

FIFTY YEARS OF U.S. IMMIGRATION: The Policy Context for Resettlement Work

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For the past fifty years, American public policy has reflected profoundly ambivalent attitudes toward immigration. At the beginning and end of this period, Congress passed strongly anti-immigrant legislation, with more generous laws enacted in between. The future of immigration policy will be determined by how this ambivalence works out.

In the fifty years since its founding, NYANA and other resettlement agencies have received immigrants and refugees who arrived in the United States under a wide variety of entry laws. To appreciate the challenges faced by these agencies, it is essential to understand the shifting legal framework that has defined their clientele.

POST-WAR RESTRICTIONISM

NYANA was founded at a time when official policy sought to restrict the numbers of newcomers allowed into the United States. The basic law governing entry in 1949 was the restrictive National Origins Quota Act of 1924, which favored entry from Northern and Western Europe, severely limited immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, and barred admission totally from Asia. The Act was based on pseudo-scientific theories endorsed by a U.S. Senate Committee headed by William Dillingham of Vermont that held that the Nordic "races" that made up the bulk of immigration for most of the nineteenth century were genetically superior to the Eastern and Southern European and Asian "races" that began to dominate entry to the United States during the 1880s. Strict adherence to the numerical limitations of the 1924 law just before and during World War II resulted in failure by the United States to realize even a fraction of its potential to rescue victims of Hitler's death camps.

Many Americans, led by President Harry Truman, perceived a fundamental contradiction between maintenance of an immigration policy based on unjustifiable evaluations of

comparative racial worth and the ideals for which America fought in defeating Hitler. They forcefully called for an end to national origins quotas as a demonstration that the United States repudiated pernicious racial classifications that had recently engulfed Europe.

The campaign to end quotas, however, failed to roll back a new wave of restrictionism sparked by the traumatic experience of war and the fatigue of a large segment of Americans with engagements abroad. Congress rethought U.S. immigration policy and emerged in 1952 with the McCarran-Walter Act, a law that, although it made many minor changes such as a small entry program for Asians, basically reaffirmed the national origins system of 1924. No longer able to justify this policy on racial grounds, its backers promoted the stability of the United States as their prime rationale for continued targeted entry. The Act also reflected growing Cold War tensions in its strengthening of alien surveillance, imposition of new grounds for excluding newcomers, and expansion of the deportation powers of the government. President Truman vetoed the legislation, explaining, "The greatest vice of the [quota] system is that it discriminates, deliberately and intentionally, against many of the peoples of the world." However, restrictionist sentiment was so powerful in Congress that Truman's vigorous objections were overridden easily.

IRRESISTIBLE FLOWS

Even before the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952, events in the post-war

world dictated that a constricted and racially selective national origins policy would be impossible to maintain. A steady stream of newcomers began to be admitted outside the national origins system.

The first major group to require separate admissions were victims of World War II, especially Holocaust survivors. All over Europe, millions of people had been displaced by the war, and many, particularly uprooted Jews, had no desire to return to their pre-war homes, where neighbors had in many cases participated in their forced expulsion to concentration camps. Hundreds of thousands lived in displaced-persons camps, where nascent international refugee organizations assisted them and sought a permanent solution to their plight. Focused on reconstruction, the leading nations of Western Europe were reluctant to admit newcomers.

American Jewish organizations mobilized to override national origins quotas to secure the admission of Holocaust survivors. They sparked the formation of the Citizens Committee for Displaced Persons (CCDP). Mindful of widespread anti-Semitism, they filled the CCDP's top posts with Christian clergy and civic leadership. They realized that advocacy for entry of any new group, even one comprising victims of the enemy the country had just defeated, would be an extremely difficult task.

The campaign for displaced persons coincided with the onset of the Cold War. Right-wing opponents of admission of war victims looked with much greater favor on the rescue of escapees from the Soviet Union and its allies, especially natives of lands that resisted Soviet rule, such as the Baltics. Victims of Soviet oppression joined people uprooted by World War II in seeking entry to the United States outside the quota system. In response to their plight, Congress passed a Displaced Persons Act in 1948 that contained provisions favoring people in flight from Communism over Holocaust survivors. Much more inclusive legislation was enacted in 1950. Ironically, in their rush to admit refugees from behind the Iron Curtain, U.S. authori-

ties did not carefully check their pasts, resulting in some cases in the entry of Nazi collaborators. As a result of the two displaced-persons measures, over 400,000 newcomers gained entry outside the quota system. The influx of Jewish immigrants to New York resulting from this legislation sparked the formation of NYANA.

