In Character
Winter 2005

Coming to America: A Look Into What Drives Immigration

by Jason L. Riley

Fourteen years ago, pursuant to Section 132 of the Immigration Act of 1990, the United States set up what is today known as the Diversity Immigrant Visa Lottery. The theory was that millions world-wide pine to live here, but lack the family or job connections necessary for citizenship. What they needed to reach Lady Liberty, it was determined, was a helping hand from Lady Luck.

Congress had abolished country quotas back in 1965, effectively ending the European dominance of U.S. immigration that already had begun to wane after the Great Depression. Over the next twenty-five years, mostly Latin Americans and Asians came instead. The intent of the new lottery, to be held annually, was to buck this trend and further diversify the stock of newcomers. The government would make available by random selection forty thousand green cards. The winners could start their lives over in America.

The State Department established a one-week period in 1991 – from 12:01 a.m. on October 14, to 11:59 p.m. on October 20 – during which individuals could apply by mail. The time and date constraints would be strictly enforced; mail arriving before or after this period would be discarded. A post office box in Merrifield, Virginia, was rented to receive the applications. The department's Bureau of Consular Affairs told the United States Postal Service to expect around five million responses. Close to twenty-four million arrived.

Stories abound regarding the jockeying that's occurred over the years to fill the relatively few slots available. Statistically, you have better chance of becoming a Phi Beta Kappa Harvard University graduate. That's why mob scenes at post offices around the globe are not uncommon. And it's why there were riots in Sierra Leone in 1996 after thousands of lottery forms were dumped into the sea by government officials. Civil unrest over the program has also occurred in Cuba, where Fidel Castro has refused to authorize citizens to register for the lottery since 1998. In places like Albania, venal consulate officials and others claiming to have an inside track on the process reportedly have swindled untold thousands. Even aliens already in the U.S. have been targets of lottery fraud, according to a General Accounting Office report.

Over time the government has tweaked the program here and there. The number of visas available has risen to fifty thousand. The application period has been extended to sixty days. You can apply only once each year, and a formula is used to give preference to countries – mostly in Europe and Africa – that have had relatively low levels of immigration in the previous half-decade. People from nations deemed "overrepresented" in America – China, India, Vietnam, Mexico, and a few others – can't participate. The last significant change occurred in 2003, when the State Department announced that henceforth all applications would have to be filed electronically in an effort to reduce not only paperwork but the advantage enjoyed by those applying from inside the United States.

Since 2000, applications have averaged more than eleven million annually. Even 9/11 didn't dent the program's popularity. An odd band of U.S. critics – economic protectionists, zero-population-growth zealots, nativists, political demagogues – have persisted over the years in trying to scotch the lottery, insisting that immigration should be limited to refugees, relatives of those already here, or professionals with special skills. But many of the same critics also complain about an excess of illegal immigration. And they don't want to acknowledge that the way to reduce the flow of illegals is to expand legal channels, not constrict them. Nevertheless, the lottery helps us understand the amazing appeal of the United States, the extent to which our society and our political traditions embody the aspirations and help to fulfill the purposes of people around the globe.

.....

A 2002 paper published by the Population Reference Bureau, which tracks migration trends, notes that "in 1800 Europe had 20 percent of the world's nearly one billion residents, while the Americas had 3 percent." In the two subsequent centuries, say the authors, Europeans in search of economic opportunity and religious and political freedom emigrated to North and South America. As a result, today "Europe has just 12 percent of the world's six billion people while North and South America together have about 14 percent."

Only five major countries – the United States, Canada, Australia, Israel, and New Zealand – officially welcome immigrants as permanent residents. And the roughly eight hundred thousand admitted each year by the United States is four times more than the next most welcoming nation, Canada. In an important book published last year, *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What It Means to Be American*, Tamar Jacoby explains that their reasons for coming to the U.S. have remained largely the same. "Like most immigrants in the past," writes Jacoby, "the overwhelming majority of today's brand-new arrivals know why they have come to the United States: to make a better life for themselves and their children by becoming American." She elaborates on their aim, their purpose:

> Most foreigners, whether they arrive legally or illegally, come to the United States to work. Most do not come in the expectation of living on welfare: most are not entitled to most kinds of benefits for at least five years. Thanks to modern technology, they generally know from other immigrants who have preceded them from their regions whether or not work is available. And in economic downturns, when there are fewer jobs to be had, fewer immigrants seem to make the trip. After all, if you're going to be unemployed, it's much better to be unemployed at home than in the United States. It's usually warmer at home and less expensive to live, and you are likely to be surrounded by a network of supportive family and friends. So while technically three-quarters of American immigrant visas are given out on the basis of family ties, the lion's share of foreigners who come to the United States get a job – or two or three jobs – and work hard at it.

.....

