

“Shut the Door”: A Senator Speaks for Immigration Restriction

At the turn of the 20th century, unprecedented levels of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe to the United States aroused public support for restrictive immigration laws. After World War I, which temporarily slowed immigration levels, anti-immigration sentiment rose again. Congress passed the Quota Act of 1921, limiting entrants from each nation to 3 percent of that nationality's presence in the U.S. population as recorded by the 1910 census. As a result, immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe dropped to less than one-quarter of pre-World War I levels. Even more restrictive was the Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act) that shaped American immigration policy until the 1960s. During congressional debate over the 1924 Act, Senator Ellison DuRant Smith of South Carolina drew on the racist theories of Madison Grant to argue that immigration restriction was the only way to preserve existing American resources. Although blatant racists like Smith were in the minority in the Senate, almost all senators supported restriction, and the Johnson-Reed bill passed with only six dissenting votes.

It seems to me the point as to this measure—and I have been so impressed for several years—is that the time has arrived when we should shut the door. We have been called the melting pot of the world. We had an experience just a few years ago, during the great World War, when it looked as though we had allowed influences to enter our borders that were about to melt the pot in place of us being the melting pot.

I think that we have sufficient stock in America now for us to shut the door, Americanize what we have, and save the resources of America for the natural increase of our population. We all know that one of the most prolific causes of war is the desire for increased land ownership for the overflow of a congested population. We are increasing at such a rate that in the natural course of things in a comparatively few years the landed resources, the natural resources of the country, shall be taken up by the natural increase of our population. It seems to me the part of wisdom now that we have throughout the length and breadth of continental America a population which is beginning to encroach upon the reserve and virgin resources of the country to keep it in trust for the multiplying population of the country.

I do not believe that political reasons should enter into the discussion of this very vital question. It is of greater concern to us to maintain the institutions of America, to maintain the principles upon which this Government is founded, than to develop and exploit the underdeveloped resources of the country. There are some things that are dearer to us, fraught with more benefit to us, than the immediate development of the undeveloped resources of the country. I believe that our particular ideas, social, moral, religious, and political, have demonstrated, by virtue of the progress we have made and the character of people that we are, that we have the highest ideals of any member of the human family or any nation. We have demonstrated the fact that the human family, certainly the predominant breed in America, can govern themselves by a direct government of the people. If this Government shall fail, it shall fail by virtue of the terrible law of inherited tendency. Those who come from the nations which from time immemorial have been under the dictation of a master fall more easily by the law of inheritance and the inertia of habit

into a condition of political servitude than the descendants of those who cleared the forests, conquered the savage, stood at arms and won their liberty from their mother country, England.

I think we now have sufficient population in our country for us to shut the door and to breed up a pure, unadulterated American citizenship. I recognize that there is a dangerous lack of distinction between people of a certain nationality and the breed of the dog. Who is an American? Is he an immigrant from Italy? Is he an immigrant from Germany? If you were to go abroad and some one were to meet you and say, "I met a typical American," what would flash into your mind as a typical American, the typical representative of that new Nation? Would it be the son of an Italian immigrant, the son of a German immigrant, the son of any of the breeds from the Orient, the son of the denizens of Africa? We must not get our ethnological distinctions mixed up with out anthropological distinctions. It is the breed of the dog in which I am interested. I would like for the Members of the Senate to read that book just recently published by Madison Grant, *The Passing of a Great Race*. Thank God we have in America perhaps the largest percentage of any country in the world of the pure, unadulterated Anglo-Saxon stock; certainly the greatest of any nation in the Nordic breed. It is for the preservation of that splendid stock that has characterized us that I would make this not an asylum for the oppressed of all countries, but a country to assimilate and perfect that splendid type of manhood that has made America the foremost Nation in her progress and in her power, and yet the youngest of all the nations. I myself believe that the preservation of her institutions depends upon us now taking counsel with our condition and our experience during the last World War.