The weakness of the quota system was further revealed in 1956 when the Soviet Union invaded Hungary, causing a sizeable refugee flow. Reacting to a combination of ideological sympathy for the Hungarians, guilt at not aiding the resistance to Communist forces, and concern for a humanitarian crisis, President Eisenhower gave parole to about 32,000 Hungarians. Congress retroactively authorized their entry.

A similar scenario was repeated on a larger scale in the early 1960s. Upper- and middle-class victims of Castro's revolution in Cuba sought refuge in the United States, consolidating a new population base in Miami. In the first half of the decade, over 200,000 Cubans crossed into Florida. Originally, this community conceived of itself and was seen by U.S. authorities as temporary residents readying for a reinvasion of their homeland and the overthrow of Castro. The failure of the Bay of Pigs expedition and the settlement terms of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, however, ended overt American efforts to foment a revolution. Cubans were granted permanent residence by an act of Congress, outside the quota system.

THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW IMMIGRATION SYSTEM

By the 1960s, the need for an overhaul of U.S. immigration policy became overwhelming. First, as the cases of the displaced persons, Hungarians, and Cubans made clear, the national origins quotas incorporated in the McCarran-Walter Act simply could not accommodate the immigration flows the United States felt compelled to accept as a national response to the challenges of the modern world. From the moment of its passage, the act was outdated.

Second, national origins quotas could not withstand the pressures for racial and ethnic fairness generated by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. A preference system based on pseudo-scientific racial theories of the 1920s and reaffirmed as explicitly seeking to maintain America's ethnic balance in 1952 clearly clashed with the principle of equality that drove domestic policy during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The landmark Immigration Act of 1965 should be understood not solely as an immigration reform measure but also as companion legislation to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The key accomplishment of the Immigration Act (formally, the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965) was the abolition of national origins quotas. U.S. policy would now treat all countries of the world equally in providing opportunity for their nationals to immigrate. This provision explicitly repudiated the notion that had dominated immigration law for four decades that there exist identifiable human races of differing natural intellectual and occupational capacities. The 1965 Act created uniform admissions standards worldwide, ended all legal discrimination against Asians, and imposed a ceiling for the first time on entry from Latin America.

The consequences of this major shift in immigration policy were unforeseen by its advocates. Congressional and administrative leaders believed that the major effect of the law would be to reopen immigration from European nations, such as Greece and Italy. Through the 1970s and 1980s, however, it became apparent that its greatest impact lay elsewhere. Asian and Latin American immigration rose dramatically as a result of the 1965 legislation, whereas entry from Europe plummeted. Over 85 percent of immigrants now come from Asia or Latin America; less than 15 percent derive from Europe.

The Immigration Act of 1965 also incorporated a preference system that stressed family unification. Spouses and children of citizens and permanent residents, as well as

parents and siblings of citizens, received varying degrees of priority in entering the country. In addition, 20 percent of admissions were reserved for workers who could benefit the American economy, and 6 percent of admissions slots were set aside for refugees, still defined largely as escapees from Communism.

These provisions, together with later amendments, were the major factors spurring the greater numbers of legal immigrants entering the country after 1965. In the 1950s, about 2.5 million newcomers arrived in the United States. This number rose moderately to 3.3 million in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the Immigration Act became fully effective and admissions rose to 4.4 million. The 1980s saw a further significant jump to 7.3 million, a number that will be somewhat exceeded in the 1990s if present trends hold. Only in the first decade of the twentieth century, when nearly 8.8 million immigrants arrived, were post-1965 entry levels surpassed.

The 1965 Act was a genuine landmark in American legislative history in that it decisively altered previous policy. In its wake, American immigration became more numerous, diverse, and family oriented.

REFUGEE CRISES

One problem unresolved by the Immigration Act of 1965 was the growing number of refugees around the world and the pressure some of them exerted on U.S. entry policy. Preferences under the law allowed for only 17,500 refugee admissions annually, a number that experience demonstrated was far too small to meet U.S. humanitarian or foreign policy interests.

Events occurring within a decade of the Act's passage demonstrated its inadequacy. Over 300,000 Cubans continued their exodus between 1965 and 1975; they entered the country under special legal arrangements. In the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, Indochinese who had been associated with American military, diplomatic, or economic efforts faced grave danger from the victorious Communist governments of the region and

had to be admitted on an emergency basis to the United States. About 135,000 Southeast Asian refugees entered the country in 1975. Because of their connections to the American intervention, this wave, compared with its successors, tended to be disproportionately fluent in English, highly educated, Christian, and able to adapt relatively quickly to American society. Still, the United States had no regularized means of admitting them, so that like the Hungarians before them, they were paroled in by the President and had their legal status confirmed retroactively by Congress.

