

“We” are major beneficiaries of economic migrants and chain immigration; how about you?

On May 30, 2019, President Trump tweeted, “On June 10th, the United States will impose a 5% Tariff on all goods coming into our Country from Mexico, until such time as illegal migrants coming through Mexico, and into our Country, STOP. The Tariff will gradually increase until the Illegal Immigration problem is remedied.” Our first questions in reading this policy announcement concerned the potential impact of this tariff on US agricultural trade with Mexico, and the US, Mexico, and Canada Agreement that is awaiting ratification by the US Senate.

At this point in time, it is unclear how Mexico will respond. From the US perspective, will the tariff be applied to seasonal agricultural crops coming into the US? Will it be applied to livestock shipments? Will Mexico retaliate with a 5 percent tax on US corn and other agricultural products being shipped to Mexico?

As we contemplated these issues our thoughts drifted to the focus of the tweet—the issue of immigration—and the entry of our ancestors into this country. Given the policy perspectives of the President, would our ancestors have been allowed in?

Daryll’s grandfather was 17 when he arrived, unaccompanied, at Ellis Island on May 6, 1906. He migrated from the mountainous farming terrain near Bergen Norway in search of economic opportunities that were unavailable at the time in rural Norway. During the first 5 years in New York City, he worked odd jobs and accumulated sufficient savings to move to North Dakota and “Homestead” a farm.

During the especially severe first winter in ND, he used a Sears Roebuck catalog to learn English beyond what he had picked up in NYC to get by day-by-day. (As an aside, when Daryll was growing up, his grandfather was the only person he knew who subscribed to numerous newspapers and literally read them from beginning to end.) Over time he traded farms a number of times, arriving in Iowa in 1939 with his wife and three children (Daryll’s mother and aunt and uncle).

Prior to moving to Iowa, he sponsored his parents and all but one of his six siblings to make the “new-world” move. All became productive citizens, accumulating wealth (mostly as farming operations) for their retirement and to hand down to their children. They did not come with advanced degrees nor were they independently wealthy, but they were ambitious, entrepreneurial and had a strong work ethic that they passed on to their children and descendants.

Harwood’s great-great grandfather came to the US in the middle of the nineteenth century along with two other male family members in search of opportunity and to avoid conscription in the Prussian Army—certainly reasons that would not be acceptable in the present political climate. They settled on farms just north of Dayton, Ohio. They too brought other family members over from Prussia.

When Harwood’s great grandfather finished eighth grade in the nearby country school, he left the farm, walked to Dayton, and found a room where he could stay while he attended and graduated from high school. He then obtained a job and worked his way into upper management in the shoe department of the major department store in Dayton. His son, Harwood’s grandfather

and namesake, followed in his father's footsteps in the shoe business and continued working until he was nearly 80.

While the story of African Americans and Native Americans is quite different from the above stories, the majority of farmers in the US can trace their origins to immigrants, many of whom came as economic migrants and through "chain migration." Many who came through formal ports of entry were deloused and treated with suspicion of possible criminal connections. They faced ethnic discrimination for years.

In many ways, the story of earlier waves of immigrants is not so different from those who arrive at America's borders each day. Today, as then, they are seeking economic opportunity not available in their home countries, and in many cases to escape disorder and violence. They want a better opportunity for themselves and their children.

If the experience of our ancestors is any indication, their children will make major contributions to the future of this nation.

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