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Immigration is not a simple debate over policy.

It is a debate challenging the very standards under which this country was founded.

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It is a debate challenging the very standards under which this country was founded.

The United States of America is a country of immigrants—immigrants from all parts of the world, who have united together to create the free democracy existing today. Yet within a country so focused on freedom, an opposite notion is flashing through the minds of many Americans: Exclusion. Some Americans forget that their ancestors were not always Americans, but foreigners seeking a better life. Had their ancestors been stripped of the opportunity to immigrate, these same Americans would not be here thriving in the America they take for granted today.

The most suspect argument against immigration is the charge that immigrants hurt the economy. One influential study by Donald R. Davis and David E. Weinstein of Columbia University concludes that “the net effect of immigration to the United States is a drain on U.S. native workers of about \$70 billion per year” (qtd. in Dinan). They argue that workplace access to the advanced technology of the U.S. allows immigrants to be more productive and thus, more competitive, hurting native workers and possibly displacing them. They also argue that, because immigrants are not living in their home countries and because, therefore not consuming American workers' products, our exports are suffering. Also, George Borjas, an economist at Harvard University, argues that immigrants hurt the U.S. economy by redistributing wealth in disadvantageous ways to the lower-middle-class and below. He supposes that immigration allows employers to take advantage of both immigrants and these native workers, “pouring more poor people into the U.S. and making the poor who are already here even poorer” (qtd. in “THIS IS A BATTLE”). Others examine economic deprivation caused by social service strains. They argue prisons are running out of space because of illegal immigrants, hospitals receive the burden of writing off medical services for illegal immigrants, and schools are flooded with the children of illegal immigrants—at most, at the cost of \$1,600 per immigrant per year (Fonda and Cullen).

There are multiple issues with the research of the Columbia University professors, the arguments of George Borjas, and the conclusions of others. As noted by Jared Bernstein, a senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute, “the Columbia report, while trying to focus on the effect of technology on immigration, oversimplifies a complex issue with so many moving parts” (qtd. in Dinan). He unpacks the underlying (and narrow) assumptions by drawing attention to the fact that the model assumes balanced trade, a condition under which two nations provide a fairly mutual trade pattern (minimal surplus / deficit)—*This hasn’t occurred in the recent past and most likely won’t occur in the near future*. The Columbia research also incorrectly concludes that immigrants are detrimentally affecting native workers’ salaries. A study recently published by the Immigration Policy Center found that, during the 1990s, native born workers’ salaries went up 1.1 percent despite increases in immigration, and they show that most immigrants do not directly displace American workers but complement them, because “workers with different levels of education perform different tasks and fill different roles in production” (Parker). According to Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, the native born workers who are displaced often become motivated to improve their skills and their earning power (Fonda and Cullen). The Columbia research also incorrectly argues that immigrants are not consuming American worker’s products. Immigrants are like all other Americans in that they need to survive (eat, drink, shop, etc.), and over 80 percent of the earnings of illegal immigrants stay in the U.S. (Fonda and Cullen).

George Borjas argues that immigration leaves the rich richer and the poor living poorer. Surprisingly, he decides to ignore the ‘spillover effect.’ As Ben Johnson, director of the Immigration Policy Center and part of The American Immigration Law Foundation puts it, “the availability of labor is itself an economic benefit” (qtd. In Parker). The availability of labor enables business owners to expand their businesses, employ more workers, and raise

wages. This is in accordance with the work of Daniel Griswold, an immigration expert for the Cato Institute, who notes that “a vibrant laborer population could even create white-collar jobs” (qtd. in Fonda and Cullen). This is possible because a flourishing labor force would enable employers to expand, and then require them to create sub-manager jobs to successfully run their expanded businesses.

Those who examine the social service strains focus on specifics instead of the big picture. Elaine Lacy, director of research initiatives at the Consortium for Latino Immigration Studies at USC, said the majority of immigrant Latinos consistently make payment to the federal treasury (Parker). Because most of them are ineligible for most social services, they do not represent a deficit, but a surplus. In fact, economists at the Rand Institute have found that the majority of immigrants pay taxes. Through 2002, illegal immigrants have paid an estimated \$463 billion to Social Security; most withdraw almost nothing for fear of being discovered, avoiding government facilities at all costs (Fonda and Cullen).

Many see the solution to the “immigration problem” as black and white: Lay down the law, remove the illegal immigrants, and only allow the immigrants into the country that are absolutely necessary—this won’t work. After 9/11, the government took on a task similar to this. Craig Barrett, chairman of Intel Corp., refers to the government’s crackdown as such: “if we had purposefully set out to design a system that would cripple our ability to be competitive, we could hardly do better than what we have today” (qtd. in Maiello and Ridgway). Hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants were still crossing the border, but the H1B visas for specialty occupations dropped from 165,000 to 65,000 a year (Maiello and Ridgway). For companies like Intel, employing foreign workers with special occupations (engineers, scientists, programmers, etc.) became almost impossible. This led many companies to relocate abroad, which directly and negatively affected U.S. GDP.

Ironically, GDP lost to the U.S., if gained by poorer countries with struggling economies, would not necessarily be bad for the “immigration problem.” In 1992, the average income in the 22 richest countries in the world was more than \$22,000 annually—The other countries averaged barely \$1000 (Philip). This considerable discrepancy means that a person from a struggling economy could simply immigrate to the U.S. and increase their yearly income by 2000%. As President George W. Bush said to Larry King in 1999, “[When] you’re making 50¢, and you look up north and see the chance to make \$50, and your kids are hungry, you’re going to come” (qtd. in Allen and Cloud).

Indeed, over 12 million foreigners in search of a better life have packed their bags for America. In doing so, they’ve increased social security by \$463 billion with minimum withdrawal. They’ve created a more flourishing labor force, allowing businesses to expand with the potential of creating white-collar jobs. Despite of them (possibly because of them), the salaries of native born workers in the 1990’s went up 1.1 percent. And over 80 percent of immigrants’ earnings stay in the U.S. Yet what they’ve done is illegal.

Immigrants not only created the democratic United States of America, but they continue to transform it in a positive manner. Had America been founded upon the notion of exclusion, it would not be half of what it is today. Albert Einstein, probably the greatest physicist of all time, was a German before he became an American. Madeleine Albright, the first female Secretary of State, immigrated to the U.S. from Czechoslovakia (Sheen). Arnold Schwarzenegger, movie actor and current Governor of California, is still a citizen of Austria (Leamer). “Are we the people,” questions Frank Sharry, the executive director of the National Immigration Forum, “or are we a set of ideas and ideals that are universal, such that the people who come here and subscribe to those ideals are American” (qtd. in “THIS IS A BATTLE”)? Immigrants are the beating heart of America. In holding them back, we only hurt ourselves.

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