MESSAGE OF IMMIGRATION BILL IS DISPUTED

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Body

This year's failed ***immigration bill***, students of United States ***immigration*** policies agree, was in the American tradition of welcoming newcomers while keeping the "golden door" from opening too wide. The students disagree, however, on whether the principal ***message*** of the ***bill***, which died when Congress adjourned yesterday without approving it, was "come in" or "keep out."

Oscar Handlin, Carl H. Pforzheimer professor at Harvard University, an authority on the history of ***immigration***, called the ***bill*** "a more liberal measure than any we've had in 90 years." Although it would have cracked down on the entry of illegal aliens, he said it was "liberalizing" in every other regard. "I can't conceive of this happening even 30 years ago," Professor Handlin said.

Students of US ***immigration*** policies agree that this year's failed ***immigration bill*** was in American tradition of welcoming newcomers while keeping 'golden door' from opening too wide; they disagree on whether principal ***message*** of ***bill*** was 'come in' or 'keep out' (M)

But Richard Wade, a professor of history at the City University Graduate Center, found the ***bill***, in essence, "identical with the restrictive legislation of the 1920's, when we were trying to keep certain groups out of the country." "Now we are trying to 'control our borders,' which amounts to keeping out low-income Mexicans," he said.

'Part of the Ebb and Flow'

The Rev. Andrew M. Greeley, director of the Center for the Study of American Pluralism at the University of Chicago, saw the measure as "part of the ebb and flow of America's attitudes to newcomers." He reviewed the history: "The Founding Fathers worried about the Germans and the Irish; the Germans and the Irish worried about the Poles and the Italians; now, the Poles and the Italians worry about the Hispanics and the Asians. I don't think anything is different."

Father Greeley summed up 200 years of what he called "our national ambivalence" toward newcomers: "We don't like to let people in and could never permit unrestricted ***immigration***, but we can't adopt the sort of restrictions that other countries impose. That would go against American ideals."

History supports that view. In the first century of the Republic, settlers and laborers were needed, and ***immigration***, mainly from northern and western Europe, was encouraged. Although the influx from Ireland after the potato crop failures of the 1840's aroused anti-Catholic feelings, no measures were taken to restrict entry.

In the 1870's, however, an economic depression brought calls by labor leaders, particularly in the West, for a clampdown on the entry of Chinese workers. Conspicuously different from most Americans and without political power since they were not permitted citizenship, the Chinese made easy targets, and the Chinese Exclusion Acts of

the 1880's barred their entry. The Japanese were kept out by a "gentlemen's agreement" between Tokyo and Washington in the early 1900's.

Others on Not-Wanted List

Restrictions on most Asians were retained in a 1917 codification of ***immigration*** laws. They were joined on the not-wanted list by the Italians and Jews who had been coming to the United States in large numbers and who, some Americans feared, would prove "unassimilable." A provision of the new ***bill***, aimed specifically at them, added illiteracy to the reasons for keeping people out.

This group was also a main target of the restrictive 1924 National Origins Act, the most important ***immigration*** measure up to that time and for decades afterward. It set a quota for each nationality based on the number of its members already in the United States, as well as an overall ceiling of 150,000 immigrants a year. Most Asians were barred entirely.

The quota system, frankly designed to favor ***immigration*** from western and northern Europe at the expense of most other areas, remained the law until after World War II.

Although restrictions were eased as the war ended, particularly to admit "displaced persons" from Germany, Italy and Austria, the national origins quota was retained in the first major postwar revision of ***immigration*** law, the McCarren-Walter Act. It became law in 1952 over the veto of President Truman.

Race as Bar Eliminated

The 1952 law did, however, eliminate race as a bar to citizenship; for the first time in American history, Asians were permitted to become citizens.

Not until 1965 was the national origins quota system, which had been passionately attacked over the years, scrapped. The key passage of the new law reflected profound changes in national attitudes: "No person shall receive any preference or priority or be discriminated against in the issuance of an ***immigration*** visa because of his race, sex, nationality, place of birth or place of residence."

Overall limits on ***immigration*** were retained, however, and a preference system was set up that gave priority to relatives of United States residents and to immigrants with needed talents and skills. Each country in the Eastern hemisphere was allowed 20,000 places, a welcome step to Italians and Greeks.

In another major change, an effort to hold down the entrance of Mexicans, the 1965 law placed a ceiling of 120,000 on ***immigration*** from the Western Hemisphere. Some students date to this legislation the flow of "illegals" that would soon become a source of national concern and in time would lead to this year's ***bill***, sponsored by Romano L. Mazzoli, Democrat of Kentucky, and Alan K. Simpson, Republican of Wyoming.

Economic Times Became Bad

Although newcomers from countries in this hemisphere had been exempt from quotas, and Mexicans in particular were often welcomed as cheap labor, the welcome wore out when times turned bad.

In the Depression of the 1930's, 500,000 people of Mexican descent, most of them United States citizens, were "repatriated" to Mexico by Federal ***immigration*** officials. In World War II, when the United States needed workers, Mexicans were again welcomed, only to be expelled in the 1950's in a Government campaign.

The heavily publicized entry of hundreds of thousands of "undocumented aliens," mostly from Mexico, brought demands in the 1970's to "stem the tide." Congress responded in 1976 with an amendment to the ***Immigration*** and Nationality Act that, for the first time, imposed an annual limit of 20,000 immigrants on each country in this hemisphere and subjected them to the preference system in effect for other nations.

The immediate effect was to cut in half the legal immigrants from Mexico, who had been running at far over 20,000 for a decade. But the illegal immigrants kept coming.

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