
OBSERVATIONS

Keeping Them Out, Letting Them In

Peter Webner

MOST OF today's political debates in America fall into a familiar pattern. On issues ranging from taxes, health care, energy, education, and abortion to the Iraq war and government surveillance of suspected terrorists, liberals and conservatives assume distinct and often diametrically opposed positions. But in the last few years, one issue—immigration—has roiled American politics in unconventional ways. Crossing social and economic lines, differences over this issue have pitted the views and perceived interests of one minority (Hispanics) against another (African-Americans), caused divisions among people of shared religious faith, and set liberals concerned about the welfare of American workers against liberals who believe the United States has a duty to welcome newcomers from less developed nations.

But the issue is most neuralgic, it would seem, on the Right—to the

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point where divisions over it threaten to split apart the conservative coalition. In this internal conservative debate, a leading magazine like *National Review* is on one side, a leading newspaper like the *Wall Street Journal* on the other; much of the talk-radio world is on one side, President Bush and Senator McCain are on the other. The differences are deep, intense, and at times personal.

Now along come books by two leading advocates of the opposing camps. Speaking for the restrictionist camp is Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies and a contributor to *National Review* and *National Review Online*, who has written *The New Case Against Immigration: Both Legal and Illegal*.^{*} Speaking for the latitudinarian camp is Jason L. Riley, a member of the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board and the author of *Let Them In: The Case for Open Borders*.[†]

ON BEHALF of their respective causes, both Krikorian and Riley marshal an impressive number of facts and studies. Both write clearly and comprehensively, and both

display polemical talent. But that is where the similarities end.

Unlike many critics of immigration, Mark Krikorian does not argue that today's newcomers are fundamentally different from yesterday's—i.e., less prepared for American life or less interested in acculturating to its norms. Immigrants, he says, "are what they've always been." Instead, it is *America* that is different—to the point where "a policy that served us well in our adolescence is harmful in our maturity."

Surveying the "impacts" of immigration, Krikorian strives to document how immigrants are indeed a threat to our economy and our sovereignty; how they cost too much, overpopulate the country, and fail to assimilate; how they are responsible for lengthening our commutes, causing urban sprawl, and thereby radically transforming our once-tranquil landscapes and even creating a "tree deficit." Yet none of this, he insists, is a knock on immigrants per se; the problem, instead, is "modern society" in general and, more specifically, "modern

^{*} Sentinel, 304 pp., \$25.95.

[†] Gotham, 256 pp., \$22.50.

America,” which simply can no longer accommodate mass immigration as it once could and did.

On these grounds, Krikorian flatly opposes further influx, legal no less than illegal. He wants to keep out both immigrants and guest workers, those who are skilled and those who are unskilled, those who come from Europe and those who come from Latin America, from Asia, or from Africa. “Modern America has outgrown mass immigration,” he states categorically, and we therefore need to adjust our policies accordingly.

Nonsense, says Jason Riley, who contends in *Let Them In* that a liberal immigration policy not only is consistent with an American tradition that “has served us quite well over the past two centuries” but will make today’s America better in almost every respect. An open-border policy, Riley writes, will increase overall productivity, keep us younger and stronger than our overseas competitors, and provide vital human capital. It is also wholly compatible with the needs of homeland security. For Riley, then, we seal the border at our peril. What we really need to do is to provide more, not fewer, legal ways for immigrants to enter America.

Designed explicitly to be a myth-buster, Riley’s book is organized around many of the anti-immigrant claims made by critics like Krikorian. “Time and again,” Riley concludes, “my own reporting and research found these claims”—namely, that immigrants pose a demographic threat, steal jobs from native-born Americans, overburden our welfare system, threaten our security, and are refusing to assimilate—“to be overblown when they weren’t counterfactual.” He concludes: “We still have much more to gain than lose from people who come here to seek a better life.”

WHO GETS the better of the argument? In some respects, Krikorian does. Riley is capable at times of as-

cribing bad or even racist motives to those with whom he disagrees. Mocking immigration critics, he devotes part of his first chapter to going after, among others, Krikorian himself, whom he accuses of being a “puppet” of one John Tanton, “a radical environmentalist and staunch supporter of Planned Parenthood.” He also warns readers not to assume that Krikorian’s arguments are made in good faith.

