Call for a New Immigration Policy

The former governor of Connecticut wrote this spirited challenge to Congress and the country before setting out as U.S. Ambassador to India.

CHESTER BOWLES

America badly needs a new policy on immigration. Our present policy is a product of the age of Harding and Coolidge, when we were naively determined to isolate ourselves from the world, its problems, and its people. Its basic principles are outdated, discriminatory, and in clear violation of the democratic concepts on which our country has been built.

From the signing of the Declaration of Independence until 1921 America offered a generous welcome to immigrants from all over the world. As a result, some forty million men, women, and children crossed the oceans to create new lives of freedom and opportunity in the United States.

At the time of the Revolution our stock was largely English with a sprinkling of Dutch, Irish, and Scotch. The 1830's, however, brought hundreds of thousands of Irish immigrants, who had been driven from their homeland by potato crop failures and the oppressive tactics of British officials. They were joined by equally large numbers of Germans, who were defeated in their revolutionary effort in the 1840's to build a democratic Germany, and who came to America as a land of promise where an individual could speak his mind freely and rise to whatever heights he was capable.

The end of the Civil War, the passage of the Homestead Act, and the introduction of ocean-going steamships brought a further increase in the number of immigrants, most of whom continued to come from northern and western Europe. Beginning in 1885, however, their annual number diminished, and those coming from Italy, Poland, Greece, Rumania, and other southern and eastern European countries sharply increased.

Altogether, the flow of newcomers to America became one of the greatest migrations in recorded history. In the first ten years of the twentieth century immigration averaged one million men, women, and children each year—or more than one percent of our total population at that time. By 1910, 40 percent of all people living in the United States were either born abroad themselves or had a foreign-born parent or parents.

Today part of America’s strength lies in the fact that through the years we have thus borrowed generously from the people of Europe, and indeed of all the world. Some of our greatest scholars, scientists, public servants, business and labor leaders are the sons or grandsons of the immigrants of fifty years ago.

From the birth of our American democracy until the end of the First World War the only restrictions on immigration were designed to keep out those who were enemy aliens, diseased, feebleminded, or likely to become public charges. During the war, strong support began to develop for a more strict immigration policy with an annual ceiling, and specific quotas for each nationality. One of Woodrow Wilson’s last acts as President was to veto such a bill.

In 1921, the first restrictive legislation was passed. This legislation set a top quota of 350,000 immigrants annually, exclusive of newcomers from the Western Hemisphere who were specifically exempt. The effect of this limitation was to reduce annual immigration to about one third the average number which had entered our country in the years before the First World War. The national quotas set by this legislation also discriminated sharply against potential newcomers from eastern and southern Europe.

But the 1921 Act was only a curtain raiser. In 1924 new legislation was passed which cut its total quotas to less than half, and discriminated even more harshly against southern and eastern Europeans. This legislation, which was further modified in 1929, still forms the basis of our immigration policy. The only improvements occurred in 1945 and in 1946 when the previous ugly, race-conscious discrimination against Asiatic peoples was relaxed, although not wholly eliminated.

The first objective of this thirty-year immigration policy has obviously been to reduce the number of immigrants coming to our shores. That objective has been achieved with a vengeance. Although our population has increased by one third since 1944, the quotas set under the 1924 Act allow only one sixth as many immigrants to come to America each year as came on the average in the fourteen years immediately preceding World War II.

The reduction of immigration on such a drastic basis was demonstrably wrong when our present policy was established in 1924. Such an extreme is even more misguided now in the midst of a world struggle of tremendous proportions. Our ability to succeed in this struggle depends upon the strength, convictions, and abilities of our people.

Who will question the fact that in 1951 we are immeasurably stronger, not only in the terms of economic power, but also in spiritual values, because of the millions who came to America from abroad in the last 100 years? Our working force of able-bodied men and women in industry, agriculture, and trade totals 62 million. Who can deny that our country would be better prepared for whatever the future may hold if that figure were 65, 70, or 75 million?

The second objective of our immigration policy has
been an attempt to legislate what kind of people make the “best” American citizens. In line with this objective our immigration laws insist that the Browns and the Schwartzes are more desirable Americans than the Lavellis and the Petrofskys.