Without offense, but with regard to the salvation of our own, let us shut the door and assimilate what we have, and let us breed pure American citizens and develop our own American resources. I am more in favor of that than I am of our quota proposition. Of course, it may not meet the approbation of the Senate that we shall shut the door—which I unqualifiedly and unreservedly believe to be our duty—and develop what we have, assimilate and digest what we have into pure Americans, with American aspirations, and thoroughly familiar with the love of American institutions, rather than the importation of any number of men from other countries. If we may not have that, then I am in favor of putting the quota down to the lowest possible point, with every selective element in it that may be.

The great desideratum of modern times has been education not alone book knowledge, but that education which enables men to think right, to think logically, to think truthfully, men equipped with power to appreciate the rapidly developing conditions that are all about us, that have converted the world in the last 50 years into a brand new world and made us masters of forces that are revolutionizing production. We want men not like dumb, driven cattle from those nations where the progressive thought of the times has scarcely made a beginning and where they see men as mere machines; we want men who have an appreciation of the responsibility brought about by the manifestation of the power of that individual. We have not that in this country to-day. We have men here to-day who are selfishly utilizing the enormous forces discovered by genius, and if we are not careful as statesmen, if we are not careful in our legislation, these very masters of the tremendous forces that have been made available to us will bring us under their domination and control by virtue of the power they have in multiplying their wealth.

We are struggling to-day against the organized forces of man's brain multiplied a million times by materialized thought in the form of steam and electricity as applied in the everyday affairs of man. We have enough in this country to engage the brain of every lover of his country in solving the problems of a democratic government in the midst of the imperial power that genius is discovering and placing in the hands of man. We have population enough to-day without throwing wide our doors and jeopardizing the interests of this country by pouring into it men who willingly become the slaves of those who employ them in manipulating these forces of nature, and they few reap the enormous benefits that accrue therefrom.

We ought to Americanize not only our population but our forces. We ought to Americanize our factories and our vast material resources, so that we can make each contribute to the other and have an abundance for us under the form of the government laid down by our fathers.

The Senator from Georgia [Mr. Harris] has introduced an amendment to shut the door. It is not a question of politics. It is a question of maintaining that which has made you and me the beneficiaries of the greatest hope that ever burned in the human breast for the most splendid future that ever stood before mankind, where the boy in the gutter can look with confidence to the seat of the Presidency of the United States; where the boy in the gutter can look forward to the time when, paying the price of a proper citizen, he may fill a seat in this hall; where the boy to-day poverty-stricken, standing in the midst of all the splendid opportunities of America, should have and, please God, if we do our duty, will have an opportunity to enjoy the marvelous wealth that the genius and brain of our country is making possible for us all.

We do not want to tangle the skein of America's progress by those who imperfectly understand the genius of our Government and the opportunities that lie about us. Let us keep what we have, protect what we have, make what we have the realization of the dream of those who wrote the Constitution.

I am more concerned about that than I am about whether a new railroad shall be built or whether there shall be diversified farming next year or whether a certain coal mine shall be mined. I would rather see American citizenship refined to the last degree in all that makes America what we hope it will be than to develop the resources of America at the expense of the citizenship of our country. The time has come when we should shut the door and keep what we have for what we hope our own people to be.

Source: Speech by Ellison DuRant Smith, April 9, 1924, *Congressional Record*, 68th Congress, 1st Session (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1924), vol. 65, 5961–5962

An “Un-American Bill”: A Congressman Denounces Immigration Quotas

At the turn of the 20th century, unprecedented levels of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe to the United States aroused public support for restrictive immigration laws. After World War I, which temporarily slowed immigration levels, anti-immigration sentiment rose again. Congress passed the Quota Act of 1921, limiting entrants from each nation to 3 percent of that nationality’s presence in the U.S. population as recorded by the 1910 census. As a result, immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe dropped to less than one-quarter of pre-World War I levels. Even more restrictive was the Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act) that shaped American immigration policy until the 1960s. While it passed with only six dissenting votes, congressional debates over the Johnson-Reed Act revealed arguments on both sides of this question of American policy and national identity. For example, on April 8, 1924, Robert H. Clancy, a Republican congressman from Detroit with a large immigrant constituency, defended the “Americanism” of Jewish, Italian, and Polish immigrants and attacked the quota provisions of the bill as racially discriminatory and “un-American.”

