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Immigration: An Abolitionist Cause

by [Ken Schoolland for the Foundation For Economic Education](#)

One of the most frequent arguments used against opening borders is that it would add to the welfare burden of the state and that innocent taxpayers will be compelled to pay for slothful immigrants.

Slothful immigrants? Students in my international trade and finance classes always get a good laugh at the notion of "slothful immigrants." I ask my students to imagine that they are an employer facing two job applicants. The only thing they know about them is that one is an American and the other is an immigrant. Which is likely to be the worker who will work harder? They always always always say the immigrant is sure to be the harder worker.

If it is logical on economic grounds to deport someone so that they do not become dependent on welfare, then it would make more sense to deport Americans on welfare than immigrants. But no one suggests that. Why?

The people of America proudly declare every Fourth of July "that all Men Are Created Equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Yet citizens are presumed to have a right to be in the United States of America and immigrants are not. This is especially odd since all Americans, or their ancestors, were once immigrants themselves.

Note the state control that is inherent in the circular logic of those who declare: "Newcomers cannot be allowed in, because the state *might* compel us all to pay the potential welfare costs for their upkeep." It is the same circular logic that is used to control all that we do, such as:

"Citizens cannot smoke cigarettes or marijuana, because the state *might* compel us all to pay the potential medical costs for their illness."

"Citizens cannot keep a child out of government schools, because the state *might* compel us all to pay the potential unemployment costs of inadequate training."

"Citizens cannot keep their money out of the Social Security system, because the state might compel us all to pay the potential retirement costs of inadequate funding."

Or, eventually, "Citizens cannot give birth to newcomers, because the state *might* compel us all to pay the potential costs for their upkeep."

If one accepts this logic of the politician, then the right to all individual human action is lost to the state.

Many free-marketeers champion individual freedom in virtually every other aspect of economics except immigration. They may accept immigration theoretically, but only after all forms of welfare have been abolished. Which is to say: "Not in my lifetime." If we truly believe in the notion of personal responsibility for individual actions, then we must hold politicians accountable for the welfare system, not innocent immigrants who had no say in the policy. It would be just as illogical as holding a refugee to account for the tyranny of a dictator that drove her from her homeland.

Arguing the practical side, Julian Simon asserted that it is a misconception that immigrants, as a group, are a welfare burden on taxpayers. Immigrants do so much to contribute to the economic health of a country, and they pay more in taxes than they absorb in benefits, so the continuation of welfare benefits for citizens may well *depend* on their contributions.¹

Welfare Decay

Is it correct to suppose that in-migration is caused by the existence of welfare? Evidence shows that the opposite is true.

Proof can be found in migration patterns within America's 50 states, where there are no border guards and virtually no language and cultural barriers. Do people move between states to find the most welfare? No! *Just the opposite.*

States that give the most welfare have the most out-migration. States with the least welfare have the most in-migration.

Take my home state, Hawaii, for example. Hawaii is the most socialistic state in America, with by far the most generous welfare benefits of the 50 states. According to a Cato Institute study by Michael Tanner and Stephen Moore, the six basic welfare benefits in Hawaii (six among a possible 77 welfare programs) could provide a mother and two children with the equivalent of a pre-tax income of \$36,000 or a wage of \$17.50 an hour.² This is a lot of money and by the "welfare-magnet theory" should have attracted every welfare mom in America.

It hasn't. According to recent Census data for the 1990s, Hawaii experienced a net domestic out-migration of 9 percent of the population to other states. In fact, all the top welfare regions—Hawaii, Alaska, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and the District of Columbia—experienced net domestic outmigration to other states.

Hawaii has an ideal climate, fabulous beaches, wonderful people, but the economy is in decline. In fact, it is the only state in the nation that experienced real economic contraction the entire decade of the '90s. No wonder, since it has been chronically listed as the number-one "tax hell" in the country by *Money magazine*.

The legislature feels it has to raise taxes to pay for the welfare, and by raising taxes the lawmakers drive people away. The same is true for the second-highest welfare state, Alaska, which had the second-slowest growing economy in the nation for a decade.

Contrast this with states that grant little welfare. Mississippi provides only a third of the *welfare* money that Hawaii offers. In fact, the median income of a worker in Mississippi is \$6,000 less than what a family can get on welfare in Hawaii. Did everyone abandon Mississippi to get on the gravy train in Hawaii?

Just the opposite. In fact, all five states at the very bottom of the welfare list—Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Arizona—experienced net domestic inmigration from other states. The deserts of Arizona and Nevada, with some of the lowest taxes, were the fastest growing states in the nation.

