The position Donald Trump has taken towards immigration since he launched his campaign for the presidency is undeniably racist and divisive. From calling immigrants rapists, murderers, and animals and their homelands “shithole countries,” Trump has forsaken the “dog whistle” appeal to voters’ worst instincts favored by many modern nativist politicians for blatant and crude race-based fearmongering and scapegoating. The major objective of his policy and legislative actions on immigration, from ending DACA to decimating the U.S. refugee resettlement program and terminating Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for tens of thousands of immigrants who have lived here for many years, is clear: to reduce the number of non-white immigrants in the U.S.

At the time of our country’s founding, chattel slavery was legal in all thirteen colonies, so perhaps it is no surprise that racism has long shaped U.S. immigration policies and practices. One of the first naturalization laws, the 1790 Naturalization Act, denied citizenship to all but “free white persons of good character.” The legal boundaries of “white” were contested throughout the nineteenth century regarding who was eligible to naturalize, culminating in two Supreme Court decisions...
in the early 1920s. In Takao Ozawa v. U.S. (1922), the Supreme Court ruled that since only Caucasians were white and Japanese were not of the Caucasian race, they were not white and therefore ineligible for U.S. citizenship. Three months later in United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind (1923), a national of India was found to be Caucasian as defined by anthropologists of the day. The court nevertheless ruled that Mr. Thind was not a “white person” as “used in common speech, to be interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man” and that he, too, could not naturalize. According to historian Mae Ngai, these two decisions cast Japanese and Asian Indians with Chinese as “unassimilable aliens” and helped constitute the racial category of “Asian.”

Earlier, in 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, one of the first attempts by the U.S. to regulate immigration along racial lines. This piece of legislation was driven largely by concerns to maintain white “racial purity” and a widespread anti-Chinese movement in California where Chinese workers were blamed for declining wages and economic malaise. The Chinese Exclusion Act paved the way for a series of laws between 1882 and 1904 that severely restricted immigration from China and provided for the deportation of many Chinese immigrants already residing in the U.S. Restriction on Chinese immigration would last until 1943.

Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe began arriving in the U.S. in greater numbers during the last decade of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century. This change in the demographic status quo alarmed many Americans, including the editors of the best-selling magazine in the U.S., Saturday Evening Post, who warned that continuing migration patterns would yield “a hybrid race of people as worthless and futile as the good-for-nothing mongrels of Southeastern Europe.” The 1924 National Origins Quota Act was developed to curtail such migration by establishing immigration quotas based on two percent of each nationality’s proportion of the foreign-born U.S. population in 1890, before widespread immigration from Italy, Greece, Poland, Russia, and other countries of southern and eastern Europe had begun. President Calvin Coolidge enthusiastically signed the bill. He wrote that “racial considerations [were] too grave to be brushed aside” and that “divergent peoples will not mix or blend.”

The offensively named Operation Wetback was a massive immigration enforcement effort executed as a military operation in 1954 by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to apprehend and deport undocumented workers from Mexico, especially in the Southwest. At its outset three thousand workers a day were returned to Mexico by bus, train, and boat, often with little concern for their welfare or legal status. One Mexican labor leader reported that “wetbacks” were brought into Mexico “like cows” in the back of trucks and unloaded in the desert 15 miles south of the border. Eighty-eight braceros (temporary agricultural workers recruited from Mexico under a 1942 Mexican Farm Labor Agreement) died of heatstroke in a round-up conducted in 112-degree heat. A Congressional investigation described a cargo ship that transported workers to Vera Cruz as an “eighteenth century slave ship” and “penal hell ship.” By the time the program was terminated in 1955, it is estimated that as many as eight hundred thousand Mexican workers had been deported.

At the height of the civil rights movement and a global Cold War debate over the merits of western democracy vs. communism, the National Origins Quota Act had become a national embarrassment. Fulfilling a campaign promise of John F. Kennedy, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (INA) at the foot of the Statue of Liberty. This act literally “changed the face of America” by ending an immigration-admissions policy based on race and ethnicity for one based on immigrants’ family relationships with U.S. citizens and legal residents and, to a lesser degree, job skills. The act unexpectedly set into motion widespread changes in the racial and ethnic makeup of the U.S. when immigration from Europe fell flat and interest in emigrating from non-European countries after the end of colonial rule grew. In parallel with the termination of the Bracero program in 1964, the INA also inadvertently contributed to steep increases in undocumented immigration by limiting legal immigration from countries in the Western Hemisphere (which previously had no cap).

The oldest trick in the political playbook is divide and conquer. Politicians throughout our history have stoked fear of the immigrant “other” to great effect. Pope Francis reminded legislators not to repeat such injustice in his address to Congress in 2015:

> When the stranger in our midst appeals to us, we must not repeat the sins and the errors of the past. We must resolve now to live as nobly and as justly as possible, as we educate new generations not to turn their back on our ‘neighbors’ and everything around us. Building a nation calls us to recognize that we must constantly relate to others, rejecting a mindset of hostility in order to adopt one of reciprocal subsidiarity, in a constant effort to do our best.

We would “do our best” by rejecting the racist, nativist Trump agenda.

—Endnotes on page 8
ENDNOTES

TAINTED LEGACY


5 Op cit, Ngai, 156.


THE EXPANSION BROADENS


2 Ibid.


ENDNOTES

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