Krikorian’s book, with its measured tone and carefully qualified assertions, testifies to the unfairness of this particular charge. But *The New Case Against Immigration* is hardly free of other defects, while Riley’s book has many virtues of its own. In particular, *Let Them In* excels in its analysis of the economic benefits of immigration, and in showing that individual states with large legal and illegal immigrant populations are faring better than one might suspect.

But that is just the problem: each author insists that his case is based on solid empirical evidence, leaving the lay reader struggling to decide whose evidence to believe and how to adjudicate their competing interpretations. Krikorian, for example, asserts on the basis of fact and argument that mass immigration makes it less likely that low-skilled American workers will be hired and more likely they will drop out of the labor market altogether. Wrong, answers Riley, citing a study by the economist Giovanni Peri according to which the inflow of immigrants to California over a 25-year period cannot be shown to have worsened the employment opportunities of natives with similar education and work experience.

Assimilation? “Ending mass immigration [will] not guarantee the restoration of a common civic culture,” Krikorian concedes, “but continuing it does guarantee that any attempt at such restoration will fail.” For Riley, by contrast, it is not immigrants who are assaulting our common American culture but our

own homegrown elites. His solution to the problem? “Keep the immigrants. Deport the Columbia faculty.”

What about demographics? “The artificial population growth caused by [mass immigration] is undermining a variety of modern goals related to quality of life,” according to Krikorian. Afraid not, Riley counters. Not only is the United States “nowhere close to being overpopulated,” but “[t]o the extent that immigrants facilitate U.S. population growth and wealth creation, they are part of the solution, not the problem.”

Would America at least benefit from immigrants who are skilled professionals? No way, says Krikorian. Because of their “transnational lifestyles,” skilled professionals pose an even greater challenge to “patriotic assimilation” than uneducated immigrants. They also displace American workers with comparable skills and training and remove an incentive for us to reform our low educational standards. Riley will have none of it. “[H]igh-skill immigrants from Europe, Asia, and Southeast Asia do more than create extra jobs for U.S. employers,” he writes. “They also seem to have a knack for creating entirely new companies that employ thousands of people.”

Even scholars are treated like ping-pong balls. Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation, cited favorably by Krikorian, calculated that in 2004, low-skill immigrant households represented a net annual burden to American taxpayers of nearly \$20,000 per household. According to Riley, however, Rector’s study is a “shoddy” and poorly argued piece of work. Again, Krikorian adduces a study by the Harvard economist George Borjas, who found that the immigration wave of the 1980’s and 1990’s caused a drop in the annual earnings of all categories of American workers, especially male high-school dropouts. According to Riley, Borjas “had to rig his model”—and Riley seeks to show how.

ON AND on it goes. So unwilling is each author to concede even a single point to the other side that they come to sound more like lawyers than like analysts. In real life, there are simply not that many issues in which all the arguments line up on one side. That is certainly the case when it comes to immigration policy.

Thus, one should be able to concede that illegal immigration is a problem, both in terms of violating our laws and in terms of costs imposed on some communities. At the same time, one should be able to acknowledge that low-skilled workers fill actual needs, that high-skilled immigrants have added an enormous amount to our economy, and that the grit, drive, and adaptability of many of our newest immigrants are admirable qualities.

Though one would not know it from the positions staked out by Krikorian and Riley, many people do in fact hold such nuanced views. There is no real constituency in this country for open borders pure and simple; neither is there one for putting a stop to legal immigration altogether. A debate does rage over what to do with the millions of people who are already in the country illegally, but a broad consensus seems to have formed on the need both to prevent further illegal immigration and to rationalize the current system of legal immigration, which is an unholy mess.*

What of the politics of the issue? This, too, is a complicated story. Immigration has been a galvanizing issue in border states like California, which in 1994 passed a referendum, Proposition 187, denying access to education and health care to illegal immigrants and their children and requiring public employees to report such immigrants to the authorities. Yet as a *national* issue, immigration hardly registered until recently; according to Riley, it did not come up even once in the 2004 presidential debates.

That all changed in President Bush's second term. As a former

governor of Texas, Bush was philosophically and emotionally disposed to welcome immigrants. "Family values do not stop at the Rio Grande River," he said many times. "Immigration is not a problem to be solved, it is the sign of a successful nation. New Americans are not to be feared as strangers, they are to be welcomed as neighbors."

