

Substantial Disruption



Money, Toilet Paper, and Trump's Immigration Policy

By Mike Tully

Years ago, when I worked in radio, a friend and co-worker told me a story about his grandfather, an immigrant from Russia. His grandfather was a wealthy man who was concerned about the rise of the Bolsheviks and the rapidly deteriorating security of his native land. He packed wads of cash – Russian currency – into his luggage and set sail. He would have more than enough cash to rent a place to stay and provide for himself while he found his footing in America. His ship was in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean when the Russian government collapsed, along with its currency. All that money my friend's grandfather thought would subsidize his entry into a new life was suddenly worthless. "He used it for toilet paper," his grandson told me.

I thought of this story while reading about the Trump administration's new immigration policy, which is designed to reduce overall legal immigration and limit it by wealth. If there had been such a wealth qualifier at the time, my friend's grandfather would have been eligible for legal residency when he left Russia, but not when he arrived in New York. He sailed to the west a rich man and arrived here a poor one. His descendants have prospered and added to our national fabric, as have many Americans, most of whose ancestors came here as humble immigrants yearning for the promise of America.

The [new immigration policy](#) Trump announced this week does not include racial quotas, which would likely be invalidated by the Supreme Court. Instead, the new policy focuses on income and wealth, which could have a similar effect, given that wealthy white immigrants are more likely to satisfy the new criteria than people of color.

The new policy expands the definition of "public charge" in immigration law. An applicant for lawful entry into the U.S. can be denied permission to enter the country if there is evidence the applicant would be a "public charge," which means, "[primarily dependent on the government for subsistence](#)." Historically, that would exclude recipients of cash payments, such as welfare, unless they could prove they would become self-sufficient and not reliant on welfare. The criteria have been expanded to include publicly-funded health care, nutrition, and housing programs, and the ability of applicants to rebut evidence of dependency has been eliminated. Under the new rules, if an applicant has received at least 12 months of public benefits within a 36-month period, or is likely to, based on the government's analysis, he or she will be kept out of the country. The result will be two-fold: potential applicants for lawful entry into the U.S. will be less likely to claim public benefits, and there will be fewer immigrants allowed to stay. Since they will include information about income, assets, health and language ability, the new rules favor richer and whiter applicants. Immigrants with an income at least 250 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines and private health insurance will move to the front of the line. The administration estimates the federal and state governments will save \$21 billion over ten years because potential applicants for legal entry will forego applying for governmental benefits.

But is the requirement that applicants for legal entry “stand on their own two feet,” as Acting Director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services Ken Cuccinelli put it in an [unfortunate rewrite](#) of Emma Lazarus’ words on the Statue of Liberty, a good idea? Data suggest it is not.

The notion that the country will be better off by banning poor immigrants in favor of wealthy ones ignores human nature and lessons of history. Consider “the immigrant paradox,” discussed by Anna Sutherland [in an article](#) for the *Institute of Family Studies* in 2016. She wrote that “the sons and daughters of immigrants are more successful than not just their parents but also ‘youth from similar racial/ethnic backgrounds whose parents were born in the U.S.’” Sutherland quoted a study published in *Social Science Research* that found children of immigrants “were more likely than those from nonimmigrant families to be enrolled in college [68% vs. 53%] or to be working or studying [85% vs. 77%], and they were less likely to have a criminal record [8% vs. 25%] or to have had a child [8% vs. 17%].” “That was in spite of coming from households with less educated parents and lower family incomes,” she added. [Children of immigrants](#) have given us Google, the iPhone, YouTube and Mickey Mouse.

The flip side of “the immigrant paradox” is “the second-generation curse.” “(O)nly 30 percent of family-owned businesses make it through the second generation,” [wrote the New York Times](#) in 2016. “That data is from 1987, but experts say it still holds true today. It is known as the second-generation curse.” “Less than one third of family businesses survive the transition from first to second generation ownership,” [wrote Forbes in 2013](#). “Another 50% don’t survive the transition from second to third generation.” If the children of immigrants tend to be over-achievers, the children of established businesses represent the other side of the coin.

Representative Ilhan Omar, a Somali refugee, in a [recent piece in The New York Times](#), noted that “The ideals at the heart of our founding” are “equal protection under the law, pluralism, religious liberty.” “Having survived civil war in my home country as a child,” she wrote, “I cherish these values.” Should we not cherish those who cherish our values – even if they are poor?

When you think about the goals of American immigration policy, consider the information I included in this piece and then ask yourself if we really want to limit legal immigration to the well-off and comfortable. Who would you rather have coming to this country: somebody who feels entitled – or somebody who is grateful?