Marie Duffus, currently of Flatbush, Brooklyn, one of New York City's more difficult neighborhoods, is certainly working hard at it. She came here in 1999 at age thirty-four. Asked why, she pauses for a moment and then begins to answer. Duffus was born in Kingston, Jamaica, and growing up, she says, "life was great. My parents owned their own shop. We also owned farm animals. We weren't short of anything. We had a washing machine, a microwave, a gas stove, everything." But by 1999, she also had two daughters and was estranged from their father. "You would see people coming from America, telling you what life was like there, how great it was," she says. "I thought my kids would have more opportunities here, especially with regard to getting an education. I really want to see my kids go to college, and I can't pay college tuition in Jamaica."

A former seamstress, Duffus found work as a caregiver in New York and began to save. Eighteen months later, she sent for her girls, the older of whom recently won a scholarship to an all-girls Catholic high school, where she's now a freshman. The mother says she knows she's done right by her children, but she still misses home sometimes. "I miss the warm beaches and the cool breezes and the fresh fruit," says Duffus. She also misses the customs. "In Jamaica, when you feel sick, you don't even have to take up a telephone. You just tell your child to go tell a neighbor that you're not feeling well. Suddenly, people will be bringing you dinner. You're so loved."

.....

It's politics rather than economics that explains why Alex Tsalikhin now calls America his home. Ask Tsalikhin, forty-three, why he immigrated, and he responds in a tone betraying his suspicion that the questioner doesn't have all his marbles. "I'm from Russia," he says, as if there's nothing more to say. But pressed to elaborate, he does. Unlike the Duffuses, Tsalikhin's family belonged to the social elite. His father, now deceased, was a physician in St. Petersburg, where his mother was employed as a college professor.

The Tsalikhins, however, also happened to be Jewish, and when Alex emigrated in 1990 – his mother left three years later – anti-Semitism was rampant in the collapsing Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev, who would begin moving the communist country toward democracy, had come to power five years earlier. State control of information was easing, and many Russians got glimpses of what life was really like in the rest of the world – and

particularly in the West – for the first time.

But Tsalikhin, a sculptor, stresses that he craved artistic freedom more than anything. The government had a program for artists, but you had to join the union. Russia forbade him from earning a living as a sculptor outside of state channels. “They had a law that said, ‘If you don’t work, you go to prison,’” he explains. “I was an artist and a musician. It was a dangerous situation. The police visited me several times. The artistic community there at the time was underground.”

He has returned to Russia twice in the past fourteen years for visits, but he says he’d never go back permanently:

> I’m an American citizen now. I like it. Russia changes all the time. I love my country but it’s very unpredictable. I have a son who’s twenty-three. He’s been to Russia twice, but I’m glad he’s an American. He has more opportunities here. Here, we have freedom of choice for everything. Open business, not open business. Live in the street, or buy a house. Freedom of choice.

These days, you’ll find Tsalikhin exercising his freedom to pursue his artistic ambitions from his house in Fort Lee, New Jersey.

.....

Religion and politics have played an even more prominent role in the immigration experience of Chung-Wha Hong and her family, though in a way that no one could have guessed thirty-one years ago when her father made his way to the United States from Korea for what he thought would be just a sojourn.

By day, Hong is the advocacy director of the New York Immigration Coalition, an umbrella outfit for some one hundred and fifty groups throughout the Empire State that agitate for all manner of left-wing causes on behalf of immigrants and refugees. A committed activist with a slight build and no-nonsense demeanor, Hong often uses terms like “social justice” in discussing her work. But the militancy softens considerably when this native of Korea and mother of two starts to reveal her personal story. In the telling, we get not only another example of purpose-driven migration to the United States, but we also see the potentially positive impact it can have on the countries from which people emigrate.

Hong was born in Taegu, a large city at the southern end of the Korean peninsula. Her mother brought the family to America in 1977, when she was eleven and her brothers were nine and seven. Her father had moved to the States three years earlier on a scholarship sponsored by a church group that offered international students an opportunity to study at an American theological seminary. His stay was supposed to be temporary, but the church didn’t want him to leave and kept renewing the scholarship year after year. Korean congregations in the United States needed Korean-speaking ministers with credentials that it is hard to find among U.S. citizens. At the urging of a Korean professor who said the children would have more educational opportunities here, Hong’s father eventually sent for the rest of his family.

“Just to give you an idea of where Korea was at the time,” says Hong,

> For the entire three years that we were separated from our father we never talked to him on the phone. Making international calls was a privilege that most people couldn’t afford. I remember taping messages to my dad and mailing them, so he could listen to them on cassette. We were still watching black and white TV’s, and we didn’t have a refrigerator. Korea was going through a huge industrial revolution. This was in Seoul in the seventies. And it wasn’t as if we were dirt poor. We were kind of average, even middle-class.

.....

