

Immigration Act of 1921 Imposes Quota System, 1921-1924

Historic U.S. Events, 2012

Legislation in 1921 to establish a quota system put an end to the ideal of the United States as a refuge for those escaping their home country in hope of a better life

Key Figures

Warren Harding (1865-1923) was the 29th president of the United States, serving from 1921 to 1923. He signed the restriction act of 1921 into law.

Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) served as the 28th president of the United States from 1913 to 1921. He opposed restriction and twice vetoed bills calling for a literacy test.

Albert Johnson (1869-1957) was a Republican representative from the state of Washington. He chaired the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization and strongly supported total restriction.

Adolph Sabath (1866-1952), a Democratic representative from Illinois who emigrated from Europe at the age of 15 and was a leading opponent of restricting immigration.

LeBaron Colt (1846-1924) was a Republican senator from Rhode Island. He chaired the U.S. Senate Committee on Immigration and supported restricting immigration.

William P. Dillingham (1843-1923), another advocate of restriction, served as a Republican senator from Vermont.

Madison Grant (1865-1937), an author and lawyer, authored *The Passing of the Great Race in America* (1916), which strongly promoted restriction.

Henry Lodge (1850-1924) was a Republican senator from Massachusetts, who supported restriction and advocated giving literacy tests to potential immigrants.

Kenneth Roberts (1885-1957) was a novelist and journalist who supported total restriction.

Summary of Event

During most of the nineteenth century, people who wanted to immigrate to the United States were able to do so. By the 1880s, however, this freedom was starting to vanish with the first law that restricted immigration in 1882, when the Chinese were barred from entering the United States. Antipathy to Chinese workers in California triggered Congress to pass this legislation due to job fears and racial bigotry. Many people believed that Chinese workers would accept lower wages than whites, enticing employers to hire them instead of native-born Americans; in addition, there were people who felt the Chinese culture was inferior and that they would never be a credit to the United States. In 1907, under a gentlemen's

agreement with the government of Japan, the Japanese were added to the undesirables list. Other groups forbidden from entering the United States were those suffering from mental illness, paupers, polygamists, prostitutes, and those with a "loathsome or contagious disease." In contrast to more than 1,000,000 immigrants that were accepted annually from 1890 to 1914, less than 13,000 were excluded as a result of these limits.

Anti-immigrant groups, such as the American Protective Association (established in 1887) and the Immigration Restriction League (founded in Boston in 1894), felt that this number was too low, and they cautioned of an "immigrant invasion" that could threaten the American dream. They opposed open immigration, arguing that the immigrants came from poorer and "backward" regions of Europe. They warned that these immigrants would bring ideas of anarchism, communism, radicalism, or socialism with them, and that due to their preference of living in cities, they'd contribute to the power of crooked bosses. Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), supported their opinion, adding that since the new immigrants would accept low wages, it would lead to lower wages for all workers.

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, a constituent of the Immigration Restriction League, sponsored a bill demanding a literacy test to prove that immigrants were capable of reading and writing in their native language, and although Congress passed the bill in 1897, President Grover Cleveland rejected it, claiming that it was discriminatory. Cleveland maintained that the United States should open its borders to any immigrant and that sufficient jobs and prospects existed to permit anyone to concretize an ambition of financial success.

President William McKinley's assassination in 1901 led to the banning of anarchists and people who agitated for the violent downfall of the U.S. government. In 1907, the House and Senate set up the United States Immigration Commission, led by Senator William P. Dillingham, and three years later this commission issued a 42-volume report recommending a cutback in immigration, claiming that immigrants were "racially inferior." The commission warned that immigrants from eastern and southern Europe lacked intelligence and were likely to turn to crime or end up poor and sick. It suggested a literacy test and although Congress passed literary test legislation in 1912, President William Howard Taft used his veto power, pointing out that illiteracy came from a dearth of education and was unrelated to inborn intelligence. Open immigration was part of America's history and values, and many of America's most energetic and wealthiest citizens were illiterate when they first arrived on American shores. Had the United States excluded such people, Taft contended, America would never have attained the greatness it did.

In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson vetoed another attempt at the literacy bill, condemning it as a negation of America's moral value of an open door. When America entered World War I two years later, however, Congress overruled Wilson's second veto and a reading test was administered to prospective immigrants over the age of 16. In addition, the law excluded those from China, India, and Japan, despite any degree of literacy. At any rate, the test was elementary and between 1918 and 1920, more than 99 percent of immigrants passed it. Representative Albert Johnson, chair of the House Committee on Immigration, tried to suspend all immigration in 1919, but his proposal was trounced in the House of Representatives.