This concept of nationality “class,” this effort to place millions of Americans in the role of inferior citizens, runs completely counter to our democratic principles. It is not only undemocratic, it is ridiculous. Where is there any evidence that Americans who are descended from southern or eastern Europeans have contributed less by and large to the building of our country than Americans descended from western and northern Europeans? Actually the states in which Polish, Italian, Greek, and other immigrants from southern and eastern Europe largely have settled—New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan—are now among the most prosperous in the Union. They lead in progressive legislation.

The following comparisons indicate the shocking amount of discrimination which the 1924 Act established as part of our policy:

Immigration from Italy in 1914, the year immediately before the First World War, totaled 296,000. The 1921 Act lowered it to 42,000 annually. The present Italian immigration ceiling, set in the 1924 Act, slashed this to only 5,000.

In 1914, 174,000 Polish immigrants reached the USA. The 1921 Act reduced their quota to 30,000 a year; the 1924 Act to 6,000. Greece, which sent 46,000 people to our country in 1907, now has an annual quota of only 307.

In contrast, the 1921 Act set a top limit of 77,000 on immigration from Great Britain and Northern Ireland—only slightly under the all-time record from these countries in a single year. Even when the total immigration ceiling was cut in half under the 1924 Act, Great Britain’s quota was reduced only to 65,000. Under this law the annual German quota is substantially more than total quotas from all southern European countries, including Italy and Greece plus Poland.

Put in terms of discrimination, in 1900, 65 percent of all immigrants coming to this country came from eastern and southern Europe, while 33 percent came from western and northern Europe. The 1924 Act reduced quotas from southern and eastern Europe to only 14 percent of the annual total, while increasing the percentage from northern and western Europe to 84 percent. (The remaining 2 percent were from Africa and Asia.)

Although the “Displaced Persons” legislation, passed by Congress in 1948 under spur of the war, allowed many refugees who were in particularly dire straits to come to the USA at once, it did not modify our basic policy. The 330,000 immigrants who have been admitted under this supposedly generous law are almost all chargeable against the future quotas of the countries in which they lived.

This means that unless the present law is changed, immigration from many southern and eastern European countries will be shut off for many years in the future, with the exception of a relatively small number of specialized cases which do not come under the quota restrictions.

What can we do about our shortsighted and discriminatory immigration policy? We can do several things which should receive wide support once the problem is understood.

The very least we can do is to adapt our present annual ceiling, established in the 1920’s, to our present population. This would increase total annual immigration under the present law by about 50 percent—without increasing the percentage in relation to our 1924 population. We can also eliminate from this law the ugly discrimination against people from southern and eastern Europe by scrapping national quotas and placing all applicants on an equal basis in regard to race, color, religion, and national origin. But these would still be only halfway measures.

If we mean to practice democracy as well as preach it, we must adapt our annual immigration ceiling to the world we live in. We must re-establish the USA as a haven for those who despise tyranny and bigotry, and as a land of opportunity for the many competent, vigorous people who would welcome an opportunity to build a freer and fuller life in what is still the New World.

We can make an important start toward this objective in the next few years by validating our backlog of unfilled quotas and by pooling these quotas without regard to nationality. These backlogs, particularly in the last twenty years, have been sizable.

In the early stages of the new immigration act most nationality quotas were quickly filled, with growing waiting lists in southern and eastern European countries. But in the 1930’s, under the influence of the depression, immigration fell off, and in the 1940’s, the war brought about additional reductions. From 1930 to 1946, the British used only 5 percent of their substantial annual quotas and the Irish used only 3 percent. The average for all countries was only 23 percent.

In the quarter century, from the passage of the 1924 Act until 1950, only 1,500,000 immigrants actually were able to enter our country under quotas in addition to 1,200,000 immigrants mostly from Western Hemisphere countries, who were not subject to quotas under this legislation. This means that in the last 27 years a total of 2,500,000 fewer immigrants have actually come to this country under quotas set by the 1924 Act than even the sponsors of this harshly restrictive legislation had anticipated.

