The Immigration Pause of 1924–1965: A Foundation for American Unity and Prosperity

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Executive Summary

Between 1924 and 1965, the United States enacted the most consequential immigration restriction in its history—a policy that allowed the nation to assimilate more than 20 million immigrants from the Great Wave of 1880–1920, created unprecedented economic prosperity for American workers, and forged national unity that proved essential during the trials of the Great Depression and World War II. This report examines the legislation that created this "Great Pause," its dramatic impact on immigration rates, the successful assimilation that occurred during this period, and the consequences of its termination in 1965.

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1. The Legislative Framework: Creating the Immigration Pause

1.1 Pre-Restriction Immigration: The Great Wave (1880–1920)

The decades preceding the 1920s immigration restrictions witnessed unprecedented migration to American shores. Between 1880 and 1920, over 23 million immigrants entered the United States[1]. This represented the largest foreign-born percentage in American history—14.7% of the U.S. population in 1910[2].

Pre-World War I immigration averaged approximately 861,500 annually from all countries combined, with 175,983 from Northern and Western Europe and 685,531 from other regions, primarily Southern and Eastern Europe[3]. During the peak years of 1900–1914, Italian immigration alone averaged 210,000 per year, totaling 2.9 million Italians[4]. By 1920, more than 4 million Italians had arrived and represented over 10% of the nation's foreign-born population[5].

1.2 The Emergency Quota Act of 1921

The first major legislative brake on mass immigration was the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 (Johnson Quota Act). Signed on May 19, 1921, this law established, for the first time, numerical limits on the number of immigrants who could enter the United States[6]. Annual quotas for each country were set at 3% of the number of foreign-born persons from that nationality residing in the United States according to the 1910 census[7]. The total

annual ceiling for all immigration was set at 357,802 immigrants—less than half the 805,228 admitted in 1920[8]. Immigration levels dropped to 309,556 in 1921–22, a dramatic reduction principally affecting Southern and Eastern Europe[9].

1.3 The Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson–Reed Act)

On May 24, 1924, President Calvin Coolidge signed the Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson–Reed Act)[10]. This legislation became the defining immigration law for four decades.

Main provisions:

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- **Reduced quotas**: Cut annual quotas from 3% (1910 census) to 2% (1890 census)[11] **Total immigration cap**: Initially set at 165,000 annually, later reduced to 150,000 in 1927[12]
- **Preferential allocation**: Used 1890 census data before significant Southern/Eastern European immigration
- **Visa system**: Prospective immigrants required to apply for visas at U.S. consulates abroad[13]
- **Asian exclusion**: Effectively barred immigration from Asian countries

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2. Statistical Impact: From Mass Migration to Manageable Immigration

2.1 Immediate Reduction in Immigration Flows

Immigration levels before and after restriction legislation:

Period	Annual Immigration	Source
1901–1914 average	878,000	[14]
1920	805,228	[15]
1921 (after Emergency	560,000	[16]
1921–1922	309,556	[17]
1924 (pre-Act)	706,896	[18]
1925 (post-Act)	294,000	[19]
1929	280,000	[20]

Table 1: Immigration levels before and after restriction legislation

Total immigration fell from 707,000 in 1924 to 294,000 in 1925—a reduction of 58% in a single year[21]. By 1929, immigration had declined to 280,000 annually, representing an 80% reduction from pre-restriction levels[22].

2.2 The 40-Year Immigration Pause

From 1925 to 1965, the United States admitted 7.3 million legal immigrants over 40 years[23]. In contrast, the prior four decades (1880–1920) saw 23 million immigrants[24]. The foreign-born share of the U.S. population declined steadily from its 1910 peak of 14.7% to under 5% by 1970[25].

2.3 Deferential Impact by National Origin

Country	Annual Quota	Source
Great Britain/Ireland	62,574	[26]
Germany	51,227	[26]
Ireland (separate)	28,567	[26]
Sweden	9,561	[26]
Italy	3,845	[26]
Poland	5,982	[26]
Russia	2,248	[26]

Table 2: Selected national quotas under 1924 Act (initially)

Italian immigration, which had averaged 210,000 annually from 1901–1914, was reduced to just 4,000 per year—a 98% reduction[27].

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3. Assimilation Success: The Fruits of the Immigration Pause

3.1 The Assimilation Challenge of the Great Wave

In 1910, 23% of the 13 million foreign-born individuals age 10 or older—approximately 3 million people—were unable to speak English[28]. Schools were overwhelmed and immigrant communities maintained the customs of their homelands, raising questions about allegiance to America, particularly at the outbreak of World War I[29].