Immigration rose dramatically in 1920, with fears that millions of Europe's war refugees were about to invade the United States. Racism influenced many opinions, with Warren G. Harding, later president of the

United States, calling for legislation to allow only people whose racial background proved that they could embrace American values to immigrate. Attorney Madison Grant, who became an adviser to Albert Johnson's Immigration Committee, authored the most influential book promoting this racist view, *The Passing of the Great Race in America* (1916), describing society as a huge snake, with the head consisting of Nordic races, while the "inferior races" made up the tail. This sort of pseudo scientific argument resulted in the establishment of the 1921 quota system to ensure that the tail would not rule over the head.

In 1921, the House passed Johnson's bill demanding a two-year moratorium on all immigration. The Senate Committee on Immigration declined to support a complete ban after hearing business groups testify that they needed European laborers. The National Association of Manufacturers also argued that they needed access to cheap labor, although some business leaders began to suspect that those in the immigration camp were poisoned by communism and socialism, particularly after the communists came to power in Russia in 1918. The prospect of masses of revolutionary workers with a tendency to go on strike flooding the nation seemed too steep a price to pay for lower salaries. Unions, such as the AFL, pressured the government for strict parameters on immigration. To keep workers' wages high, Samuel Gompers testified in Congress, the country had to keep foreign workers out. By 1921, immigrant groups themselves were the only ones who called for open immigration. The few members of Congress who supported them realized that they were a distinct minority.

Senator William Dillingham, whose 1910 report renewed attempts to limit immigration, came up with a quota plan that he anticipated would reassure business and labor. His quota allowed each nation to send to the United States five percent of its total population already present in America according to the 1910 census. Before Dillingham's suggestion received final approval, however, Johnson and those who favored total suspension slashed the quota to three percent and established 350,000 as the upper limit of legal immigrants in one year. Although Woodrow Wilson rejected the bill before finishing his presidential term, it was passed in the Senate and the House. Some representatives whose districts contained large immigrant populations opposed the bill. Congressman Adolph Sabath, a Democrat from Chicago, was the leader of the opposition, arguing that the legislation was based on pseudoscientific reasoning that falsely overvalued the Nordic nations, but to little avail.

Impact of Event

The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 drastically limited immigration into the United States. In 1922, only 309,556 people legally came to America, compared with 805,228 the prior year. Quotas for Africa, Australia, Europe, the Middle East, and New Zealand generally filled rapidly, with the eastern and southern Europeans filling almost 99 percent of their quota. Emigration from Canada, Mexico, and other nations of the Western Hemisphere was not restricted, as Congress wanted to ensure a sufficient supply of cheap agricultural labor for farmers in California and Texas. China and Japan were the only countries possessing a quota of zero.

The 1921 act allowed for "special partiality" for relatives of America citizens, such as wives, children under 18, parents, brothers, and sisters in order to preserve family unity, but this was the only exemption in the stringent quota policy.

This "emergency" law was extended in May 1922, for another two years, but Johnson's Immigration

Committee kept gathering evidence to push for a stop to all immigration. Johnson became progressively more involved with eugenics and was in close communication with Madison Grant. Johnson was appointed president of the Eugenics Research Association of America, an organization that busied itself collecting supposed statistics on the genetic characteristics of Americans. He focused on whatever information he could obtain regarding the concentration of relatively new immigrants in hospitals catering to those with mental illnesses, prisons, and poorhouses. Such data led him to campaign for a change in the law, specifically a further reduction in the number of "new" immigrants allowed in, to save the country from an even larger onslaught of criminals, paupers, and the mentally ill. The Immigration Committee decided to roll back the census base from 1910 to 1890, when far fewer eastern and southern Europeans lived in the country, and to cut the quota even more, from three percent to two percent. Congress later adopted those suggestions in 1924.

Under the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, ships filled with prospective immigrants were turned away and sent back to their place of origin. These procedures, however, were only the start, and the self-appointed guardians of American racial purity in Congress were already plotting even tighter controls. It was only after the curtain of silence was lifted after World War II and the American public realized that by refusing entry to refugees who were "yearning to breathe free," they had sealed their fate. They understood that the United States had failed to live up to its moral purpose.

Source Citation

"Immigration Act of 1921 Imposes Quota System, 1921-1924." *Historic U.S. Events*. Detroit: Gale, 2012. *Gale U.S. History In Context*. Web. 5 Feb. 2013.

Document URL

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Gale Document Number: GALE|BT2359030337