Once this first wave gained admission, refugee flows subsided somewhat for two years, though between 7,000 and 20,000 Indochinese needed parole to enter each year between 1976 and 1978. Then refugee pressures flared again. In 1979, Vietnamese refugees took to the seas in flimsy craft, braving both natural elements and violent pirates to escape their homeland. The United States took in more than 75,000 refugees that year. At the same time, the Soviet Union opened its gates briefly to Jewish refugees; nearly 25,000 found refuge in America. Without a refugee policy, the United States admitted more than 100,000 refugees in 1979.

In 1980, a sharp surge in refugees demanded a radical revision of policy. The crisis of the boat people worsened; more than 160,000 refugees from Indochina were admitted in a single year. The exodus of Soviet Jews continued at the previous year's levels, as more than 28,000 found refuge in the United States. With continuing flows from other regions, total refugee admissions reached over 206,000 in 1980, nearly double the level of the previous year and more than ten times the number that entered in 1977.

The public, already concerned over very high refugee flows, became truly alarmed by a sudden new source of entry: Cubans escaping from the port city of Mariel. Fidel Castro, denounced by the United States and other nations for his refusal to allow exit from his nation, decided to turn the tables on his critics by allowing an uncontrolled outflow. As boats from Miami arrived to pick up relatives, Castro forced them to take additional passen-

gers, including hardened criminals and persons suffering from serious mental defects. U.S. policy collapsed in complete disarray as President Jimmy Carter first offered to accept the Marielitos "with open arms" and then suddenly shut off the flow when its inmate component was revealed. The *Miami Herald*, concerned that the incident would destroy the city's tourist trade, called for the immediate cessation of the boatlift lest, it warned, the country would be overrun by criminals. In fact, about 125,000 Cubans came in during the Mariel episode, less than 10 percent of whom had spent time in Castro's jails and insane asylums.

The government lacked anything approaching an adequate crisis management capacity for the increased refugee and Cuban flows. President Carter had appointed former Senator Dick Clark as U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs early in 1980, but he left the Administration just before the Mariel crisis to join the campaign of Carter's opponent, Senator Edward Kennedy. The Department of Health and Human Services had established an Office of Refugee Resettlement, but in the chaos of the period, the office had five directors within six months. Refugee policy seemed out of control, with no effective federal oversight.

THE REFUGEE ACT OF 1980

In fact, by the time of the Mariel crisis, order was beginning to return to U.S. refugee policy. Responding to the growing need for effective management, Congress passed the landmark Refugee Act of 1980. This law made three major changes in defining refugees and establishing programs to assist them.

First, the Refugee Act brought the definition of a refugee into conformity with international law. Until 1980, U.S. legislation had limited the legal definition of refugees to persons fleeing Communist countries or the Middle East region. The Act replaced this constricted definition by adopting the language of the United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to Refugees that designates as a refugee a person who cannot return to his

or her country due to a "well-founded fear of persecution" on the basis of race, religion, nationality, membership in a social group, or political opinion. Theoretically, anyone forced to flee for political reasons anywhere in the world could now qualify for entry to the United States as a refugee. However, the practical scope of this designation was considerably narrowed later in the Act by the statement that admissions would be targeted to persons "of humanitarian concern" to the nation. This clause allowed the United States to recognize the refugee status of people around the world, but to reserve admissions for opponents of its political enemies, since they were of special interest to the government.

Second, the Refugee Act established a procedure for deciding how many refugees to admit. Before the beginning of each fiscal year, the President would propose the number of refugees to be allowed into the country in the next year, based on an analysis of political danger in various regions of the world. The Administration would then hold a consultation with Congress to evaluate the proposed flow. Finally, the President would announce the final ceiling in the Federal Register. Should a crisis make additional admissions necessary in the middle of a fiscal year, the law allowed for an emergency consultation.

Third, the Act established a series of federal programs, with participation by the states, for the domestic resettlement of new refugee arrivals. These programs included cash and medical assistance and training that aimed to help refugees achieve self-sufficiency as quickly as possible.

The Impact of the Refugee Act

The Refugee Act of 1980 had an immediate and profound impact on American refugee policy, bringing order to the chaotic situation of 1980. Whether it also stifled the nation's capacity to respond to refugee emergencies has been an issue of sharp debate since its passage.

