Berlin](#).

[Canada](#), New Zealand and Australia are also rolling out the welcome mat. So why isn't the U.S.?

Folks, this is a competition the U.S. can easily win. America's comparative advantage is our flexible, entrepreneurial culture that generally does an excellent job of integrating hard-working newcomers.

"America is never finished; that is the great genius of our nation. We are an organic, not a static culture," explained Steven Roberts, author of *From Every End of This Earth*, which chronicles the lives of 13 immigrant families.

Roberts, an ABC News political analyst and a professor at The George Washington University, told me that "our current immigration policies are backwards and stupid."

The only roadblock to changing them is self-imposed. In the face of uncertainty, many Americans are adopting a batten-down-the-hatches mentality. Efforts to raise the limit on H-1B visas have fallen victim to small-minded anti-immigration sentiment on the right and economy-killing protectionism peddled by lefty labor unions.

That type of shortsighted thinking is nothing new.

Roberts writes that in 1753, Ben Franklin issued a warning about the German immigrants pouring into [Pennsylvania](#): "They will soon outnumber us, [and we] will not, in my opinion, be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious."

Sounds like something [Lou Dobbs](#) or Tom Tancredo might say. But they are wrong, as was Franklin.

Germany's own recent experience with anti-immigration policies can teach us a lesson. When Poland and other Central European nations joined the European Union, Germany feared that Polish workers would flood across the newly opened border. So, snooty Germany sought protections that allowed it to keep out citizens of the new member states.

The result? Poles skipped right over Germany and went to [Ireland](#) and Britain and greatly contributed to their economic booms. Meanwhile, Germany was left with an aging, shrinking population and a stagnant economy.

Our restrictions on H-1B visas risk doing the same thing. Highly skilled immigrants create jobs, come on an as-needed basis and pour tax money into the government's coffers.

As we try to rebuild our economy and maintain America's position of leadership in the world, an influx of well-educated immigrants would boost ingenuity and spur economic growth.

Every day that we maintain the crippling cap on H-1B visas, we force another batch of smart people to take their know-how and ideas elsewhere.

What are we waiting for? Let's stop shooting ourselves in the foot.

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