The family moved into the housing projects of St. Louis, Missouri, which they considered a major quality-of-life improvement. “For starters, it was a three bedroom,” says Hong. “So the whole family was no longer sleeping in one room.” After a year or so they headed to Massachusetts because, she says, “Koreans are very enamored with Harvard, and my father thought that if we moved to Boston the kids would have better chance of going to Harvard.” Alas, Hong ended up attending the University of Pennsylvania; one brother ended up at Trinity College; and the other, in one of the surest signs of assimilation, wound up quitting college to become a website designer.

The trajectory of the parents is no less striking. Hong’s mother, who was also a minister, enrolled in an English-language class and a job-training program in Boston shortly after they relocated there. While holding down full-time work, she began taking courses at Boston University’s theological seminary, where she got her master’s degree and was ordained as a Methodist minister. “There weren’t many Korean women ministers ordained,” explains her daughter, “and it also meant the Methodist church had an obligation to place her. You’re guaranteed a job if you’re good enough to be ordained.” Hong adds proudly, “It’s also rare for a Korean woman to be heading a mostly white rural church, but she’s doing it today in Connecticut, and she regularly speaks at national church women’s conferences.”

Hong’s father’s experience here, meanwhile, radicalized him politically, says Hong. The Korea he left in the seventies was run by a military dictatorship that tortured and imprisoned leaders of democratic movements. “He got politicized in the United States,” she says. “The intellectual and political freedom appealed to him. It changed his life. Ever since, he’s been devoted to political activism.” In 1987, after more than a decade, he returned home to use his ministry to promote democracy. “Dad took it as a personal mission to go back to Korea and try to change things there,” says Hong.

> It’s kind of ironic. He wanted to stay [in America] and bring us here because of the freedom he enjoyed, but ultimately that led him back to Korea. Now he’s a full-time activist and religious leader there. Human rights, labor, antiwar, reunification. Korea has such a small activist circle that once you work on one issue, you’ve got to work on all of them.

.....

Stuart Anderson has been a close follower of U.S. immigration policy since the early 1990s, when he worked at a think tank in Washington, D.C. Later he served on the staff of Spencer Abraham, at the time, a Republican Senator from Michigan who headed an influential immigration subcommittee. Anderson plies his trade mostly anonymously, mastering public policy arcana and its implications, so he can explain it to politicians and journalists.

These days, Anderson runs the **National Foundation for American Policy**, which he founded in 2003 because “I felt there was a need for a group on the right of the political spectrum to focus on immigration and trade issues in a very empirical way. I wanted to take market principles and apply them to those issues using empirical research on the different aspects, the different costs and benefits.” He adds, “I felt that the folks who opposed immigration were, quite frankly, much more active in getting their viewpoint in the press.”

Anderson’s view of what brings skilled workers to the U.S. is informed by, among other things, his experience on Capital Hill setting up hearings for immigrants to testify before lawmakers setting the policies. “Why do they come?” asks Anderson.

> The key word is opportunity, and opportunity may be different for different people. For some of the people who are high-skilled professionals, what I found is that it wasn’t an opportunity so much to come here and make more money. I think a lot of these people are driven by an interest to work at the cutting edge, whether it’s in polymers or chips or whatever. The main reason was they wanted to work somewhere they’d be at the top of their field. These aren’t economic hardship cases.

.....

His concern is that the U.S. will start limiting entry of these individuals, who often come first for school and then stay to work, and that other nations will benefit in our stead from their knowledge and skills. "If the U.S. limits student admissions, denies applications, makes it too difficult for people to come, they'll find opportunities elsewhere in the world, like in Canada or England or Japan."

When Anderson made those remarks, he had Silicon Valley and the largely-immigrant driven tech boom of the 1990s in mind. But he just as easily could have been discussing someone like Kishan Koul, a sixty-three-year-old Indian immigrant who first came to America four decades ago. Originally from Srinegar, a city in the Himalayas near the Pakistan border, Koul describes a rather comfortable upbringing. The son of a prominent surgeon, he studied engineering at one of the countries oldest universities. Upon graduating, he moved to Calcutta and joined one of the world's top multinationals, Union Carbide, as a junior executive. "At the time, they were growing quite fast, so that's where I stayed for a couple years," he recalls. "Then one day the boss said to me, 'Kishan, we've given you all the promotions we can with an Indian degree, so why don't you go to the U.S., get a masters, and double your salary?' That was the reason I came to the United States. It was 1965."

Koul wound up at Massachusetts Institute of Technology at a time when the space program was in full swing. His plan had been to get the degree and go back to India. The plan changed. "I was young and I got an opportunity to get involved in the most exciting field at the time, material science," he says. "This was the time when they developed a curriculum where they would integrate physicists, chemists, metallurgists, ceramists – all of them together in one place – and develop a new knowledge base called material science. My professor was one of the leaders in the field."

