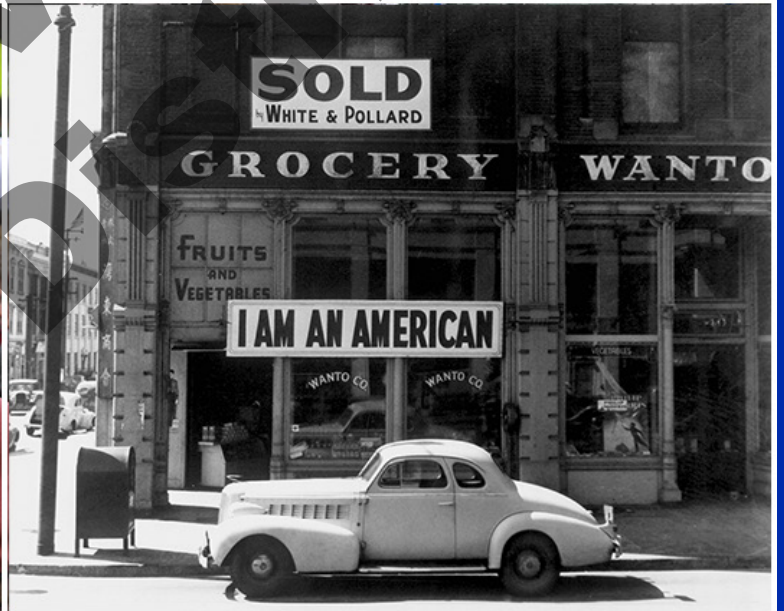


Immigration and the U.S. Policy Debate



THE
**CHOICES
PROGRAM**
BROWN UNIVERSITY

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Introduction: A Country of Immigrants

Today, immigration and immigration policy dominate social media and political debates. Indeed, many people in the United States consider immigration policy a critical factor in deciding the future of the country.

To say that the United States is a country of immigrants is more than an acknowledgment of history. It is also how many U.S. citizens think about their country: a refuge and a place of opportunity for all.

“I have always believed that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage.”

—Ronald Reagan, January 25, 1974

But, a careful look at the history of U.S. immigration shows that immigrants have not always been welcomed with open arms. The questions that come up in debates about immigration are complex. Certain themes have arisen repeatedly in the past and continue to the present day. For example, today, some U.S. citizens worry about losing their jobs to immigrants willing to work for lower wages, or about impoverished immigrants arriving and needing financial assistance. But these concerns actually date back to the nineteenth century. Other concerns about immigration can be traced all the way back to the earliest days of the country. Deeply rooted racism and xenophobia (suspicion of foreign cultures, religions, and ethnicities) have always been influential in shaping the country’s trajectory, attitudes toward immigrants, and government immigration policy.

For these reasons, studying the history of immigration is one way to begin to explore the complex story of the United States—a story that began well before the arrival of the first colonists.

Immigration by European colonists in the seventeenth century displaced and disrupted native civilizations. Some native people arrived in North America as early as 10,000 BCE. For thousands of years, civilizations prospered and fell as they did in

other parts of the world. European colonists were merely the latest newcomers in a long history of migration and change.