There's no doubt about it. In-migration is caused by opportunity, not by welfare. Of course, there are high-profile exceptions, but people who are too lazy to work are also too lazy to

move away from everything that is familiar to them. This is generally true within a nation and even more so between nations. It is the courageous of the world who are far more likely to risk everything to go to a new and potentially hostile land where the language, the customs, and the people are all unfamiliar.

Tyrant and Corporate Welfare

There are *other* forms of welfare, however, that do contribute mightily to migration. These are tyrant welfare and corporate welfare.

The U.S. taxpayer has been compelled to provide tyrant welfare to an extremely sordid gang of thugs over decades: from Duvalier, Mobutu, and Marcos to Pahlavi, Noriega, Suharto, Saddam Hussein, and even Osama bin Laden.

The Center for Defense Information states that the United States sells weaponry to the political elite in 150 nation-states— four-fifths of these nation-states are undemocratic. Two-thirds of that number are listed by the U.S. State Department as having governments that are abusive of human rights.³

Since the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the new drug wars, the American share of worldwide arms transfers climbed spectacularly to 70 percent, most of which has been paid for, directly or indirectly, by U.S. taxpayers.⁴ This has surely contributed to the tenfold increase of refugees in recent decades.

Still another form of welfare directly leads to immigration. This is corporate welfare known as “protectionism.” Because of trade barriers, American, Japanese, and European consumers are prohibited from buying products that workers and entrepreneurs are willing to produce abroad.

Hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of earnings could lead to prosperity for these people in their homelands. But those earnings are stopped by corporate welfare protectionism.

This is especially true in the agricultural and textile sectors that are particularly well suited to development in the Third World, but still experience extraordinarily high trade barriers. *The Economist* magazine indicated the magnitude of agricultural trade barriers alone: “If rich countries were to remove the subsidies . . . poor countries would benefit by more than three times the amount of all the overseas development assistance they receive each year.”⁵

Immigrants are not lured from their homelands by the prospect of generous welfare benefits so much as they are driven from their homelands by tyrant welfare and protectionist corporate welfare. Reforming these policies could do much to improve conditions for people the world over.

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the airwaves have been filled with cries to end immigration as a means of keeping terrorists far away. It is understandable that, in the fearful panic of such a crisis, people will clamor for protective measures. But to gain real protection, reason must prevail over collectivist repression.

Government intelligence and security agencies, with an abundance of wealth, personnel, and technology at their disposal, failed miserably in a decade-long effort to root out a terrorist network with global tentacles that probably originated in some of the poorest nations of the world. This was not only a monumental failure of government at its primary security function, but also a failure of American foreign policy. To ask for an end of immigration sidesteps responsibility for this failure and scapegoats refugees who are also the victims of terror.

Would America be more secure if all newcomers were banned? Should tourism and business travel be stopped? Should people be stopped from crossing state borders as well? No. This is as illogical as trying to prevent future crime by banning births. Much more is lost than gained

by such measures.

To paraphrase champions of the Second Amendment, "If you outlaw migration, only outlaws will migrate." Far better that *individual* criminal conspirators be effectively tracked and prosecuted.

History of Invitation

It is a fact of American history that invitations have always been extended to immigrants by people who were eager to employ them. People were welcomed because they offered labor that was not available in this growing country.

Immigrant labor made growth possible, and companies offered contracts to thousands of people who worked harder, worked longer, worked cheaper, and worked at greater personal risk than those who came before. They built railroads over mountain ranges, and they built farms in the plains and deserts.

That is, they worked until a protectionist government responded with legislation to envious domestic labor groups who would not compete. It is the pattern of history that once immigrants become settled and comfortable, they seek some pretext for keeping out other immigrants who are still more hungry and more diligent.

The first of these laws reversed American openness by appealing to blatant, collectivist racism. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was a shameful act in a nation-state that two years later carved at the bottom of the Statue of Liberty:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

First they targeted the Chinese, then it was the Japanese, the Mormons, the Muslims, and the Catholics from southern Europe. They also outlawed political rebels. Ironically, laws against the admission of political rebels would have banned all of America's original revolutionary heroes. It was collectivism in all of its primitive, religious, and ethnic variations.

Contract labor was forbidden, and churches and charities were not even allowed to pay the passage of desperate refugees. And then there were the Jews.

The Jews were invited by their cousins in America who would have taken them in and helped them establish livelihoods, even given them a chance to fight against Hitler's death machine, but they were turned back. They were barred from a safe haven by the millions— and condemned to Hitler's gas chambers— by a law, the National Origins Act, the quota system.