Since the foundations of the American commonwealth were laid in colonial times over 300 years ago, vigorous complaint and more or less bitter persecution have been aimed at newcomers to our shores. Also the congressional reports of about 1840 are full of abuse of English, Scotch, Welsh immigrants as paupers, criminals, and so forth.

Old citizens in Detroit of Irish and German descent have told me of the fierce tirades and propaganda directed against the great waves of Irish and Germans who came over from 1840 on for a few decades to escape civil, racial, and religious persecution in their native lands.

The “Know-Nothings,” lineal ancestors of the Ku-Klux Klan, bitterly denounced the Irish and Germans as mongrels, scum, foreigners, and a menace to our institutions, much as other great branches of the Caucasian race of glorious history and antecedents are berated to-day. All are riff-raff, unassimilables, “foreign devils,” swine not fit to associate with the great chosen people—a form of national pride and hallucination as old as the division of races and nations.

But to-day it is the Italians, Spanish, Poles, Jews, Greeks, Russians, Balkanians, and so forth, who are the racial lepers. And it is eminently fitting and proper that so many Members of this House with names as Irish as Paddy’s pig, are taking the floor these days to attack once more as their kind has attacked for seven bloody centuries the fearful fallacy of chosen peoples and inferior peoples. The fearful fallacy is that one is made to rule and the other to be abominated. . .

In this bill we find racial discrimination at its worst—a deliberate attempt to go back 84 years in our census taken every 10 years so that a blow may be aimed at peoples of eastern and southern Europe, particularly at our recent allies in the Great War—Poland and Italy.

Jews In Detroit Are Good Citizens

Of course the Jews too are aimed at, not directly, because they have no country in Europe they can call their own, but they are set down among the inferior peoples. Much of the animus against Poland and Russia, old and new, with the countries that have arisen from the ruins of the dead Czar's European dominions, is directed against the Jew.

We have many American citizens of Jewish descent in Detroit, tens of thousands of them—active in every profession and every walk of life. They are particularly active in charities and merchandising. One of our greatest judges, if not the greatest, is a Jew. Surely no fair-minded person with a knowledge of the facts can say the Jews or Detroit are a menace to the city's or the country's well-being. . . .

Forty or fifty thousand Italian-Americans live in my district in Detroit. They are found in all walks and classes of life—common hard labor, the trades, business, law, medicine, dentistry, art, literature, banking, and so forth.

They rapidly become Americanized, build homes, and make themselves into good citizens. They brought hardihood, physique, hope, and good humor with them from their outdoor life in Sunny Italy, and they bear up under the terrific strain of life and work in busy Detroit.

One finds them by thousands digging streets, sewers, and building foundations, and in the automobile and iron and steel fabric factories of various sorts. They do the hard work that the native-born American dislikes. Rapidly they rise in life and join the so-called middle and upper classes. . . .

The Italian-Americans of Detroit played a glorious part in the Great War. They showed themselves as patriotic as the native born in offering the supreme sacrifice.

In all, I am informed, over 300,000 Italian-speaking soldiers enlisted in the American Army, almost 10 percent of our total fighting force. Italians formed about 4 percent of the population of the United States and they formed 10 percent of the American military force. Their casualties were 12 percent. . . .

Detroit Satisfied With The Poles

I wish to take the liberty of informing the House that from my personal knowledge and observation of tens of thousands of Polish-Americans living in my district in Detroit that their Americanism and patriotism are unassailable from any fair or just standpoint.

The Polish-Americans are as industrious and as frugal and as loyal to our institutions as any class of people who have come to the shores of this country in the past 300 years. They are essentially home builders, and they have come to this country to stay. They learn the English language as quickly as possible, and take pride in the rapidity with which they become assimilated and adopt our institutions.

Figures available to all show that in Detroit in the World War the proportion of American volunteers of Polish blood was greater than the proportion of Americans of any other racial descent. . . .