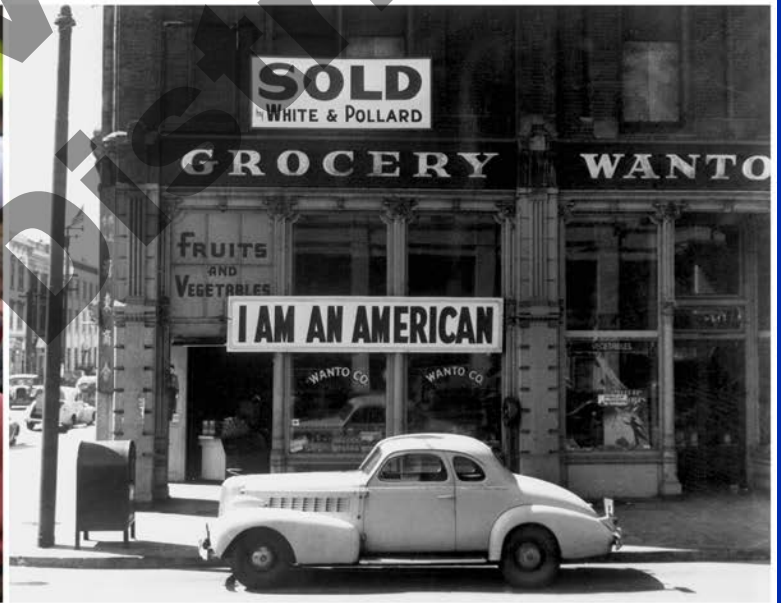
Soon, Western European immigrants populated the area with colonies. Throughout this process, Europeans and their descendants exploited and discriminated against the native people they encountered. They also enslaved Africans and forced them to come to North America. The historical interactions between native peoples, Europeans, Africans, South Americans, Central Americans, Asians, and others all shaped the present-day United States.

Since the U.S. government began counting in 1820, more than seventy-four million immigrants have come to the United States. As of 2017, the United States had a larger number of immigrants living within its borders than any other country in the world—about 49.8 million immigrants. But according to total population size, as of 2017, immigrants made up only about 15.3 percent of the U.S. population—a much lower percentage than in other countries such as the United Arab Emirates (88.4 percent), Kuwait (75.5 percent), Singapore (46 percent), Australia (28.8 percent), and Canada (21.5 percent), to name a few.

With the U.S. population greater than 325.7 million, and economic uncertainty and security concerns weighing on the minds of many, some contend that the United States does not have room for more immigrants. Many argue that foreign cultures and religions threaten the cultural and political traditions of the United States. At the same time, others believe that the United States cannot afford to close the door to the skills and experiences that newcomers bring. Some people also think that admitting immigrants who wish to reunite with their families already in the United States should be a priority. Many people acknowledge the cultural and social benefits of accepting more immigrants into the country. Others believe that the United States has a humanitarian obligation to keep its doors open to migrants and refugees fleeing conflict or persecution—especially conflicts in which the United States has played a role.

Immigration and the U.S. Policy Debate

Teacher Resource Book



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TEACHER RESOURCE BOOK

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Primary Source Analysis: The Dillingham Commission

Objectives:

Students will: Explore the concept of national identity.

Interpret the political and social beliefs underlying historical U.S. immigration policies by analyzing a primary source document.

Compare the early twentieth century immigration policy debate with today's debate.

Required Reading:

Before beginning the lesson, students should have read the Introduction and Part I and completed “Study Guide—Introduction and Part I” (TRB 3-4) or “Advanced Study Guide—Introduction and Part I” (TRB-5).

Handout:

“Excerpt from the Investigations of the Dillingham Commission, 1911” (TRB-13)

In the Classroom:

1. Exploring National Identity—Ask each student to take out a piece of paper, but instruct them not to write their name on it. Put the following question on the board: “What does it mean to be an American?”

Have students write their response at the top of the page. Then, instruct students to pass their paper to the left. Students should read the sentence that their neighbor wrote, add a new idea below, and fold the top of the paper to hide the first sentence. Then, have students pass the paper to the left again. Repeat the steps above.

Once students have passed the papers a few times, allow them to unfold and read all of the contributions. How did different students answer the prompt? Did their answers vary? Inform students that definitions of national identity in the United States, or what it means to be “American”, varies from person to person and throughout time. Students will explore how some people defined Americanness and national identity in the early twentieth century by examining a primary source.

2. Twentieth Century Attitudes—Have students imagine that they are members of Congress in 1911. A few senators pushing for immigration reform have prepared a statement expressing their findings for Congress. As members of Congress, what might some of their concerns be in 1911? Which groups are calling for stricter regulations on immigration? Why? What attitudes about immigration existed in the United States at this time? Ask students to use what they learned in Part I of the reading to support their answers.

