Epilogue

A New Immigration Debate

THE RISE IN IMMIGRATION and its changing composition after 1970 renewed the ambivalence and even hostility that Americans felt toward immigrants. In 1997 Hispanics constituted 11 percent of the population, blacks 12 percent, Asians 4 percent, and whites 73 percent. Hispanics and Asians had been considerably fewer in 1940; indeed, Hispanics constituted only 6.4 percent of the population as late as 1980 and Asians only 1.5 percent. Moreover, given the rate of immigration, averaging about one million annually in the 1990s, and high birth rates among Latinos, projections suggested that by 2050 Hispanics would rise to 25 percent of the population and Asians to 8 percent. Blacks were predicted to grow only to 14 percent, while whites would shrink to a bare majority of the United States population. Sounding much like Theodore Roosevelt during World War I, Patrick J. Buchanan, the national politician most concerned publicly about immigration and the nation's demography, warned in 1994 that the United States was heading for social fragmentation: "If America is to survive as 'one nation, one people,' we need to call a timeout on immigration to assimilate the tens of millions who have lately arrived. . . . We need soon to bring down the curtain on this idea of hyphenated Americanism."

The sluggish economy of the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially in California, helped fuel Americans' fears about the economic effects of immigration. Yet the initial impetus for a new immigration debate and movement to restrict the number of newcomers came from environmentalists, who were dissatisfied that groups like the Sierra Club and Zero Population Growth did not take positions favoring cuts in the migrant flow. They believed that too many people were coming to America and that the country's natural resources could not sustain a population growing at such a rate. When they could not move the mainstream population and environmental organizations, they formed their own groups, the most notable being the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which came into existence in 1979. FAIR had about 70,000 members at the end of the 1990s and offices in both Washington and Los Angeles. It also produced a cable TV program and lobbied Congress to change immigration laws. FAIR was followed by similar groups, such as the Carrying Capacity Network (CCN), Californians for Population Stabilization (CAPS), and Population-Environment Balance (Bal-

ance). Another restrictionist group, the American Immigration Control Foundation (AICF), was organized in 1983. While occasionally referring to the nation's resources, it concentrated on social issues. In the 1990s local restrictionist organizations appeared in California, Florida, Texas, Washington, Arizona, and Chicago. They paid attention to environmental issues, but they also expressed other fears about immigration.

The older nativist organizations, such as the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution, played little role in renewed debates, as did the eugenicists. Recognizing that public racism had fallen into disrepute, the new restrictionists did not use racist arguments, which had been so common at the turn of the century, against recent immigrants. Moreover, the themes of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism were rarely heard, and religion as an issue was muted. Although perhaps 5 percent of the new immigrants were Muslims, restrictionists did not call much attention to this fact.

The new arguments for immigration restriction centered on environmental concerns, economics, faults of the present system, and assimilation issues. Those wanting greater restriction insisted that the nation was growing too large and farms were disappearing; they foresaw shortages of water, farmland, and other resources. Too many people meant too many automobiles on the highways and in cities and too much pollution. Americans have certainly been worried about the environment, and Congress has responded with laws to clean up the nation's water sources and air. But legislators have expressed little interest in the relationship between population driven by immigration and the environment. Thus the new nativists have pointed to other issues. They see a poorly run Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), a porous border between the United States and Mexico, an asylum system being abused, the entrance of immigrant criminals and terrorists, and a Congress unwilling to allocate funds for an efficient system of immigration regulation. Many of these complaints have to do with undocumented immigration. On this issue the restrictionists have much public support; a spokesperson for the National Council of La Raza, who did not believe that legal immigration was too high, remarked, "We are all against illegal immigration." In 1986 Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which outlawed the employment of undocumented immigrants, but the act has not proven effective in controlling illegal immigration. Congress responded again in 1996 and enacted more controls; it also increased funds for border patrols. As for the other complaints about the immigration system, in the 1990s legislators tightened the rules for asylum and prompted the INS to deport more alien criminals.

Yet illegal immigration was not the sole problem for those wanting immigration reduced. After all, said FAIR, the tide of legal immigration was

much higher than the illegal flow. Academics like Vernon Briggs, Jr. of Cornell University insisted that the new mass immigration had an adverse impact on the earnings of low-wage Americans, especially blacks who had not finished high school. Another economist, Donald Huddle, wrote that immigrants were using America's welfare programs without paying their fair share of the cost; the United States spent billions of dollars on them each year. These attacks were echoed by members of CCN, Balance, CAPS, and FAIR, but they did not go unanswered. The pro-immigration lobby, led by the National Immigration Forum, insisted that immigrants were benefiting the United States and that the nation should continue to welcome them. Economic studies were sometimes inconclusive; as a result they provided ammunition for both sides in the debate. Even a 1998 study published by the National Research Council, carried out by a group of distinguished economists for the National Academy of Sciences, did not end the dispute. In fact, both sides claimed that the report supported their view. Two Harvard economists, who were on the Council's panel of experts, felt compelled to set the record straight in an Op Ed article for *The New York Times*. The study, they insisted, demonstrated that immigration had both positive and negative economic impact and that people using the study to demonstrate only the good effects were failing to look at the whole picture. "Overall," they concluded, "the academy report is not a one-sided pro-immigration tract."

In 1994 California became the center of the economics-of-immigration debate. In that year local organizations sponsored Proposition 187, which denied government services to illegal aliens and required officials to report their names to the INS. Most benefits for illegal aliens had already been banned, but the most controversial aspect of the proposition prevented the education of illegal aliens. The Supreme Court had already held that such prohibitions were unconstitutional, but California voters ignored this decision when they approved Proposition 187 by a vote of 59 percent to 41 percent. However, a federal judge enjoined it from being put into law because of the prior Supreme Court decision. In 1998 the judge repeated her decision, and Proposition 187 was virtually dead.