His last visit home was in 1989. Koul and his wife have two grown daughters, whom he describes in a mildly annoyed way as "very different, all-American." He lives in Massachusetts and still does consulting work. As was the case with Chung-Wha Hong's and so many other immigrant families, priorities shifted, purposes changed. Life simply took a detour that he didn't expect. "I didn't come here to immigrate," says Koul. "I had no reason to immigrate. I just got distracted."

.....

In his book *Who Are We?*, Harvard historian Samuel Huntington writes that the causes of immigration to America "are found in the demographic, economic, and political dynamics of the sending country and the economic, political, and social attractions of the United States." And nowhere is this more applicable at the turn of the twenty-first century than with respect to immigrants from Latin America. The Duffuses, Tsalikhins, Hongs, and Kouls are not unrepresentative of who's here today and why, but they are much less consequential to the future makeup of the country than those coming via our southern border.

In 2000, Mexican immigrants made up around 28 percent of the total foreign-born population in the United States. The next largest groups, Chinese and Filipinos, amounted to about 5 percent and 4 percent, respectively. Huntington elaborates on this disparity:

> In the 1990s, Mexicans also were over one-half of the Latin American immigrants to the United States, and Latin Americans were about one-half the total immigrants to the continental United States between 1970 and 2000. Hispanics, 12 percent of the total U.S. population in 2000 (two-thirds of Mexican origin), increased by almost 10 percent from 2000 to 2002 and became more numerous than blacks. It is estimated they will constitute up to 25 percent of the population by 2040.

For most of U.S. history, immigration from Latin America was negligible. "The 1924 immigration act did not impose quotas on Western Hemisphere countries, and for years the border was unpatrolled," notes Michael Barone in *The New Americans*. "People would cross the river in the Lower Rio Grande Valley to work in the Texas fields during the day and then return to their homes in Mexico at night, or they might live in Texas; no one outside the area much cared, for there was no mass migration any farther north."

Today, of course, that's no longer the case. Today, terms like "Mexifornia" and "Mexizona" are common, and it looks like "Mexichusetts" and "Mexisota" soon will be as well. But the purpose of the migration hasn't changed, nor has the fact that the income gap between the U.S. and Mexico is the widest of any two contiguous nations on earth. The Mexicans coming to the United States are still, by and large, economic refugees seeking a better return on their human capital. And they are doing what anyone who understands labor markets would expect.

Frank Sharry is a veteran observer of U.S. immigration and the various forces that drive it. In the late-1970s, he worked in Southeast Asia, interviewing Vietnamese boat people who wanted to come to the United States. In the early eighties, he worked to resettle the Mariel Cubans who came from Castro's prisons, and later, to help Nicaraguans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans and other Central American immigrants who settled in the Boston area.

"We talk in this country about the distinction between political refugees and economic migrants," says Sharry, now executive director of the National Immigration Forum, an advocacy group based in Washington. "But what's happened, particularly in Mexico and in Central America, is that the structure of local communities and economies now depends on migration." In the high-sending regions of Latin America – places like the central and southern Mexican states of Michoacan and Guerrero – the understanding is that you reach a certain age and then you migrate. Sharry says that in eastern El Salvador, another high-emigration locale, it's increasingly difficult to find young men and women. "These regions now have a tradition to this effect," he says. "It's family networks. You have someone [in the U.S.] who can help you when you arrive, so you come up here and work. You come up here because you know you can't survive at home. You can't sustain a family. There's no land. There's no job. There's not enough to go around. So you do what most people in your community have done. Go north and work."

Today's immigration debate is fundamentally an argument about the Latino flow and whether it behooves us to try and dam it off or absorb it. Some sound alarms that the Mexican influx is unique and that it soon will have American culture slouching toward Guatemala. Others counter that the elites of yesteryear made the same predictions about the inability of the Irish and Italians to assimilate. Meanwhile, our politicians are split between those eager to battle the forces of supply and demand, and those who want to construct a regulatory regime for foreign workers that's in tune with the realities of the U.S. economy.

For the immigrants, themselves, however, much of this rhetoric is just background noise. The very fact that they've chosen to uproot and cross a national border in the first place – something less than 3 percent of the world's population chooses to do – is evidence of unique mettle and determination. All of which is impressive, even inspirational. And insofar as their experience helps put to rest fanciful notions of political and moral relativism, the idea that every society is equally suited to allowing men and women to follow their dreams, it is also educational and clarifying. Immigrants come to the United States because they ache to live as they choose, to pursue their own purposes, and we remain the world's foremost tribune of freedom and opportunity. It's a testament to America's standing in the world. Even better, it's an indication that we're still winning the global battle for talent and human capital that will keep us competitive and financially fit for generations to come.

.....

Jason L. Riley is a senior editorial writer at *The Wall Street Journal*.