Almost immediately, the procedures for setting levels of entry regularized the flow of

refugees. Admissions dipped below 160,000 in 1981, declined further to below 100,000 in 1982, and remained steady at about 60,000 to 70,000 per year throughout the rest of the 1980s. An increase in refugees from the former Soviet Union pushed the number back over 100,000 in 1989, peaking at 132,000 in 1992, but levels again reached about 75,000 in 1996 and 1997. The consultation mechanism has steadied the flow, avoiding the sharp jump that caused the crisis of 1980.

The requirement that refugees gaining admissions be "of humanitarian concern" to the United States has resulted in limiting resettlement to a few national groups. More than one-half of all refugee admissions since the new wave began in 1975 have come from Indochina, whereas close to a quarter have fled the Soviet Union and its successor republics. In 1996, well after the demise of the Soviet Union, Indochinese made up nearly 20,000 and Russian speakers almost 30,000 of the 75,000 refugees admitted that year. More than a million Cubans have arrived since 1960 in a closely related program. Thus, although the Cold War may have ended diplomatically, it has continued to shape U.S. resettlement policy.

Three reasons account for the continued domination of refugee intake by flows that began during the Cold War. First, proposals for refugee admissions originate in the State Department and reflect foreign policy interests. Refugees come largely from nations that have been historical enemies of the United States, including residual flows after the cessation of hostilities. Second, refugee policy is heavily influenced by domestic politics. In recent history, Jews and Cubans are the only populations that have followed up their advocacy for refugee status for co-ethnics abroad with real political muscle. In support of acceptance of Indochinese refugees, the aftermath of the Vietnam War uniquely united conservatives who wished to aid the flight of escapees from Communism and liberals who sought compassion for victims of the conflict.

But a third factor needs consideration as well: Cubans, Soviet Jews (as well as

Pentacostals), and Indochinese all had strong claims to refugee status. Anti-Semitism persisted in Russia and the other successor republics even after the collapse of the Soviet regime. The Communist governments of Cuba and Southeast Asia continued to punish political dissent. These were populations facing persecution who were of clear humanitarian interest to the United States.

Serious questions have arisen about the capacity of the United States to respond to refugee emergencies in other parts of the world. Although some new groups were added to the refugee stream, such as Bosnians, whose admission numbers rose from 1,887 in 1993 to 21,357 in 1997, basically immigration policy remained focused on the groups that had dominated inflow since passage of the Act in 1980. Africa, the continent with by far the largest number of refugees, accounted for less than 9 percent of admissions to the United States in 1997.

Charges of inequities in U.S. refugee policy focus on the treatment of people in flight from the Central American civil wars of the 1980s. These conflicts were caused in large measure by struggles over land and access to economic resources so that political and economic motives were closely intertwined in migrants' decisions to leave. Their advocates in the United States have stressed factors coercing their departure, such as repression and the danger of living in militarily contested areas, and demanded asylum for this population, whereas the government has described their exodus as a search for economic opportunity and denied them political refuge. Similarly, Haitians sought asylum but were defined as economic migrants; the U.S. Coast Guard established a special program to intercept their boats on the high seas and return them to Haiti.

Some of these groups benefited from legislative relief that never amounted to full refugee status. Some Haitians acquired residence in the United States in 1986. In 1990, Congress created "Temporary Protected Status," which allowed people who would face danger due to war or anarchy in their homelands to remain in the United States tempo-

rarily until the emergency subsided. This status was extended to Salvadorans in 1990 and in later years to other Central Americans, as well as nationals of other places in turmoil, such as Lebanon, Liberia, and Kuwait. In 1997, Nicaraguans were granted legal status, while other Central Americans could apply to stay permanently, but without guarantees on the outcome of their cases.

The sum of these legislative developments is that the United States now has a two-tier refugee system. Those admitted under the Refugee Act receive full legal protection as well as government-funded programs to facilitate their integration. Others receive only temporary protection, with uncertain prospects for permanent residence and no resettlement assistance. The Refugee Act has proven a humane and effective instrument for those who receive its protection, but the narrow scope of groups it has served has raised serious questions about its capacity to guide a truly humanitarian refugee policy.

CHANGES IN IMMIGRATION LAW

Simultaneous with these changes in refugee policy, important alterations took place throughout the 1980s and 1990s in immigration policy. Trends in the law generally mirrored the economic and social climate of the times.

