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Trump's views on immigration aren't as bad as those in the 1920s. They're worse.

The designers of the quota system at least tried to hide their racism.



By David Atkinson January 14

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President Trump's reference to Haiti, El Salvador and the nations of Africa as "shithole countries" reflects his ongoing antipathy toward nonwhite immigrants. Coupled with his inaugural campaign claim that many Mexican immigrants are rapists and drug traffickers — and recently reported assertions that Haitian immigrants have AIDS or that Nigerians live in huts — it seems clear that the president's anti-immigrant politics are animated by a deep-seated bigotry.

Trump's chauvinistic rhetoric evokes one of the nation's darkest episodes of racially-inspired immigration policy: the implementation of a national quota system in the early 1920s. And yet there is also a striking and unnerving difference. Even in the 1920s — a period that exemplified the worst impulses of American nativism — prominent advocates of immigration restriction often tried to avoid explicitly voicing disparaging and overtly racist arguments against immigrants, preferring instead to disguise their bigotry with euphemism and obfuscation whenever possible.

Whenever their true racist intent did become public — as President Trump discovered again on Friday — their intolerance threatened to damage immigrant political support at home and to undermine foreign policy objectives abroad.

While Trump's frequent nativist declarations reflect the racial attitudes of an earlier xenophobic era, the president's inability to modulate his true feelings reveals not only a flawed political sensibility but also a more disturbing strain of personal racism.

The 1921 Emergency Quota Act and the 1924 Immigration Act specifically targeted southern and eastern European immigrants. These statutes were inspired by long-festering notions of racial fitness and degeneration, along with anxieties about the radicalism, poverty and instability that accompanied the end of war in Europe. People from countries such as Italy and Poland were judged to be racially inferior and ultimately impossible to assimilate compared with their neighbors from northern and western Europe.

The 1921 act imposed 3 percent quotas on European immigrants based on their numerical presence as registered by the 1910 Census. This intentionally limited "undesirable" immigrants from places such as Hungary and Romania while allowing larger numbers of

immigrants from ostensibly “desirable” places such as Great Britain and Scandinavia. The 1924 Immigration Act made the quota system permanent and even more restrictive by establishing even smaller percentages based on the 1890 Census.

These acts were unequivocally racist. Supporters of the quota system nourished their bigotry with pseudoscientific appraisals of racial inferiority, casting derogatory aspersions over entire ethnic groups. As the popular racial theorist Lothrop Stoddard proclaimed in his 1920 book “The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy,” “Our country, originally settled almost exclusively by Nordics, was toward the close of the nineteenth century invaded by hordes of immigrant Alpines and Mediterraneans, not to mention Asiatic elements like Levantines and Jews.” He called this influx of “swarming, prolific aliens” a threat to the future of the white Nordic race.

President Lyndon B. Johnson perfectly encapsulated the sentiment animating these laws when he presided over their repeal in 1965 — declaring the “un-American” statues erected “twin barriers of prejudice and privilege” that represented “a cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American Nation.”

But even amid the toxic atmosphere of nativism and anti-Semitism that characterized the early postwar years, many leading proponents of immigration restriction understood that brazen declarations of racial inferiority and humiliating outbursts of national insult were inappropriate and often counterproductive. Instead, even the most ardent restrictionists commonly camouflaged their racism. Indeed, the very mechanism at the heart of the quota acts used census numbers to avoid explicitly identifying the legislation’s real targets and to disguise its discriminatory intent.

Why did many Americans avoid overt exclamations of racial intolerance, even in an era marked by such powerful xenophobic currents? For one, they feared the domestic political backlash from largely immigrant communities in the Northeast and the Midwest. And even the most committed supporters of exclusion recognized the potential diplomatic complications that might arise from insulting large numbers of people around the world.

Two examples illustrate how domestic and international considerations militated against explicit racial outbursts against immigrants in the 1920s. In 1920, as he prepared the foundations of the emergency quota system, Rep. Albert Johnson of Washington state requested firsthand accounts of conditions in Europe from the relevant State Department consuls.

These reports described the unsanitary circumstances of prospective immigrants and warned against the dangers of Bolshevism and anarchism. They reserved special opprobrium for Jewish migrants from Southern and Central Europe. According to the U.S. consul in Rotterdam, “the great mass of aliens passing through Rotterdam at the present time are Russian Poles or Polish Jews of the usual ghetto type.” They were, the consulate reported, “filthy, un-American, and often dangerous in their habits.”

When Johnson surprisingly published the consulates’ unedited observations, many Americans were shocked by the rampant anti-Semitism and barely concealed racism that suffused the remarks. Some of these statements were initially — and erroneously — attributed to Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, who was forced to defend himself in the press. Hughes received a flurry of letters from immigrant aid societies and Jewish organizations decrying the State Department’s racism. Veteran progressive reformer Mary Dreier accused Hughes of acting “to inflame the already dangerous race hatreds existing in this country and [to] create distrust of us among foreign peoples.”

A similar situation unfolded in 1924. As Congress prepared to institutionalize the national origins system that year, members also resolved to exclude Japanese immigrants from the United States. Japanese immigration was severely curtailed by diplomatic agreement in 1907, sparing the Japanese the ignominy of explicit national exclusion. By 1924, however, anti-Japanese sentiment favored including the Japanese in what was by then a near total ban on Asian immigration.


Despite this groundswell of support for such a policy, outright Japanese exclusion remained a political and diplomatic non-starter. Since the 1890s, the Japanese government had successfully fought to prevent the enactment of explicitly anti-Japanese immigration restrictions in the United States and throughout the British Empire, even if that meant yielding to thinly-veiled discrimination. Contrivances like the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement between the Theodore Roosevelt administration and the Japanese reflect the federal government's willingness to downplay overt racism toward Japan to avoid conflict.

Once again, despite substantial testimony about purported Japanese deceptions and undesirability, Congress was forced to conceal its constituents' basest exclusionary impulses — and thanks to the Supreme Court, it had the cover to do so. In November 1922, the court ruled that under the terms of the American immigration and naturalization law, the Japanese were “aliens ineligible for citizenship” since they were neither white nor of African descent. Seizing upon this ruling, Congress included a provision excluding ineligible aliens from the country. The ruse did not fool the Japanese government and press, which protested against this de facto ban, albeit without success.

Even during a period of fierce anti-immigrant sentiment, many supporters of restriction still deemed blatant discrimination at least impolitic and in some cases beyond the pale. Political and diplomatic considerations tended to ameliorate the worst excesses of prominent nativists, who at least tried to disguise their racism.

The potential diplomatic fallout from the president's prejudices are just as dangerous today, as American forces support anti-terrorist operations in the Horn of Africa and the Trans-Saharan region. As insult and derision continues to emanate from the White House, it is important to remember how abnormal and potentially detrimental that is, even by the standards of our most objectionable history.

 **4 Comments**

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