In early 2006, Bush acted on his 2000 campaign commitment to reform the immigration mess by pushing for legislation that would increase enforcement measures but also create a guest-worker program. At the same time, a Senate bill supported by both Bush and John McCain would have allowed illegal immigrants to earn legal status if they met certain requirements. Both the President's initiative and the Senate proposal, the latter quickly labeled an "amnesty" program, caused large parts of the conservative talk-radio world to mobilize in opposition and much of the Republican base to move toward open revolt. The response helped kill the legislation.

But politics is a tricky business. As Riley reminds us, congressional Republicans hoped that by taking a strong stand against the illegal-immigration "crisis" in the spring of 2006, they would help their party's electoral prospects come fall. One can understand the thinking behind this. Immigration had indeed become an important issue for Republican voters, at times more important even than the Iraq war and national security; it stood to reason that tough or even harsh rhetoric would benefit a candidate in the primaries.

But what worked in the primary season did not resonate nearly so well in the general election. In fact, as Riley writes, "the strategy bombed," and it bombed "even in places where illegal immigration [was] a huge problem." In Arizona, which Riley calls "ground zero in the border wars," the Republican contenders J.D. Hayworth and Randy Graf went down to defeat;

so, in Colorado, did Bob Beauprez, who had made opposition to illegal immigration a centerpiece of his run for governor. Other GOP candidates suffered a similar fate.

It is true that 2006 was a terrible political year for Republicans in general, and these candidates might have lost anyway. But it is just as likely that their approach backfired, and especially among Latino voters. The Republican share of the Hispanic vote, which had more than doubled in a decade (from, according to Riley, 21 percent in 1996 to 44 percent in 2004) plunged to just 29 percent in 2006.

HOW CAN we reconcile the fact that Bush and McCain's pro-immigration efforts caused such a fierce populist backlash with the fact that those championing an anti-immigration platform went down to defeat in 2006? And how is it that John McCain, running against a raft of GOP candidates who made a priority out of stopping illegal immigration, has won the presidential nomination of the Republican party?

The answer may be that the politics of immigration has, at least until now, been locked in a kind of status quo ante. Anyone who tries to liberalize immigration laws (as former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer did with his proposal to issue driver's licenses to illegal immigrants) will set off a furious counterreaction. At the same time, anyone whose opposition to illegal immigration appears to border on the obsessive will encounter a brick wall. Yes, McCain won the GOP nomination (a strike against those preoccupied with stopping illegal immigration) but in the process he was forced to jettison his own Senate plan in favor of concentrating on border security first (a strike *for* those preoccupied with stopping illegal immigration).

Among Republican strategists, there are two schools of thought go-

* See, on this point, Yuval Levin's "Fixing Immigration" in COMMENTARY, May 2007.

ing forward. According to one, any continuation of the GOP's less-than-concealed hostility toward Latino voters might well end by relegating the party to permanent minority status, since Latinos are among the fastest-growing demographic groups in America. According to the other, Latinos will always vote for Democrats over Republicans, so trying to accommodate their demands will ultimately harm the party's message. Which is correct? Riley summarily dismisses a Krikorian-like anti-immigration platform as political "fool's gold." He may be right, but the issue is hard to predict.

WHEN ALL is said and done, what emerges most powerfully from the opposing cases presented by Krikorian and Riley is that where one situates oneself along the spectrum of the immigration debate depends on one's view of America itself—of who we are, and where we are.

Krikorian writes that his book is "not a pessimistic or declinist argument." But in fact it is; threaded throughout *The New Case Against Immigration* is the idea that, unlike in the past, America can no longer incorporate newcomers. Globalization, modernity, and our own failures as a nation have conspired to make legal and illegal immigration a grave and growing threat.

Yet, on empirical grounds alone, this fundamental pessimism conflicts with the reality of modern American life. In the decade between 1995 and 2004, for instance, the number of illegal immigrants roughly doubled. According to the Krikorian thesis, this should have exacted a huge toll on our country's social, civic, economic, and environmental well-being. And yet during that same period, as Yuval Levin and I have documented,* a vast number of social indicators—including the rates of teen pregnancy and sexual activity, binge drinking and smoking, abortion, drug use, education, and divorce—markedly improved,

while in areas like welfare and crime, where one might think illegal immigration would have made things much worse, the improvement had the dimensions of a sea-change.