3. Examining the Document—Break the class into groups of three or four and distribute “Excerpt from the Investigations of the Dillingham Commission, 1911” to each student. As students read, have them mark words or phrases they do not understand, descriptions of immigrant communities, and policies recommended by the commission. After students read the document, have them discuss in groups what they underlined and parts they found interesting or surprising. Students may also use this time to look up words or phrases that they do not understand.

4. Making Connections—Call students back together and discuss as a class the content and tone of the statement. How did the commission describe immigrants? What policies did it recommend? What information might the commission have left out for the purposes of making their argument? Do students think all immigrants were “unskilled”? How would the commission define “least desirable citizens”? What picture does the commission paint of Americans and American society?

Ask students to recall the various definitions of “American” that the class generated earlier. How do these compare to the view of the Dillingham Commission? Do students see any similarities between the report of the Dillingham Commission and the current U.S. debate about immigration?

Homework:

Students should read Part II and complete “Study Guide—Part II” (TRB 14-15) or “Advanced Study Guide—Part II” (TRB-16).

Name: _____

Excerpt from the Investigations of the Dillingham Commission, 1911

Instructions: Below is an excerpt from the Dillingham Commission's statement presented to Congress in 1911. As you read, mark or underline the following: 1) words or phrases you do not understand; 2) ways immigrants are described; 3) policies the Dillingham Commission proposes.

As a result of the investigation the Commission is unanimously of the opinion that in framing legislation emphasis should be laid upon the following principles:

1. While the American people, as in the past, welcome the oppressed of other lands, care should be taken that immigration be such both in quality and quantity as not to make too difficult the process of assimilation.

2. Since the existing law and further special legislation recommended in this report deal with the physically and morally unfit, further general legislation concerning the admission of aliens should be based primarily upon economic or business considerations touching the prosperity and economic well-being of our people.

3. The measure of the rational, healthy development of a country is not the extent of its investment of capital, its output of products, or its exports and imports, unless there is a corresponding economic opportunity afforded to the citizen dependent upon employment for his material, mental, and moral development.

4. The development of business may be brought about by means which lower the standard of living of the wage earners. A slow expansion of industry which would permit the adaptation and assimilation of the incoming labor supply is preferable to a very rapid industrial expansion which results in the immigration of laborers of low standards and efficiency, who imperil the American standard of wages and conditions of employment.

The Commission agrees that... The investigations of the Commission show an oversupply of unskilled labor in basic industries to an extent which indicates an oversupply of unskilled labor in the industries of the country as a whole, a condition which demands legislation restricting the further admission of such unskilled labor.

It is desirable in making the restriction that—(a) A sufficient number be debarred to produce a marked effect upon the present supply of unskilled labor.

(b) As far as possible, the aliens excluded should be those who come to this country with no intention to become American citizens or even to maintain a permanent residence here, but merely to save enough, by the adoption, if necessary, of low standards of living, to return permanently to their home country. Such persons are usually men unaccompanied by wives and children.

(c) As far as possible the aliens excluded should also be those who, by reason of their personal qualities or habits, would least readily be assimilated or would make the least desirable citizens.

The following methods of restricting immigration have been suggested:

(a) The exclusion of those unable to read or write in some language.

(b) The limitation of the number of each race arriving each year to a certain percentage of the average of that race arriving during a given period of years.

(c) The exclusion of unskilled laborers unaccompanied by wives or families.

(d) The limitation of the number of immigrants arriving annually at any port.

(e) The material increase in the amount of money required to be in the possession of the immigrant at the port of arrival....

All these methods would be effective in one way or another in securing restrictions in a greater or less degree. A majority of the Commission favor the reading and writing test as the most feasible single method of restricting undesirable immigration.