The early 1980s were a period of simultaneous inflation and high unemployment. The public worried about future employment prospects and about the capacity of government to make a positive difference in their lives. Indicative of this concern was the widespread belief that immigration policy was out of control as public authorities seemed incapable of stemming the tide of illegal entry. Widely circulated estimates of the undocumented population ranged up to twelve million, while more scholarly appraisals gauged the number at a still-high two to four million.

In response to these concerns, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which aimed to curtail illegal immigration by fining employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers. IRCA

also authorized the legalization of the undocumented population residing continuously in the country since before 1982, as well as some agricultural workers, a provision that allowed nearly 2.8 million persons to gain legal status. In practice, the legalization provisions of IRCA were much more successful in achieving their goals than the employer sanctions. Early versions of IRCA also included proposals to reduce family-based immigration, but changes in legal entry of any kind were dropped from the final version of the legislation.

IRCA became law in 1986, just as the economic constraints that spurred its passage were dissipating. The late 1980s were a period of economic growth and widespread optimism. One manifestation of new-found public confidence was passage of the Immigration Act of 1990, which expanded the numbers of immigrants allowed into the United States, especially highly educated contributors to the economy and relatives of permanent residents, and added a new entry category designed to increase the diversity of source countries of newcomers.

The 1990 Act passed just as the buoyant economy that lay behind its support was going into a decline. Like IRCA, it demonstrated that short-term economic goals are difficult to achieve through immigration policy. Together, the 1986 and 1990 legislation continued a trend stretching back a quarter-century to the 1965 Immigration Act of openness to legal entry.

The 1996 Reversal

Legislation passed in 1996 reversed the momentum of welcoming policies. The Welfare Act (formally known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996) and Immigration Act (The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996) together constituted the most restrictionist legislation passed in the United States since 1952.

The Welfare Act of 1996 barred all legal immigrants in the United States from receiving food stamps and Supplemental Security

Income (SSI), a particularly important program for the elderly and disabled poor. In addition, it disqualified those who arrived after the Act was signed into law—August 22, 1996—from receiving non-emergency Medicaid or family assistance for their first five years in the country, and, depending on their families' income, probably after that period as well. Refugees were exempted from these cuts for five years, after which they were to be treated like other legal immigrants. So great were the cuts in service specifically aimed at newcomers that they accounted for 44 percent of the \$54.2 billion that the Welfare Act aimed to save over five years.

The Welfare Act sparked sharp protests across the country that emanated from two sources. Legal immigrants receiving public assistance, particularly the elderly who were dependent on SSI, protested the unfairness of having their basic means of support taken from them. Second, states expressed great concern that immigrants losing federal benefits would turn to state and local governments for needed aid, thus placing on them a huge burden they did not wish to assume. This pressure drove Congress, in the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, to restore SSI eligibility for immigrants already receiving benefits when the Act was signed into law, as well as for those in the country on the date who become disabled in the future. The period of exemption from SSI cuts for refugees was extended from five to seven years to give them time to acquire citizenship and assure that there would be no gap in their SSI eligibility.

States also made up for some of the loss in eligibility for federal assistance. The 1996 Act allowed states to disqualify arrivals before August 22, 1996 from Medicaid and family assistance, but none with large immigrant populations chose this option. Some states created their own programs to make up for the loss of food stamps. New York, for example, purchased food stamps with its own funds for elderly, young, and disabled legal immigrants, as long as they were in the country before the signing of the law, had not

moved out of their home counties, and had applied, if eligible, for citizenship. Just under half of New York's income-eligible immigrant population was able to continue on food stamps through this provision, which was not a permanent program, but needed to be renewed in the state budget every year. Federal legislation passed in 1998 extended food stamp coverage nationally to elderly, disabled, and child immigrants.

The effect of the legislation passed in 1996 and 1997, together with actions taken by many states, is to draw a sharp line between legal immigrants who arrived before and after August 22, 1996. Those in the country before that date retain eligibility for Medicaid, family assistance, most forms of SSI, and some food stamps or other nutritional programs. Those arriving after that date do not qualify for any of these benefits. As August of 1996 recedes farther into the past, a growing proportion of newcomers will lose access to the social safety net, creating great vulnerability to the health and income effects of illness, injury, or job loss.

Immigration Reversals

The Immigration Act of 1996 also expressed an attitude of suspicion toward new immigrants. Although its full title suggests that it aims primarily to curtail undocumented entry, the primary targets of its harshest provisions are, in fact, legal immigrants.