Let us not forget that closing a door from outside a prison-state has the same effect as closing a door from inside a prison-state. Either action prevents escape. Either action is collaboration with tyrants against their victims.

Slavery by Any Other Name

It still goes on today as Cubans, Iraqis, Burmese, Sudanese, and North Koreans are hussled back to slave states. The mother of Elián Gonzalez died fleeing both Castro's tyranny and Clinton's border patrol that would have returned her to Castro's tyranny. American fishing vessels and cruise liners are even fined \$3,000 per head for the "crime" of rescuing refugees at sea and bringing them ashore.⁶

Hard as it is to accept, we have not progressed from the horrible time when runaway slaves

were captured and forcibly returned to private plantation masters. Sally Jane Driscoll, a senior writer for the Ayn Rand Institute, says:

On May 24, 1854, Anthony Burns, a young black man working in a clothing store in Boston, was arrested for fleeing from a slave owner in Richmond, Virginia. Under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, public officials in the free states were required by the federal government to help recapture escaped slaves and return them to bondage. Northerners who refused to help risked heavy fines and jail. . .

Fifty thousand Bostonians lined the streets to watch as Anthony Burns was taken to the ship that would return him to Virginia. He was escorted by Boston police, Massachusetts militia and U.S. Marines. The troops had orders to fire as needed upon the crowd without warning. Along the route to the dock many protesting Bostonians were wounded by armed soldiers.

The people of Boston rightly defended Anthony Burns, but all their legal reasoning, emotional pleas and desperate actions were ineffective. He had escaped from slavery only to be sold down the river by the federal government in repudiation of the principle of individual rights, the very principle our government had been established to defend.⁷

How many people would still count themselves as abolitionists today? How many would join massive demonstrations or the underground railroad on behalf of immigrants who are escaping slave states? It just isn't happening.

Ms. Driscoll has reminded us that as history passes before us, we will be judged one day by our descendants on whether or not we have advanced the cause of liberty or whether we have stood in the way.

I wish to say in the strongest terms I can muster, emboldened by the courage and fortitude of immigrants throughout the world and throughout history, that we should not be debating reasons for keeping people under the thumb of tyranny. We should not be devising schemes and rationalizations for the restriction of immigration. The world is full of very eloquent and powerful people who have long been serving *that* task.

Rather, let us take the part of the abolitionists of 150 years ago, those who fought against seemingly insurmountable fear, prejudice, custom, and law to champion freedom. This is practical, humanitarian, and, above all, ethical. Let us be a part of the drive for liberty today. Let us champion the millions of immigrants who are seeking liberty in the same manner that we would if we were in their shoes.

This article was originally published by the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) in The Freeman on January 2002.

End Notes

¹Julian Simon, "Are There Grounds for Limiting Immigration?" Journal of Libertarian Studies, Summer 1999.

²Stephen Moore, "Why Welfare Pays," Wall Street Journal, September 28, 1995.

³America's Defense Monitor, Center for Defense Information, Washington, D.C., www.cdi.org. The data cited in the text of this article was derived from its film "The Human Cost of America's Arms Sales," November 8, 1998.

⁴“U.S. Dealers Dominating World Arms Market,” Honolulu Advertiser, April 17, 1994, and “Arms Sales Boom,” The Economist, August 13, 1994.

⁵“Patches of Light: Special Report on Agricultural Trade,” The Economist, June 9, 2001.

⁶“\$24,000 Cruise Ship Fine for Rescuing 8 Cubans,” Honolulu Advertiser, October 22, 1993, and “Piracy Done with Fines,” Honolulu Advertiser, November 6, 1993.

⁷Sally Jane Driscoll, “Hasta la Vista, Anthony Burns: A Case like that of Elian Gonzalez Occurred in America Almost 150 Years Ago,” Ayn Rand Institute, www.aynrand.org/medialink/op-eds/burns.txt.

About The Author

[Ken Schoolland](#) is presently an Associate Professor of Economics and Political Science at Hawaii Pacific University. He is an economist, academic, author, and political commentator. Schoolland is also a Member of the Board of Directors for the International Society for Individual Liberty, and a Sam Walton Fellow for Students in Free Enterprise. [The Foundation for Economic Education \(FEE\)](#), one of the oldest free-market organizations in the United States, was founded in 1946 by Leonard E. Read to study and advance the freedom philosophy. FEE's mission is to offer the most consistent case for the "first principles" of freedom: the sanctity of private property, individual liberty, the rule of law, the free market, and the moral superiority of individual choice and responsibility over coercion.

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