Polish-Americans do not merit slander nor defamation. If not granted charitable or sympathetic judgment, they are at least entitled to justice and to the high place they have won in American and European history and citizenship.

The force behind the Johnson bill and some of its champions in Congress charge that opposition to the racial discrimination feature of the 1800 quota basis arises from “foreign blocs.” They would give the impression that 100 percent Americans are for it and that the sympathies of its opponents are of the “foreign-bloc” variety, and bear stigma of being “hyphenates.” I meet that challenge willingly. I feel my Americanism will stand any test.

Every American Has Foreign Ancestors

The foreign born of my district writhe under the charge of being called “hyphenates.” The people of my own family were all hyphenates—English-Americans, German-Americans, Irish-Americans. They began to come in the first ship or so after the *Mayflower*. But they did not come too early to miss the charge of anti-Americanism. Roger Williams was driven out of the Puritan colony of Salem to die in the wilderness because he objected “violently” to blue laws and the burning or hanging of rheumatic old women on witchcraft charges. He would not “assimilate” and was “a grave menace to American Institutions and democratic government.”

My family put 11 men and boys into the Revolutionary War, and I am sure they and their women and children did not suffer so bitterly and sacrifice until it hurt to establish the autocracy of bigotry and intolerance which exists in many quarters to-day in this country. Some of these men and boys shed their blood and left their bodies to rot on American battle fields. To me real Americanism and the American flag are the product of the blood of men and of the tears of women and children of a different type than the rampant “Americanizers” of to-day.

My mother’s father fought in the Civil War, leaving his six small children in Detroit when he marched away to the southern battle fields to fight against racial distinctions and protect his country.

My mother’s little brother, about 14 years old, and the eldest child, fired by the traditions of his family, plodded off to the battle fields to do his bit. He aspired to be a drummer boy and inspire the men in battle, but he was found too small to carry a drum and was put at the ignominious task of driving army mules, hauling cannons and wagons.

I learned more of the spirit of American history at my mother’s knee than I ever learned in my four years of high school study of American history and in my five and a half years of study at the great University of Michigan.

All that study convinces me that the racial discriminations of this bill are un-American. . . .

It must never be forgotten also that the Johnson bill, although it claims to favor the northern and western European peoples only, does so on a basis of comparison with the southern and western European peoples. The Johnson bill cuts down materially the number of immigrants allowed to come from northern and western Europe, the so-called Nordic peoples. . . .

Then I would be true to the principles for which my forefathers fought and true to the real spirit of the magnificent United States of to-day. I can not stultify myself by voting for the present bill and overwhelm my country with racial hatreds and racial lines and antagonisms drawn even tighter than they are to-day. [Applause.]

Source: Speech by Robert H. Clancy, April 8, 1924, *Congressional Record*, 68th Congress, 1st Session (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1924), vol. 65, 5929–5932.

Additional Testimony:

In his testimony before the House Committee on Immigration, John Trevor, a New York attorney and member of a group called the Allied Patriotic Societies, proposed that Congress limit immigration country by country to two percent of the immigrants from that country living in the United States in 1890. The date was critical, because most immigrants from southern and eastern Europe arrived after 1890. The House of Representatives debated Trevor's plan in March and April of 1924. Excerpts from the debate reveal how strongly members felt about immigration. It also reveals the extent of influence American eugenicist Harry Laughlin had on public policy.

Representative **Clarence F. Lea of California** told his fellow lawmakers:

What is that assimilation that we demand of a naturalized citizen? Assimilation requires adaptability, a compatibility to our Government, its institutions, and its customs; an assumption of the duties and an acceptance of the rights of an American citizen; a merger of alienism into Americanism. True assimilation requires racial compatibility. Nature's God has given the world a brown man, a yellow man, and a black man.

Whether given to us by the wisdom of a Divine Ruler or by our own prejudices or wisdom we have a deep-seated aversion against racial amalgamation or general social equality with these races. Members of these races may have all the moral and intellectual qualities that adorn a man of the white race.