In brief, as our illegal-immigration "problem" has become more acute, our social and civic life has become stronger. The same is true of the economy—which throughout the past two decades, and despite severe challenges, has been the envy of the world. We have witnessed sustained growth, increases in worker productivity and manufacturing activity, low rates of inflation and unemployment, gains in real after-tax incomes, and record-high tax revenues and stock-market gains. Even the slowdowns have been shorter and shallower than in previous decades.

According to Krikorian, the "artificially increased number of people" in America has "eroded, or even wiped out," the progress we have made in dealing with the problem of the environment. But here, too, the sheer magnitude of recent improvements belies his claim. As Gregg Easterbrook summed things up in *Time* a few years ago:

"Aggregate emissions," the sum of air-pollution categories, have fallen 48 percent since 1970, even though the U.S. population rose 39 percent during that period. . . . Air pollution can decline as the population rises because antipollution technology keeps getting better and because Clean Air Act controls on cars, power plants and factories have been growing stricter for two decades.

IF, MOREOVER, the pessimistic view fails to square with the empirical record on a variety of key issues, it is also at odds with the American creed and the American story. The United States is one of only two nations in the world founded on an idea. (The other is Israel.) In America's case, the founding idea is embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Our

liberal democracy is built on the principle that ethnic, cultural, and religious differences can be overcome by a dedication to common ideals, including human equality, social opportunity, and representative government under the rule of law.

That this creed and this story have progressed—sometimes more slowly, sometimes more rapidly, but essentially without fail—ever since America's founding is nothing short of miraculous. To take people from every corner of the earth—people who speak different languages, practice different faiths, embody different histories, and follow different customs—and enable them to cohere into a single nation that is thriving and whole is an unprecedented achievement in human affairs. That is what America has been and what, despite everything, it seems determined to remain.

Obviously this idea of America does not provide guidance on every question of immigration policy. But it does present a useful starting point. One cannot help sensing that it is an idea in whose appeal and durability Krikorian and those who share his perspective have lost confidence. Nor can one help remarking, that, in a book dedicated entirely to the subject of immigration, a reader will search in vain for a single good word about immigrants.

In the final paragraph of his introduction, Krikorian invokes both Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan. There is something unusual in this. As it happens, Lincoln said very little about immigration while President; he had, after all, a Civil War to contend with. We know, however, that in November 1862 he countermanded an order by General Grant to keep Jewish merchants out of Union lines; that he was very friendly with the large German immigrant population in Illinois; and that, to him, America's founding idea was precisely what made it capable of welcoming new immigrants

* "Crime, Drugs, Welfare—and Other Good News," COMMENTARY, December 2007.

and transforming them into true citizens.

In a speech in the summer of 1858—a speech from which, ironically enough, Krikorian quotes—Lincoln noted that while some Americans could claim a connection by blood to the founding generation, many others had arrived since that time who should, by virtue of their shared ideals, nevertheless be counted as descendants of the founders:

We have . . . among us perhaps half our people . . . who have come from Europe . . . or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none . . . but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that

that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.

As for Ronald Reagan, he held a view directly opposed to Krikorian’s, both in practical terms—he signed a 1986 bill granting amnesty to millions of illegal immigrants—and philosophically. For Reagan, the point to emphasize was the great and vivifying diversity that immigrants brought to this country, and that flowed into and became as one with the national fabric. Riley quotes Reagan’s words:

We have a statue in New York Harbor . . . of a woman holding a torch of welcome to those who enter our country to become Americans. She has greeted millions upon millions of immigrants to our country. She wel-

comes them still. She represents our open door. All of the immigrants who came to us brought their own music, literature, customs, and ideas. And the marvelous thing, a thing of which we’re proud, is they did not have to relinquish these things in order to fit in. In fact, what they brought to America became American. And this diversity has more than enriched us; it has literally shaped us.

If you believe in this vision of America, you will find the cover of Krikorian’s book particularly jarring: a picture of Lady Liberty, her hand not raised up but stretched out to signal “Stop,” her torch not just extinguished but absent. She is no longer lifting a lamp beside the golden door; she is instead pulling up the drawbridge to an aging, gated community.

As between that vision of America and Jason Riley’s, not to mention Lincoln and Reagan’s, I side with Lincoln and Reagan; and so, I believe, do most Americans.