Besides emphasizing economic issues, many new restrictionists insisted that the new immigrants had values so different from those of native-born European Americans that the nation was heading for social fragmentation and conflict. These critics were especially alarmed by Hispanics arriving in large numbers. They talked of an immigration invasion or disaster and wished immigration would return to the low numbers of the 1950s, with Europeans dominating the flow. If changes were not made, the United States would continue on its "Path to National Suicide." They also attacked bilingual education programs and bilingual ballots, which they said retarded the

process of assimilation. Others argued that language was the glue for American civilization, and they wanted to make English the nation's official language. US English, organized by Dr. John Tanton, who was also prominent in founding FAIR, was formed in 1983 to achieve this goal. Twenty-three states adopted laws or propositions saying English was their official language, but these were mainly symbolic gestures and Congress generally ignored the issue. Of course, not all supporters of US English were restrictionists. Newt Gingrich of Georgia, the Speaker of the House of Representatives in the mid-1990s, supported an amendment to the Constitution making English the official language, but he also opposed cuts in immigration.

Buoyed by the vote on Proposition 187, the Republican congressional victories in the 1994 elections, and public opinion polls indicating doubts about immigration, those who wanted substantial cuts in immigration looked to Congress in early 1995 to make changes. Yet they immediately confronted problems. Although Republicans indicated more willingness to reduce immigration than did Democrats, many Republican members approved of current immigration numbers. Some were probusiness and wanted to be able to import laborers, both low-wage unskilled migrants and those with high-tech educations. Other Republicans were unwilling to cut immigration because most newcomers entered under the family preferences of the current system, and these legislators believed that such immigrants had strong family values. Still other politicians did not want additional rules and regulations to burden employers.

Many Democrats agreed with these arguments. In addition, they represented the groups that had used the current system to come to America; obviously cuts were undesirable to these legislators and organizations. The fact that many Democrats and Republicans agreed that cuts were not necessary shows what strange bedfellows the politics of immigration has thrown together. The American Civil Liberties Union worked with the National Rifle Association, both opposing proposals for national identity cards. Advocates of a "loose border" brought together Hispanic groups and the *Wall Street Journal*, which on two occasions came out for an amendment to the constitution saying that "there shall be no borders." The Christian Coalition joined them, saying that family unification was good for America. Low-income blacks probably felt the adverse impact of immigration more than any other group, but African American legislators in Congress worked with the Hispanic Caucus on many issues, including immigration. In this case both groups opposed cuts.

Congress finally passed two laws affecting immigration in late summer 1996. The legislators did not reduce the numbers allowed entry, but instead placed tougher restrictions on asylum and illegal immigration. The INS was

given additional agents and funding, but in general, anti-immigration forces experienced defeat. Dan Stein, the head of FAIR, explained in an open letter to the American people: "Your hopes of reining in uncontrolled immigration were dashed this spring—Congress gutted the long-anticipated Immigration Reform Bill . . . in the end, Congress sold out to the special interests."

More serious for immigrants, current and future, were the 1996 cuts in welfare. Congress eliminated Supplementary Security Income and food stamps for immigrants and gave states more control over what benefits immigrants might receive. Congressional opponents of welfare change and President Bill Clinton immediately worked to undo these cuts, insisting that they were too harsh. In addition, Republican governors suddenly realized that their states would be pressured to pick up the tab when the federal government was no longer willing to support immigrants. As a result, in 1998 Congress restored some benefits and states moved to fill gaps for those immigrants who had entered before the original legislation had passed in 1996.

There was another way for immigrants to remain eligible for federal programs: to become citizens. The Clinton administration had already been encouraging immigrants to identify more closely with the United States by applying for citizenship; then Proposition 187 and congressional proposals and cuts alarmed many newcomers. In 1990 only 250,000 of the newer immigrants had become citizens, but by 1996 the figure was over one million, with projections for still greater numbers ahead. In an effort to meet the demand for citizenship, the INS was overwhelmed and occasionally checked records haphazardly, thereby allowing individuals with criminal pasts to qualify. A number of private agencies aiding the INS proved to be poorly run. Republicans in Congress were annoyed by reports of loose regulations and careless practices, and some pointed to the fact that new Hispanic citizens voted overwhelmingly for Clinton and the Democrats. Moreover, critics of the speeded-up citizenship process said, the beneficiaries did not really accept American values; rather, the new citizens simply wanted to be eligible for federal welfare programs. Responding to this criticism, in 1998 INS began to tighten procedures.

The defeat of more radical proposals and the booming economy of the late 1990s combined to dash the hopes of those who wanted substantial changes in immigration policy. They still looked to the future and insisted that America must reduce the number of newcomers. While their "reforms" were temporarily sidetracked, immigration debates waxed and waned. The 1996 laws were merely the latest round; in the future there would no doubt be similar debates. In a nation with a long history of immigration—with 65 million people having come since 1820—this topic could not remain permanently on the back burner.

How Americans define themselves is in part an immigration issue; the demographic changes the nation was experiencing as the twenty-first century dawned were part of an ongoing process. In the past, anti-immigrationists raised alarms about the changes around them, and most of their worries turned out to be groundless. There is little evidence that the newest immigrants will not assimilate. To be sure, the European component of the population was shrinking, but with so much ethnic and racial mixing occurring, who could predict what the amalgam of Americans would be in the middle of the next century? In any case, the great diversity of the American people makes it a more cosmopolitan and vibrant nation—a place of such sparkle, energy, and creativity that it remains, warts and all, the country to which so many still want to emigrate.