This cumulative backlog of 2,500,000 prospective immigrants, added to our present annual ceiling, adjusted to the 50 percent increase in our population since 1924, and spread over six years, would enable us to admit roughly 600,000 prospective new Americans each year on a democratic and nondiscriminatory basis.

Such a program could scarcely be called unreasonable. Between 1951 and 1957 it would essentially enable us to admit the total number of immigrants which the sponsors of the restrictive 1924 Act anticipated, plus a small additional number for each of the next six years to compensate for our increase in population since 1924.

This six-year program might readily form the basis of a permanent immigration policy to go into effect in 1957 when the backlog of unfilled quotas under the 1924 Act would be exhausted. I suggest an annual immigration ceiling of four tenths of one percent of our popula-
tion from all countries not in the Western Hemisphere, with no national quotas. This might be higher than the more doctrinaire advocates of an ingrown and isolationist America would welcome. But I am confident that a majority of Americans would accept it as a moderate proportion.

According to our last census this would give us a total of about 640,000 immigrants annually—and that is only half the actual number that we absorbed successfully in the years just before World War II when our population was one third less than today.

What kind of people would come to the USA under such legislation? Would they be competent to make their own way, strong, law abiding, and loyal? What about the danger of Communists, Fascists, and other undesirables?

The millions who have emigrated to America from Europe in the last 100 years have gone through a process of natural selection which has kept average standards extremely high. Their descendants are not living in America today because they happened to be born here. They are here, first, because their forebears had the imagination to grasp the “American Dream” with its promise of a better life, but even more important, because they had the courage to translate their hopes and convictions into reality.

For generations, every European town, village, and city has had its scores, hundreds, thousands who looked upon the USA as an incredible dreamland in which some day they hoped to live. The far smaller number who had the actual courage and perseverance to take their families across thousands of miles of ocean to new homes in a distant country were by and large the strongest, ablest, and the most determined.

Today all over America millions of men and women—only a generation or two or three removed from their mother countries—are contributing in a hundred different ways to the healthy growth of our economic, social, and political system. While some of our older families may have tended to coast on their illustrious past, and to take democracy for granted, many of these comparative newcomers have been introducing new life and vitality into our whole American society.

The addition each year of 640,000 new Americans from overseas, carefully selected on the basis of health, character, and ability, would add further to our national reservoir of skill, imagination, and competence. And because these new citizens were chosen without regard for nationality, race or religion, they would demonstrate to the world that in the USA, democracy, now as in earlier decades, is more than a slogan.

As far as Communists and Fascists and other “undesirables” are concerned, our United States Immigration Service has developed great skill in weeding them out. Up to January 1, 1951, of the 250,000 men and women brought in under the Displaced Persons Act, only three have been deported for cause.

Let us hope that the present Congress will accept the challenge of our foolishly restrictive and discriminatory immigration laws. The time for honest, principled, democratic action is long overdue.

An Alien Speaks . . . . ABRAHAM SUSSMAN

Flag of the States—
Banner of the Republic
Emblem of Democracy,
Symbol of the World to be,
I salute you!

I have a confession to make
A confession and a declaration,
Listen!

I am an Alien, that is to say, I am not legally bound to you. Yet I have been bound to you with the fibres of my soul even before I knew you. Bound to you in love, in admiration.
Believe me!

I have dreamt of you in my little Galician frontier town, I have dreamt of you under the flag of a dying monarchy, Under the burden of poverty, under the fear of pogroms.

I saw you in my dreams. You were floating in the stifled air that surrounded me. At times I thought you were an illusion, a fantasy, But a distant voice called to me and said: “She is real, alive, somewhere . . . .”

So I left the place where my cradle stood, Where mother rocked me to sleep with her tearful lullaby, And I wandered through lands and states Until I reached your shores.

And I saw you, real alive—as I saw you in my dreams. I looked at your stars and I saw a message in every one of them; A message to me and to millions like me; To all Americans, born and unborn.

In your stripes I read declarations, one as mighty as the other. The declaration of Independence; The declaration of Emancipation;