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America's Immigration Paradox By David Nasaw

ONE MIGHTY AND IRRESISTIBLE TIDE

The Epic Struggle Over American Immigration, 1924-1965

By Jia Lynn Yang

THE DEPORTATION MACHINE

America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants

By Adam Goodman

For historians of immigration, the paradox is inescapable and irreconcilable: The United States is and has always been both a nation of immigrants and a nation that periodically wages war against them.

As candidate and president, Donald J. Trump (whose grandfather, mother and first and third wife were immigrants), with the help of his immigration advisers Stephen Miller (the great-grandson of immigrants) and Jared Kushner (the grandson of Holocaust survivors), has escalated and opened new fronts in this war. On April 19, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, The New York Times reported that the Trump administration had deported “thousands of people to their home countries, including some who are sick with the virus,” and that “deportations of children and teenagers who arrived at the border without adult guardians have risen sharply.” The next day the president declared in a late-night tweet that he intended to temporarily suspend immigration. The day after that, he was rebuked by the Wall Street Journal editorial board, which cautioned that such an action would impede economic recovery: “Nearly all ... economic evidence shows that immigrants enhance American growth and jobs.”

We do not know the effect of the president's latest declarations. What we do know is that the war against immigrants will continue. So too the recognition that this is a nation of immigrants and that American prosperity rests, in no small measure, on those immigrants.

Immigration historians are like the blind men in the ancient Indian parable who come upon an elephant. The first man, falling against the animal's side, proclaims that he has found a wall; the second, feeling the tusk, a spear; the third, grabbing the trunk, a snake.

The authors of the two books under review approach United States immigration history from very different perspectives and reach very different conclusions. Where Jia Lynn Yang in “One Mighty and Irresistible Tide: The Epic Struggle Over American Immigration, 1924-1965” focuses on the opening of America's doors in 1965 to those once excluded, Adam Goodman's “The Deportation Machine: America's Long History

of Expelling Immigrants” describes a nation that has for more than a century discriminated against Mexican immigrants.

Yang, a deputy [national editor of The Times](#), opens her account with the Immigration Act of 1924, which affirmed and extended the exclusion of Asians, set national quotas for Europeans and severely restricted immigration from southern and eastern Europe. She then follows the path of the politicians and activists who, over the next four decades, campaigned for a nondiscriminatory immigration act. Her [history concludes — triumphantly — with the passage](#) of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act.

Because hers is a quasi-morality tale of the victory of tolerant reformers over bigoted obstructionists, Yang detours around the central irony in her historical account: that two of the most significant provisions of the 1965 act, the opening of doors to Asian immigrants (including her father) and the closing of them, through the imposition of quotas, to Latin Americans, principally Mexicans, were not part of the reformers’ agenda during the 40-year “epic struggle” that is the subject of her book.

The bill that was drafted by the Kennedy administration and resubmitted to Congress by President Johnson gave priority to immigrants based on their skills and training, not their country of origin, as had the 1924 act. But when Michael Feighan of Ohio, the Democratic chair of the House immigration subcommittee, demanded that the percentage of immigrants admitted with “special skills” be drastically reduced and that [75 percent of the](#) visas awarded go instead to support family unification, with spouses, children and parents of American citizens admitted without limitation, the Johnson administration reluctantly went along. As a result, the 1965 act was “transformative,” as Yang notes, but not in the ways its advocates had intended.

Those like Feighan who supported the “family reunification” preference did so because they believed “that giving family members a higher preference would help to preserve the country’s ethnic status quo.” The opposite occurred. In part because of enhanced economic opportunities in Europe, fewer Europeans than Asians applied for and received visas under the family reunification preferences. In 2016, Asian immigrants outnumbered Europeans by nearly five to one.

The second provision of the 1965 immigration act that neither Presidents Kennedy and Johnson nor the pro-immigration reformers advocated, but that had to be added to secure its passage, was the imposition of quotas on immigration from the Western Hemisphere: 120,000 in total, with no more than 20,000 admitted from any one country, including Mexico. Before 1965, there had been no such quotas, largely because American agribusiness required a seasonal and cheap labor force.

Government officials had resorted to other measures to control Mexican immigration. Those attempting to cross the border legally were compelled to submit to laborious, expensive and often humiliating inspections, pay a “head tax,” satisfy a literacy requirement and demonstrate that they were not likely to become “public charges.” The millions of immigrants from the south who, for a variety of reasons, could not satisfy these requirements were subject to deportation. The imposition of quotas in 1965 made it even more difficult for Mexicans to enter the nation legally. Between 1965 and 1985, more than 13 million immigrants were deported, the vast majority of

them Mexicans. According to Adam Goodman, "From the mid-1970s on, deportations averaged nearly 925,000 per year, or more than 2,500 each day."

Unlike Yang, whose gaze is focused on Congress and the writing of our immigration laws, Goodman, a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, examines how immigration policies and practices have been shaped as much by those who interpret, administer, execute and enforce the laws as by those who write them. For more than a century, with a dramatic increase after 1965, Border Patrol officers and I.N.S. (Immigration and Naturalization Service) agents acting as police, prosecutors, judges and jury apprehended suspected "illegal" Mexican immigrants at their workplaces, their neighborhoods, in their homes. Those who agreed to be "voluntarily" deported avoided sequestration in detention centers. What's more, they were advised that because there would be no formal record of their deportation, they would not be subject to imprisonment if apprehended trying to cross the border again. The reliance on voluntary deportation saved the I.N.S. millions of dollars while keeping ajar the revolving door that allowed Mexicans to cross the border, reunite with their families and satisfy American employers' insatiable appetites for cheap, unprotected, nonunionized labor. Only in the middle 1990s, after extended court battles, did the I.N.S. agree to inform apprehended immigrants of their legal rights to consult a lawyer and request asylum. As a result, immigrants, instead of agreeing to be "voluntarily" deported, challenged their removal, leaving government officials no choice but to institute formal deportation procedures.

The Trump administration has spent millions of additional dollars and instituted new means of apprehending, detaining and deporting immigrants already in the country. In late February 2020, the Justice Department established a new office of denaturalization to facilitate the deportation of naturalized immigrants. In early March, armed Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents were relocated from the border to so-called sanctuary cities to arrest undocumented immigrants.

Although these measures may appear extreme, distasteful and even un-American, they are, Goodman reminds us, a continuation rather than a deviation from past practices. Workplace raids, neighborhood sweeps, harassment, intimidation, the knock on the door by the immigration police, detention and the ultimate deportation of unwanted immigrants were not born with the current administration. They have been standard practice for more than a century.

The authors of these books are agreed on one critical point: that the laws and practices that govern immigration policy are the results of political struggle, for Yang inside, for Goodman outside, the halls of Congress. While "we tend to describe immigrants' stories as feats of will and strokes of destiny," Yang reminds us, "it is not destiny that brings a family here but politics." This is a message worth noting as we approach November.