Many individuals of any race may be superior, by every just standard of measurement, to many individuals of the white race. Yet there is an irreconcilable resistance to amalgamation and social equality that cannot be ignored. The fact is it forms an enduring barrier against complete assimilation. The brown man, the yellow man, or the black man who is an American citizen seeks the opportunities of this country with a handicap. It may be humiliating or unjust to him. You may contend it is not creditable to us, but it does exist. It causes irritation, racial prejudice, and animosities. It detracts from the harmony, unity, and solidarity of our citizenship. But to avoid further racial antipathies and incompatibility is the duty and opportunity of this Congress. The first great rule of exclusion should prohibit those non-assimilable. Our own interests, as well as the ultimate welfare of those we admit, justify us in prescribing a strict rule as to whom shall

be assimilable. We should require physical, moral, and mental qualities, capable of contributing to the welfare and advancement of our citizenship. Without these qualities it would be better for America that they should not come.

Representative **Adolph J. Sabath of Illinois** saw assimilation from a different perspective.

He argued:

What is meant by assimilation is difficult of definition. The mere fact that an immigrant, when he arrives or even after he has lived here for a number of years, still speaks his native language does not indicate that he is not being assimilated. Every day that he lives here he imbibes American ideas. . . .

Whatever his garb may have been when he came, the first suit of clothes that he purchases with his honestly acquired earnings, which represent his creative efforts from which the country profits, is made according to the American model. His work is performed in accordance with the methods adopted in our industrial centers. He becomes familiar with our form of government. His acquaintance with our laws equals that of the average inhabitant of our country, and his obedience to them measures up to that of the average native. It is true that he reads books and newspapers printed in foreign languages, but it is by means of them that he acquires a fund of information relative to the true spirit of America. Anybody familiar with the foreign language press, and with what it has done in the direction of educating the immigrant into an appreciation of what America stands for, can testify to this fact. The children of these foreign parents brought up in American public schools grow up without even an ability to read the foreign press.

The majority in its report . . . unjustifiably charged and contended that there is in this country an undigested mass of alien thought, alien sympathy, and alien purpose which creates alarm and apprehension and breeds racial hatreds. This, like most figures of speech, can not bear analysis. What is meant by alien thought and alien purpose as applied to immigrants? Does it mean that they are opposed to the land in which they live, in which they earn their livelihood, where they have established a permanent home for themselves and their children? Does it mean that they would invite conquest by foreign nations, and having to a great extent left the lands of their birth because deprived of liberty and that freedom which they enjoy in this country, that they would be willing to forego the blessings that have come to them under our benign institutions? Have they not by coming here severed their political relations with foreign lands? Does any considerable

portion of them ever expect to leave our shores? Have the thought and purpose of that Europe which they left behind been such as to attract instead of increase the repulsion which drove those immigrants to America? Are men apt to choose misery and unhappiness when they are enjoying contentment and comparative prosperity and are looked upon not as cannon fodder but as men? As well might it be said that the Puritans of New England, the Cavaliers of

Virginia and Maryland, the Knickerbockers of New York, the Quakers of Pennsylvania, and the Scandinavians of the Middle West brought with them undigested masses of alien thought, alien sympathy, and alien purpose, which made of them a menace to this country. It is not the immigrants who are breeding racial hatreds. They are not the inventors of the new anthropology. Nor do they stimulate controversy. It would rather appear, in fact is clearly shown, to be those who are seeking to restrict or to prohibit immigration who entertain such sentiments and who are now attempting to formulate a policy which is, indeed, alien to the thought, the sympathy, and the purpose of the founders of the Republic and of that America which has become the greatest power for good on earth.

Representative Grant M. Hudson of Michigan countered took issue with the idea that immigrants change their customs and their attitudes. He told Congress:

The “melting pot” has proved to be a myth. We are slowly awakening to the consciousness that education and environment do not fundamentally alter racial values.

