

Policymakers need to deviate from our tainted history and embrace the immigrants

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For all of us who are not Native American, what it means to be American is that at some point, someone in your family came from somewhere else.

This is why Donald Trump's comments on immigration in the State of the Union Address and the proposed new immigration policies are baffling to many.

The immigration discourse has moved from stopping illegal immigration to using the pending renewal of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals as a wedge to significantly reduce legal immigration. Two of the four immigration 'pillars' proposed in the State of the Union target legal immigration.

The future for so many is uncertain so we look to history for applicable lessons. Placing restrictions

on immigration is not a new concept in the United States.

As a professor and cognitive scientist at Northwestern University, I teach about the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 when Congress passed a law that regulated immigration to the U.S. based on nationality. It served as the basis for discriminatory immigration policies favoring immigrants from Western and Northern Europe over those from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

The law had an eugenic intent designed to halt the immigration of supposedly dysgenic groups, groups that purportedly contributed to a decline of the gene pool. In their 1994 book, *The "Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life,"* psychologist Richard J. Herrnstein and political scientist Charles Murray, wrote that in the early 1920s, the chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization appointed an "Expert Eugenical Agent" for the committee's work. The agent was a biologist who was especially concerned about keeping up the American level of intelligence by suitable immigration policies.

These policies were based on a combination of political populism and flawed research done on new immigrants who, fresh off the boats at Ellis Island, were asked to undergo psychometric tests to assess their intellect.

Many of these immigrants spoke no English. Some of the British, Dutch and German new arrivals had fewer difficulties understanding the testers and the tests because their languages were from the same Germanic family group as English and shared common words and word roots, compared to others whose languages differed more substantially from English.

Some immigrants were unfamiliar with paper and pencil tasks, many were illiterate. There were many reasons for better performance on those IQ test that had nothing to do with intelligence.

The Immigration Restriction Act was changed in 1965. Up until recently, we thought of it as an antiquated, shameful policy based on biased, racist research unsupported by empirical evidence. Few could imagine nearly a century later we would witness similar discriminatory policies again.

History is repeating itself, with immigrants from some countries (Northern Europe) being favored over immigrants from other countries. Today it is immigrants from Central and South America, the Caribbean, and the African Union who are targeted.

The discrimination appears haphazard. There is no reason why an immigrant from the Czech Republic (like Ivana Trump for instance), or from Slovenia (like Melania Trump), is deemed more worthy of immigration to the United States than a person born in El Salvador or South Africa.

Both of these women speak English with a foreign accent, identify with another culture and have personal and family ties to other countries. That does not make them any less committed to American values, nor are their children viewed as any less American.

Some have argued that with immigration come crime and lawlessness. However, the argument that closing the borders will increase our homeland security is unsubstantiated.

Most crimes, including the recent Kentucky high school violence, have been committed by those who were born here. Countering the incorrect narrative about immigrants as criminals, research shows communities that have substantial increases in immigration experience a sharper reduction in crime than communities without large increases in immigration.

For myself, when and if someone questions my patriotism, I remind them that me being in this country is not an accident of birth. I made a conscious decision to come to the United States a quarter of a century ago.

I chose it above all other countries in the world. I came because I appreciate and value what the United States stands for — democracy, freedom, opportunity,

or, to quote our Declaration of Independence — “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

This appreciation is one that the majority of immigrants share. Immigrants to the United States benefit the communal, economic, technological, and scientific arenas of their new home country.

In 2016, all six American winners of the Nobel Prize were immigrants. In 2016, three of the five Nobel categories included immigrants or refugees. Since 2000, foreign-born professors accounted for 33 of the 85, or nearly 40 percent of U.S. Nobel prizes. For comparison, only 13 percent of the United States population is foreign-born.

The contributions of immigrants are wide-reaching. Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google, came from Russia. Steve Chen, YouTube co-founder, came from Taiwan. Designer Oscar de la Renta came from the Dominican Republic. Major League Baseball player for the New York Yankees Mariano Rivera came from Panama.

Huffington Post and Thrive Global founder Arianna Huffington came from Greece. Hamdi Ulukaya, the founder of Chobani, a billion dollar yogurt company, immigrated from Turkey. Nearly half of the founders of America’s biggest companies, including Apple, Amazon, Oracle, IBM, Uber, eBay, Tesla and PayPal are first- or second- generation immigrants as well.

My teenage daughter wrote in a recent school essay, “In seventh grade, we read a piece where the author described America as a ‘melting pot’ of nationalities, cultures, and ethnicities. The idea immediately resonated with me. This country is inherently a country of immigrants from all around the world. Being a mix of cultures myself is precisely what makes me American.”

As a naturalized citizen of the United States, a scientist and a voter, I encourage our policymakers to deviate from our tainted history and embrace the immigrants who venture to America for better lives. Because these, too, are people who will make America great.