The Act mandates deportation for any legal immigrant who has committed an "aggravated felony," defined as any offense carrying a jail sentence of at least one year, even if the crime was committed long in the past or the sentence was suspended. With recent inflation in jail sentencing, relatively minor crimes such as a repeat turnstile jump or shoplifting can result in forced exit from the country, at the price of splitting families and loss of livelihood. The first effect of this provision has been the arrest at the border of legal immigrants returning to the United States after a visit abroad whose computer check reveals a past conviction, sometimes

decades old, after which they have lived exemplary lives. The legislation greatly raises the vulnerability of legal immigrant status.

The 1996 Act significantly raises the difficulty of contesting an order of deportation. It also bars judicial review of most deportation decisions, part of a more general Congressional campaign to strip courts of jurisdiction over administrative decisions.

Another provision of the Act severely limits the due process rights of people who arrive at the border and claim asylum because they would face persecution if returned home. Under the new rules, anyone coming to a port of entry without valid documents can be summarily excluded from the country. People asserting asylum claims must convince an inspector on the spot that they have a credible fear of persecution, though they might be traumatized by their plight or exhausted from a long journey. Standard procedures to protect rights in judicial settings such as the advice of counsel and the opportunity to observe proceedings to ensure their fairness are not allowed in these cases.

Yet another section of the 1996 Act requires sponsors of new immigrants to assume full financial responsibility for newcomers they bring into the country. Failure to provide reasonable food or shelter exposes the sponsor to legal proceedings either by the government or by the immigrant. It is reasonable to expect sponsors to provide for newcomers and the great majority of them do. However, cases in which immigrants develop serious medical conditions that are extremely costly to treat could entail financial ruin. No safety net protects sponsors from the consequences of chronic illness or injury.

Finally, the Act seeks to cut illegal immigration through an increase in the staff and equipment of the border patrol, the erection of a fence along sections of the border, and a crackdown on smuggling rings.

The Challenge of Citizenship

Immediately following the legislative setbacks of the immigration and welfare reform

laws, a new immigration crisis arose: a massive backlog in completing applications for citizenship.

In 1995, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) launched Citizenship USA, an effort to act on all naturalization applications within six months. The Service assumed that all fingerprint records it sent to the FBI to check whether applicants had criminal pasts would be handled within four months. Some background investigations were never completed, however, with the result that nearly 2,000 immigrants improperly received citizenship.

Restrictionists in Congress pounced on this error, demanding that procedures be fully revamped and ordering several simultaneous management reviews of the agency. While investigations and planning proceeded, citizenship processing around the country ground to a near halt. This delay coincided with the highest rates of demand for citizenship ever, with applications exploding from just over 200,000 in 1991 to nearly 1.8 million in 1997. As a result of skyrocketing applications at the very time the processing system broke down, the waiting period between filing an application and acquiring citizenship grew to over two years and the nationwide backlog reached over two million people.

Citizenship is not just another government service; it is the essence of American democracy. Rule by the consent of the governed means that everyone eligible must have a voice in shaping public decisions, or the quality of democratic governance suffers. Unless naturalization efforts regain operations coherence, the interests of all Americans will suffer serious harm.

THE NEXT FIFTY YEARS

In the fifty years since NYANA's founding, Americans have revealed profoundly ambivalent attitudes toward immigration. At

the beginning and end of the period, Congress passed sharply anti-immigrant legislation, in the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 and the Welfare and Immigration Acts of 1996. In between, generous legislation was enacted, including the Immigration Acts of 1965 and 1990, and refugees gained admission at levels exceeding 70,000 per year throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Public opinion polling reflects this ambivalence. Surveys asking the public whether general immigration levels should be altered almost always elicit wide backing for reducing the number of newcomers allowed into the country. But when asked whether individual immigrants benefit the country and should gain admission for particular reasons, such as to escape persecution, improve their futures, or unify their families, the majority of Americans respond positively. Americans seemingly love immigrants, but hate immigration.

The future of immigration policy depends on how this ambivalence works out. The 1996 legislation revealed the negative side of American attitudes. The Welfare Law conceived of immigrants as welfare cheats, and the Immigration Law and citizenship delays portrayed them as dangerous criminals from whom the nation needs to be protected.

At the same time, the Immigration Acts of 1965 and 1990 conceived of immigrants as mutually supporting family members or as skilled contributors to the economy. Refugee admissions target a population escaping oppression and finding freedom in the United States.

Future policy will be determined by the interplay of these conflicting visions. Immigrants will continue to need resettlement help, citizenship services, acculturation to the American and Jewish communities, and protection from nativist forces. These challenges will shape NYANA's agenda for the next half-century.