Today we face the serious problem of the maintenance of our historic republican institutions. Now, what do we find in all our large cities? Entire sections containing a population incapable of understanding our institutions, with no comprehension of our national ideals, and for the most part incapable of speaking the English language. Foreign language information service gives evidence that many southern Europeans resent as an unjust discrimination the quota laws and represent America as showing race hatred and unmindful of its mission to the world. The reverse is true. America’s first duty is to those already within her own shores. An unrestricted immigration policy would work an injustice to all, which would fall hardest on those least able to combat it.

George Washington in his Farewell Address said: Citizens by birth or choice, of a common country, that country has a right to concentrate your affection. . . . [W]ith slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. Washington

observed—slight shades of difference. But today we see huge masses of non-American-minded individuals, living in colonies or ghettos, or even cities and counties of their own. Here they perpetuate their racial mindedness, their racial character, and their racial habits. Here they speak their own tongue, read their own newspapers, maintain their separate educational system.

Ira Hersey of Maine offered his view of the nation's history:

Mr. Chairman, the New World was settled by the white race. True, we found here when the Pilgrim Fathers landed the red race. The Indian was never adapted to civilization. His home was the forest. He knew no government. He cared nothing for civilization. He gave freely of his land to the white man for trinkets to adorn his person; and this race of people, the first Americans, were pushed back as the forests receded until to-day he occupies here and there small portions of the United States, living the primitive life, wards of this Government, and in a few years they will be known no more forever.

They never were a menace to the Government. They have never been known in politics. On account of race and blood they have never been able to assimilate with our people and have kept their own place and have caused very little trouble in the progress of civilization in this country.

America! The United States! Bounded on the north by an English colony, on the south by the Tropics, and on the east and west by two great oceans, was, God-intended, I believe, to be the home of a great people. English speaking—a white race with great ideals, the Christian religion, one race, one country, and one destiny.

[Applause.] It was a mighty land settled by northern Europe from the United Kingdom, the Norsemen, and the Saxon, the peoples of a mixed blood. The African, the Orientals, the Mongolians, and all the yellow races of Europe, Asia and Africa should never have been allowed to people this great land.

Meyer Jacobstein of New York had a more expansive view of citizenship. He insisted:

Perhaps the chief argument expressed or implied by those favoring the Johnson bill [the National Origins Act] is that the new immigrant is not of a type that can be assimilated or that he will not

carry on the best traditions of the founders of our Nation, but, on the contrary, is likely to fill our jails, our almshouses, and other institutions that impose a great tax burden on the Nation.

Based on this prejudice and dislike, there has grown up an almost fanatical anti-immigration sentiment. But this charge against the newcomers is denied, and substantial evidence has been brought to prove that they do not furnish a disproportionate share of the inmates of these institutions.

One of the purposes in shifting to the 1890 census is to reduce the number of undesirables and defectives in our institutions. In fact, this aspect of the question must have made a very deep impression on the committee because it crops out on every occasion. The committee has unquestionably been influenced by the conclusions drawn from a study made by Dr. Laughlin.

This is not the first time in American history that such an anti-foreign hysteria has swept the country. Reread your American histories. Go back and glance through McMaster's History of the United States covering the years from 1820 to 1850. You will find there many pages devoted to the "100 per centers" of that time. So strange was the movement against the foreigner in those decades before the Civil War that a national political party, the "Know-Nothing Party," sought to ride into power on the crest of this fanatical wave.

In those early days, however, the anti-foreign movement, strangely enough, was directed against the very people whom we now seek to prefer—the English, the Irish, and the Germans. The calamity howlers of a century ago prophesied that these foreigners would drag our Nation to destruction.

The trouble is that the committee is suffering from a delusion. It is carried away with the belief that there is such a thing as a Nordic race which possesses all the virtues, and in like manner creates the fiction of an inferior group of peoples, for which no name has been invented.

Nothing is more un-American. Nothing could be more dangerous, in a land the Constitution of which says that all men are created equal, than to write into our law a theory which puts one race above another, which stamps one group of people as superior and another as inferior. The fact that it is camouflaged in a maze of statistics will not protect this Nation from the evil consequences of such an unscientific, un-American, wicked philosophy.