3.2 Time for Integration: The Pause Allows Assimilation

Research demonstrates that this integration was remarkably successful:

- **Occupational mobility**: Both real and relative (to native whites) income gain over time documented[30]
- **Socioeconomic convergence**: By 1980, ten of twelve analyzed ethnic groups displayed uniform mean socioeconomic scores, compared to large dispersion in 1910[31]
- **Duration enables assimilation**: Socioeconomic status converged regardless of original group standing[32]
- **Cultural integration**: Late 19th and early 20th century European immigrants successfully assimilated[33]

3.3 The Americanization Movement and Cultural Integration

The "Americanization movement" (English, civics education, promotion of American customs) peaked during and after World War I, but historians document mixed or even negative effects; heavy-handed programs sometimes slowed natural assimilation and bred

resentment[34].

The critical factor in successful assimilation was time for natural integration. Reduced arrivals meant schools and labor markets could absorb and integrate newcomers[35].

3.4 National Unity Forged During Crisis

Assimilation enabled by the pause proved essential during America's greatest challenges. It allowed the creation of unity for the Depression and WWII[36]. As Mark Krikorian notes, this aligns with George Washington's vision that immigrants "soon become one people, assimilated to our customs, manners, and laws"[37].

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4. Economic Benefits: Wage Growth and Opportunity

4.1 The Economic Logic of Immigration Restriction

Paul Samuelson (Nobel Prize–winning economist) stated in his 1964 textbook:

> "By keeping supply down, immigration policy tends to keep wages high... Limitation in the supply of any grade of labor... can be expected to raise its wage rate; an increase in supply will... depress wage rates."[38]

Mass immigration substantially depressed wages in the pre-restriction era; in the absence of immigration, urban real wage would have been 34% higher by 1910[39].

4.2 Dramatic Wage Growth During the Pause

From 1940 to 1970 (the pause period), average real earnings of white men rose by 210%, black men by an extraordinary 406%[40]. Tight labor markets meant employers had to compete for workers by offering higher wages and better conditions.

4.3 Transformational Benefits for African Americans

- Before restriction, Northern jobs were denied to blacks, filled instead by immigrant labor[41]
- World War I conditions and immigration cutbacks opened jobs to African Americans, who experienced "unprecedented openness" to industrial jobs[42]
- The 1924 Act forced employers to recruit black workers—"gaps made by the reduction in immigrant labor have forced a demand for Negro labor"[43]
- Civil rights leaders saw restriction as economically necessary for black Americans[44]

4.4 Broadly Shared Prosperity

Restriction contributed to:

- Emergence of a broad middle class
- Declining inequality relative to Gilded Age levels
- Rising economic security and opportunity[45]

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5. The End of the Pause: The Hart–Celler Act of 1965

5.1 The Political Context of 1965

The quota system was discredited for racial bias by the 1960s. On October 3, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act (Hart–Celler Act)[46].

5.2 Key Provisions

- **Ended national-origin quotas**[47]
- **Created a preference system** emphasizing family reunification
- **Uniform country caps**; introduced limits for Western Hemisphere for the first time[48]

5.3 Unintended Consequences

Supporters argued the act would not raise overall immigration. However, family reunification preferences and other mechanisms triggered a return to mass immigration and a shift in source countries[49].

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6. The Consequences of Ending the Pause

6.1 Return to Mass Immigration

Foreign-born share after 1965:

197	4.7%
198	6.2%
199	7.9%
200	11.1%
201	13.0%

Table 3: Rising foreign-born share after 1965

As of 2013, the level nearly matches the 1910 peak of 14.7%.

6.2 Economic Consequences: Wage Stagnation

Whereas real earnings for white men rose 210% in the pause period, they dropped 19% from 1970–2014. For black men, earnings dropped 32% in this period[50]. Mass immigration lowered wages for native-born workers, especially those without college degrees[51].

6.3 Cultural Fragmentation

Multiculturalism replaced the prior assimilationist "melting pot" ideal. Difference is now emphasized over shared American identity, language, and values; schools and media are increasingly fragmented, producing less cohesion[52].

6.4 Loss of National Cohesion

Indicators include increased political and ethnic polarization; declining social trust; weakened civic institutions; disputes over education and history. National unity forged during the "Pause" gave way to fragmentation in the mass immigration era[53].

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7. Constitutional and Policy Implications

Congressional authority over immigration is constitutionally clear (Article I, Section 8; Supreme Court precedents).

The "Great Pause" experience suggests that strategic immigration reduction, time for assimilation, and a preference for immigrants committed to American values best serve the national interest.

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8. Conclusion: Lessons from the Great Pause

Controlled immigration with time for assimilation produces:

- Prosperity and wage growth for all
- Successful cultural and civic integration
- National unity around constitutional principles

Mass immigration without assimilation produces:

- Wage depression and inequality
- Cultural fragmentation
- Weakened institutions and national unity

The immigration pause of 1924–1965 stands as one of the most successful—and instructive—policy decisions in American history.

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