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# Was the 1924 Immigration Cut-off “Racist”?

By [Kevin MacDonald](#)

*[Also by Kevin MacDonald: [Thinking About Neoconservatism](#)]*

When Dr. Stephen Steinlight first [advocated](#) a change in the traditional Jewish support for open borders, his reflexive loathing of the 1920s legislative cut-off that ended the First Great Wave of immigration (see [timeline](#)) overwhelmed the logic of his argument.

He described the cut-off as “**evil, xenophobic, anti-Semitic,**” “**vilely discriminatory,**” a “**vast moral failure,**” a “**monstrous policy.**” And he dismissed the vast majority of pre-1965 Americans as a “**thoughtless mob**” because they supported a near-complete moratorium on immigration.

Three years of arguing with Jewish groups about immigration reform have apparently not changed Steinlight’s mind on this point. In his most recent [monograph](#), his only reference to the 1924 Act is that “**tens of thousands**” of Jews might have been saved from the Holocaust “**had the United States not closed its doors...**”

The 1924 immigration cut-off enjoys an [almost uniquely](#) bad press.

Other examples:

\* As an alert VDARE.COM reader recently [spotted](#), even Governor [Richard Lamm](#), immigration reformer hero of the [Sierra Club insurgency](#), conceded in an NPR debate that the 1924 legislation was motivated by bigotry.

\* In a panel discussion on immigration on MSNBC’s [Scarborough Country](#) last winter, Randall [Hamud](#), an Arab-American activist, responded to Pat Buchanan, who had praised the effective 1924-1965 immigration moratorium: “**He forgets that the earlier restrictions on immigration were racist-driven.**”

But were the 1920s restrictions “**racist-driven**”? What, exactly does that mean? And could it be that the opponents of those restrictions had their own ethnic motivations? Motivations still to be found today?

Stephen Steinlight is a useful [starting point](#) because he is quite frank in his belief that the only legitimate consideration for immigration policy is his interpretation of [Jewish collective interests](#).

In my [research](#) on Jewish involvement in shaping immigration policy, I found that the organized Jewish community has been the most important force favoring unrestricted immigration to the U.S. In doing so, the various entities involved have consistently acted to further their own perceived collective interests—interests that are arguably in conflict with those of the majority of Americans.

We shouldn't blanch at the thought of bringing up the issue of [ethnic interests](#). We all accept that African American leaders like Jesse Jackson are pursuing their perceived ethnic interests. No one would deny that the Mexican-American [pro-immigration activists](#) advocating open borders are pursuing their ethnic interests. But somehow it's inappropriate or "racist" to bring up the fact that Jews and, yes, Europeans have ethnic interests too. And they are all equally legitimate.

By the time Jewish organizations and Jewish legislators sustained a (temporary) defeat over the 1921 and 1924 legislation, they had been at the forefront frustrating the immigration restrictionists for over 30 years.

By 1905, a strong element of American opinion had [turned against immigration](#). Even ethnic and religious groups that stood to gain by immigration, such as the Irish, were ambivalent, and anyway were poorly organized and ineffective in influencing policy.

At the time, pro-immigration activism was widely seen as a Jewish movement. University of Wisconsin sociologist [Edward A. Ross](#) stated in his 1914 book, [\*The Old World in the New\*](#):

**“The systematic campaign in newspapers and magazines to break down all arguments for restriction and to calm [nativist](#) fears is waged by and for one race. Hebrew money is behind the National Liberal Immigration League and its numerous publications. From the paper before the commercial body or the scientific association to the heavy treatise produced with the aid of the [Baron de Hirsch Fund](#), the literature that proves the blessings of immigration to all classes in America emanates from subtle Hebrew brains.”**

Throughout the entire period from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to their eventual victory in 1965, Jewish pro-immigration efforts were characterized by strong leadership, generous funding, sophisticated lobbying techniques, well-chosen non-Jewish allies, and good timing. The most visible Jewish activists, such as [Louis Marshall](#), were intellectually brilliant. They were enormously energetic and resourceful in their crusades on behalf of immigration as well as other Jewish causes.

This full court press exerted by Jewish organizations included intense and chilling

scrutiny of immigration opponents, such as Senator [Henry Cabot Lodge](#), and of organizations like the Immigration Restriction League. Lobbyists in Washington also kept a daily scorecard of voting tendencies as immigration bills wended their way through Congress. They engaged in intense and successful efforts to convince Presidents Taft and Wilson to veto restrictive immigration legislation.

Much of the effort was done more or less surreptitiously so as not to fan the flames of anti-Jewish sentiment. (Open anti-Jewish feelings were fairly common during this period, stemming from resentment at Jewish upward mobility, the great numbers of leftist political radicals in the immigrant Jewish community, and dislike of the newcomers' perceived strong ethnic sense.) Jewish organizations supplied the funding for pro-immigration organizations such as the National Liberal Immigration League and the Citizens Committee for Displaced Persons. Non-Jews from eastern and southern European countries were recruited to protest the effects of restrictionist legislation on immigration from those areas.

