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We Need Immigrants **by George C. Leef**

Immigrants: Your Country Needs Them by Philippe Legrain (Princeton, 2007); 374 pages; \$27.95.

Many years ago, I agreed to be a guest on a talk-radio program originating in California. The host wanted a speaker who would defend immigration. After I explained my position, the host opened the call-in lines, and for the next hour, I was subjected to a relentless barrage of attacks by irate callers. I was called a moron for not understanding that the “invading army” of immigrants was devastating the state. I was told, for instance, that there were places in California where good English-speakers would have trouble communicating because Spanish had become the dominant language. A real disaster.

There is even more of that sentiment today. To a greater or lesser extent, just about all politicians subscribe to the slogan “We must control our borders.” The question isn’t whether but rather how severely “we” need to clamp down on illegal immigration, and many people want to further limit legal immigration.

The issues here arouse the same heated, emotional response as does free trade. Ask someone whether he’s happy with his Japanese car or Australian wine and he’ll say sure. But ask about the sum total of all foreign trade and he’ll very likely flame out over the terrible trade deficit. Similarly, ask someone about an immigrant he may know — maybe a health-care worker who helps care for an elderly parent — and he’ll probably say that she is excellent. If you ask about immigration in general, however, you’ll very likely get a list of reasons that it’s a big threat and must be stopped.

Isn’t there anyone who is willing to argue that immigration is actually a good thing? Yes. His name is Pierre Legrain, a British writer whose new book, *Immigrants: Your Country Needs Them*, boldly challenges the conventional thinking at every turn. He makes a powerful case that free movement of people is just as beneficial as is the free movement of goods and capital. The book is carefully written; the argumentation is never the slapdash stuff of some of the xenophobes, but there is just a hint of anger at times when Legrain writes about the horrendous

treatment many people have received merely because they would rather work somewhere other than the place where they were born.

The economics of immigration

Most of *Immigrants* revolves around the economics of immigration. Legrain sees the increase in immigration as another aspect of globalization. Just as goods and capital can now flow more easily than ever before to wherever they get the best return, so too with human beings. The author has no patience with the statist notion that people belong to “their” nation and should be constrained by political boundaries. He observes wryly that no one has any problem when talented, wealthy Americans zip around the globe to earn money with their skills, so why is it that many people react with anger at the thought of poor, dark-skinned people doing the same thing? (Substitute leaky boats or worn sandals for the jet planes, of course.) The economic realities are the same: there is a *demand* for the services that the jet-setters can perform and there is also a *demand* for the work that poor immigrants can perform.

In fact, there is a strongly increasing demand for workers at the bottom of the wage scale. We hear a lot of careless talk about how the United States is entering “the information economy” with the implication that the demand for unskilled labor is drying up. Yes, the United States has increasing numbers of highly paid executives and professionals doing “knowledge work,” but they want all sorts of work done for them — cleaning the house, caring for elderly parents, keeping the grounds looking nice, waiting on them in hotels, et cetera. Fewer and fewer Americans desire to do such jobs, Legrain observes, so we ought to allow people who want to do them the freedom to work here. An expanding economy needs more labor and many of the world’s poor nations have an excess of it. Why stand in the way of the operation of the “invisible hand”?

As an aside, I’ve frequently heard nativists say that it isn’t true that Americans don’t want to do those jobs. Often, to make their case, they will point to a company’s ability to hire some “real Americans” to work in, say, a meat-packing plant after it’s been raided by federal agents and its illegals hauled away. In my opinion, it’s entirely irrelevant whether a company’s workers are “real Americans” or not. All people have the same rights, including the right to enter into contracts to work. Whether the worker comes from Mexico or Michigan doesn’t make any difference morally. The fact that so many people think it’s a cause for celebration when an illegal is arrested and a “real American” takes his place is an indication of an atavistic, tribal mindset.

Immigration and the law

Legrain compares efforts at “securing the border” with one of America’s most monumental follies — Prohibition. Government can’t succeed in stopping the influx of immigrants any more than it succeeded in stopping people from making and distributing alcoholic beverages, and when

it tries to stop immigrants society suffers the same nasty effects it experienced with Prohibition, namely criminality, decreased respect for the law, and a vast black market. It's a most useful analogy.

Moreover, Legrain points out that just as Prohibition was famous for its violence and death, so too has there been a heavy loss of life owing to the concentration on illegal immigration. The body count on land and on sea of men, women, and children is appalling. Unfortunately, few people who constantly profess their dedication to humanity and "social justice" will speak out against the government's lethal policies.

"Tough!" say the anti-immigrationists. "They're breaking the law and have to accept the risks. And besides, we have to protect ourselves." Against what? Well, against foreigners taking jobs away from Americans. Legrain counters that no one can take a job away from someone else, because jobs are a matter of contract. Even in the instance where an employer might prefer to contract with an immigrant than to hire a "real American," that's hardly a disaster, since there are abundant job opportunities. Why shed crocodile tears because a person who has U.S. citizenship has to spend some time searching for a job while another person who doesn't is employed?