Why members of the Jewish community, which over so many centuries demonstrated such determination to preserve its distinctiveness, should have been so demonstrably active in [preventing the preservation](#) of the nation in which they find themselves, is an interesting question.

My hypothesis, advanced in several academic [books](#): it is part of an evolutionary strategy aimed at advancing Jewish interests. As Leonard Glickman of the [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society](#) has put it memorably: **“The more diverse American society is, the safer [Jews] are.”** ([“Community Questioning Open Door,”](#) by Nacha Cattan, *Forward*, November 29, 2002).

Of course, this does not involve all Jews, and some consciously reject it. But positive attitudes and activism aimed at ending the pre-1965 ethnic homogeneity of the United States have been typical of the entire Jewish political spectrum and all of the main Jewish activist organizations. These efforts were the driving force in favor of liberalized immigration up to the 1965 sea change in immigration law. This pattern continues into the present.

In the 1924 debates, the anti-restrictionists invariably alleged that their opponents saw the issue primarily in terms of [“Nordic superiority.”](#) They complained that restrictionists viewed themselves as a superior ethnic group and argued that this view was immoral, and furthermore had no scientific basis.

Imputing motives of racial superiority had some plausibility because such ideas were certainly in the air. For example, in his popular book [The Passing of the Great Race](#)

(1921), [Madison Grant](#) argued that the American colonial stock was derived from superior Nordic racial elements and that immigration of other races would lower the competence level of the society.

But in reality, the contentions the political champions of restriction actually made were quite different—and much more modest. Their basic argument was that, while all ethnic groups in the country had legitimate interests in immigration, the interests of the founding groups made restriction imperative.

The restrictionists actually went out of their way to deny that they believed they were racially superior to other groups. The Congressional Record reports Representative William N. Vaile of Colorado, one of the most prominent restrictionists:

**“Let me emphasize here that the restrictionists of Congress do not claim that the ‘Nordic’ race, or even the Anglo-Saxon race, is the best race in the world. Let us concede, in all fairness that the Czech is a more sturdy laborer...that the Jew is the best businessman in the world, and that the Italian has...a spiritual exaltation and an artistic creative sense which the Nordic rarely attains. Nordics need not be vain about their own qualifications. It well behooves them to be humble.**

**“What we do claim is that the northern European and particularly [Anglo-Saxons](#) made this country. Oh, yes; the others helped. But... [t]hey came to this country because it was already made as an Anglo-Saxon commonwealth. They added to it, they often enriched it, but they [did not make it](#), and they have not yet greatly changed it.**

**“We are determined that they shall not...It is a good country. It suits us. And what we assert is that we are not going to surrender it to somebody else or allow other people, no matter what their merits, to make it something different. If there is any changing to be done, we will do it ourselves.”** [*Cong. Rec.*, April 8, 1924, 5922]

One is struck in reading the 1924 Congressional debate that, while virtually all of the anti-restrictionists raised the issue of Nordic racial superiority, those in favor of the legislation rarely did.

After a particularly colorful comment in opposition to the theory of Nordic racial superiority, restrictionist leader Albert Johnson remarked that

**“I would like very much to say on behalf of the committee that through the strenuous times of the hearings this committee undertook not to discuss the Nordic**

**proposition or racial matters.”**

Several restrictionists explicitly denounced the theory of Nordic superiority.

Clearly, the reformers did not see the concept as helpful to their cause.

What *can* be found in the statements of the reformers is actually fear of inferiority. Several representatives from the far West seem to have viewed the Japanese as racially equal or superior, not inferior. One senator stated,

**“we admit that [the Japanese] are as able as we are, that they are as progressive as we are, that they are as honest as we are, that they are as brainy as we are, and that they are equal in all that goes to make a great people and nation.”**

A congressman described the Japanese as

**“a relentless and unconquerable competitor of our people wherever he places himself.”**

Apparently, many restrictionists, far from feeling they were members of a superior ethnic group, worried that their people could not [compete](#) with Japanese and Chinese.

Nor did the restrictionists view Jews as intellectually inferior. During the 1920s quotas on Jewish admissions to Ivy League universities had become a controversial issue and a focus of Jewish defense organizations. As noted above, Congressman Vaile noted that Jews were **“the best businessman in the world.”** [A. Lawrence Lowell](#), President of Harvard and the national vice-president of the Immigration Restriction League, advocated quotas on Jewish admission to Harvard.

If anything, restrictionists were worried that the immigration of more Jews from Eastern Europe would result in even more competition between Jews and non-Jews.

And of course subsequent IQ [research](#) has shown their concerns to be sound—the average IQ of American Jews is well above the average for whites and is the highest of any known human group.

Restrictionists typically argued that maintaining the ethnic status quo would be fair to all ethnic groups currently in the country. This argument implicitly recognizes that different ethnic groups have different interests in immigration policy.