The assimilation issue

Putting aside the matter of employment, what about assimilation? We often hear complaints that today's immigrants aren't like the immigrants of a century ago. Those immigrants were all right because they were eager to assimilate, goes the argument. But the immigrants today want to keep their own language and customs. The anti-immigration crowd thinks that's a crushing argument. Legrain blows it to pieces.

First, he points out, the same gripe was aimed at immigrants a century ago. The Italians, Greeks, Poles, and others often flocked together and continued speaking the old language, kept up their old-world religion and traditions, and many were content to have little to do with "mainstream" America. The second generation of those immigrants, however, was usually quite eager to mix in with the rest of the population and the third generation was as "American" as the descendants of the Pilgrims. Much the same thing is occurring with current immigrants, no matter where they're from.

More significantly, though, what harm does it do if people prefer to keep to themselves and follow their traditional ways? Who is harmed if some immigrant group chooses not to assimilate? Legrain asks. Good point. Consider this almost completely unassimilated group — the Amish. They're no threat to "our" culture and neither are new immigrants today. All that it is necessary to ask of people is that they live in peace. If they do, the extent to which they assimilate doesn't matter.

Several chapters of the book are devoted to a counterattack against the many writers and commentators who have been making headlines and getting wild applause for their claims that

the “invasion” of immigrants puts America in peril. One of his targets is Peter Brimelow, who writes in his book *Alien Nation*, “A nation is in a real sense an extended family.” If that’s true, then we’d better be careful not to admit any “undesirables” into the family, rather as Jewish parents might be aghast at their daughter’s intention to marry an evangelical Christian. Legrain points out that the family analogy isn’t the least bit appropriate. “This idea of nations as extended families, or modern-day tribes, is widespread — but except perhaps for Icelanders, it is nonsense,” he retorts. Nations are conglomerations of individuals who may have little in common except for the fact that they have to pay taxes to the same government. The people of most nations are already very diverse in culture and beliefs and some additional dollops of difference can’t hurt anyone.

Terrorism and welfare

What about the possibility of terrorism? Unless we find ways to “secure the border,” won’t terrorists exploit that weakness and send in people intent on killing everyone who doesn’t accept their beliefs? Legrain replies that instead of trying to use immigration restrictions to keep terrorists out — which probably won’t work anyway, given the resources and determination of the terrorists — the United States should rely on better intelligence work and international cooperation to identify potential terrorists. That makes sense. The enormous resources devoted to the attempt to keep out all immigrants (a group that may contain no terrorists at all) would be better devoted to efforts directed specifically at terrorism.

Another argument employed by immigration opponents is that they will overwhelm the welfare system. Milton Friedman famously stated that a country can’t have a welfare system and also have open immigration; but Legrain argues that even with a welfare system, open immigration is the best policy. For one thing, few immigrants are interested in living off welfare. Lazy people who are content with a static life of subsidized poverty seldom are the ones who go to the trouble, risk, and expense of immigrating. True, there could be some who, after arriving in the United States, will rely on publicly funded services (especially medical care), but on the whole, Legrain contends, the country is still well ahead if it allows free immigration rather than going to the huge expense (something the immigration opponents ignore) of trying to prevent it. He adds that the government could make newcomers ineligible for public welfare for a period of years after immigrating. Better yet, I say, let’s end public welfare entirely. A century ago there were numerous voluntary organizations to assist immigrants; that’s the model to follow.

One of Legrain’s most compelling points is this: immigrants are a remarkably large source of foreign aid. Workers, legal and illegal, send billions back to their home countries — money that doesn’t go to the dictator or ruling oligarchy, but rather straight to very poor people. Those remittances often constitute a large percentage of the incomes of poor families with members working elsewhere. They’re a big source of funds for improved living and economic growth. So

here's a deal for the people who worry about the cost of immigration — let foreigners work here and cut foreign aid out of the federal budget. That would be a good deal.

The only part of the book to which I take exception is Legrain's chapter on what countries should do to smooth the way for immigrants. He advocates more of a role for government than is necessary or appropriate. Instead of calling for pure laissez faire, he endorses government policies, such as anti-discrimination laws, intended to ensure "that immigrants are full and equal members of society by tackling issues of racism, poverty and social inclusion with renewed vigor...." American immigrants in the 19th century acclimated themselves quite well without any government intervention designed to make them "full and equal members of society." That would be the best policy today, leaving it to private organizations to provide whatever assistance immigrants may want or need.

That quibble aside, *Immigrants* is an extraordinary book, making the best case I've ever read for an open-border policy.

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This article was originally published in the February 2008 edition of *Freedom Daily*.