The restrictionists were concerned that immigration of people of other ethnic groups and cultures would ultimately deprive their own people of political and cultural power. They argued that the interests of other groups to pursue their ethnic interests by expanding their

percentage of the population should be weighed against the ethnic interests of the majority, who naturally wanted to retain their ethnic representation in the population.

In the words of the House Majority Report,

**“The use of the 1890 census is...an effort to preserve as nearly as possible, the racial status quo of the United States. It is hoped to guarantee as best we can at this late date, racial homogeneity in the United States. The use of a later census would discriminate against those who founded the Nation and perpetuated its institutions.”**

The 1924 law also prescribed that, beginning in 1927, the national origins of the immigrants would match their percentage of the population. For example, if 10% of the country in 1920 came from Italy, then 10% of the annual quota of 150,000 immigrants would be reserved for Italian immigrants.

Clearly this was an attempt to achieve an ethnic status quo.

In other words, in the 1920s, *both* sides were pursuing their perceived ethnic self-interest. Representative Scott Leavitt stated quite bluntly that Jews should respect the desire of other Americans to retain the ethnic status quo:

**“The instinct for national and race preservation is not one to be condemned, as has been intimated here. No one should be better able to understand the desire of Americans to keep America American than the gentleman from Illinois [Mr. Sabath], who is leading the attack on this measure, or the gentlemen from New York, Mr. Dickstein, Mr. Jacobstein, Mr. Celler, and Mr. Perlman. They are of the one great historic people who have [maintained the identity](#) of their race throughout the centuries because they believe sincerely that they are a chosen people, with certain ideals to maintain, and knowing that the loss of racial identity means a change of ideals. That fact should make it easy for them and the majority of the most active opponents of this measure in the spoken debate to recognize and sympathize with our viewpoint, which is not so extreme as that of their own race, but only demands that the admixture of other peoples shall be only of such kind and proportions and in such quantities as will not alter racial characteristics more rapidly than there can be assimilation as to ideas of government as well as of blood. [Congressional Record, April 12 1924, 6265-6266]**

The House Committee was clearly annoyed that their motives were continually being cast in terms of Nordic superiority and racial discrimination—an interesting sensitivity to find, so many years ago. But the 1924 law was clearly a victory for the northwestern

European peoples of the United States. It halted the substantial transformation of the country which had gotten underway over the previous 30 years.

Because of it, the groups dominant when it passed were still (at least superficially) dominant when the 1924 law was overthrown 41 years later.

Around the time the 1924 victory was won, however, a disaster was occurring elsewhere—on the intellectual front. Beginning in the 1920s, the intellectual and moral high ground in the debate was increasingly claimed by the anti-restrictionists.

This was made possible largely by the influence of [Franz Boas](#) and his school of anthropology. The Boasians argued that the only differences among human groups are cultural differences, not biological.

Even in the early 1920s, as I have noted, the restrictionists hesitated to use arguments based on ethnic superiority and they were forced continually to deny that this was their rationale. In terms of my hypothesis, I have argued [elsewhere](#) that the Boasian School can be explained in terms of evolutionary strategy, as merely another of a series of intellectual movements dominated by Jews and aimed at advancing Jewish interests. These movements were designed to combat anti-Semitism and to de-legitimize the ethnic interests of the European majority of the United States.

What we are seeing now is the long term consequence of these movements: The displacement of the European majority—and an increase in ethnic conflict.

Since the 1965 law opening up immigration on a large scale to all the peoples of the world, the U.S. has become a cauldron of [competing](#) racial and ethnic interests. Much of the conflict centers immigration and its consequences, ranging from Muslim women having unveiled photos on their drivers' licenses to the survival of Christian symbols in public schools.

This shift to “**multiculturalism**” has been facilitated by an enormous growth of immigration from non-European-derived peoples. Many of these immigrants come from non-Western countries where [cultural](#) and ethnic segregation are the norm. In contemporary America, they are now encouraged by public policy to retain their own languages and religions, and may well continue to marry within their group.

The long term result is, inevitably, increased competition and friction between groups.

The idea that there is no biological reality to race inevitably implies that there is no such thing as ethnic interests at all. The reality, of course, is that [race does exist](#) and different races and ethnic groups do have different and often competing [interests](#). And, indeed,

from an evolutionary point of view, ethnic self-interest is not deluded: people have a very large [genetic interest](#) in defending their ethnic group.

Other non-Western countries seem to understand this. For example, despite what the *New York Times* says, [Japan](#) feels no need to allow a deluge of non-Japanese immigrants.

It's time to [exculpate](#) the 1924 law—a law that succeeded in its aim of preserving the ethnic status quo for over 40 years.

The law did indeed represent the ethnic self-interest of its proponents—albeit not “**racism**,” if racism is properly understood as irrational prejudice.

But the anti-restrictionists also had their own ethnic interests at heart.

And their subsequent successful counter-attack has unleashed the far greater, more savage, and more [threatening](#) ethnic competition that we see today.

*Kevin MacDonald [[email him](#)] is Professor of Psychology at California State University-Long Beach.*