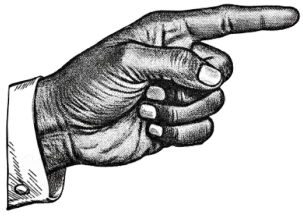
A FREE PUBLICATION

Emancipation Reclamation

How reduced immigration numbers spurred the Great Migration, propelling African Americans into the middle class...

Photo by Jack Delano Courtesy of Library of Congress

...and how, since 1965, Congress has stifled Black progress by reversing the policies and ideas recommended by Black leaders.



THE STORY YOU'VE NEVER BEEN TOLD STARTS HERE...

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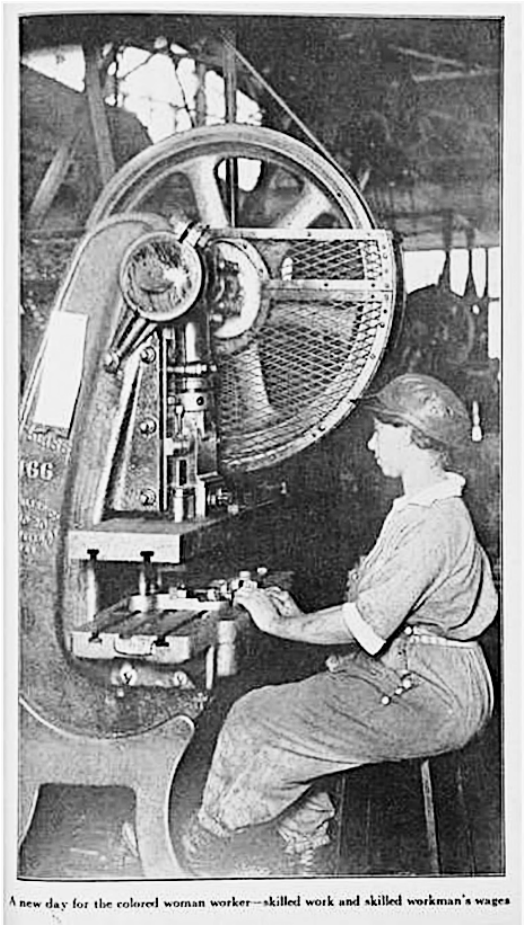
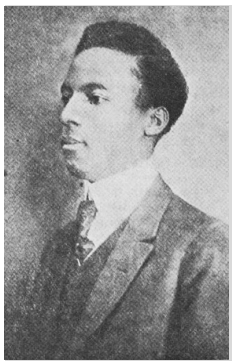


From the New York Public Library



- ✓ Better and more schools…
- ✓ Better and more houses…
- ✓ The right to vote
- ✓ And the abolition of the jim-crow car and lynching...

- A. Philip Randolph

From The New York Public Library

A Word About Words

All colors (Black, White and others) that are used to represent racial or ethnic groups are capitalized in the author's text. Quotations maintain original capitalization.

Identifications such as "negro" and "colored" in quotations reflect preferred terms of the time. In the text, "Freedmen" refers to ex-slaves in the 1800s and descendants in later centuries.

"Civil War Emancipation" refers to the combined actions of Lincoln's Proclamation, the Union Army's victory, and the three Constitutional Amendments that quickly followed.

"Mass immigration" is used under the definition of Cornell labor economist Vernon Briggs in his book, *Mass Immigration and the National Interest*: a policy of high annual volume without regard to "prevailing economic trends and social stresses" within a nation.

A Word About Civility

Most Black leaders concerned about immigration have for two centuries resisted blaming immigrants as a group for problems and placed blame primarily on discriminatory employers and government immigration policies that disregarded the impact on the descendants of American slavery. The publisher of this booklet adopts the same stance.

Sixty years after the Civil War Emancipation, most former slaves and their descendants were still trapped in the South under Jim Crow laws and in economic servitude.

But in 1923, Black southerners were beginning to see a new emancipation, one that was formalized by Congress in 1924.

Photo Courtesy of Library of Congress

The Law That Transformed Black America

Ambitious Black workers in the South scrambled to catch trains to the North. It was early 1923. "Negro migration is on again. It is in full swing," Black labor activist A. Philip Randolph told his magazine's national readership:

"The revival of industry and the restrictions against immigration are making openings in the North and West for the Negro workers heretofore undreamed of."[1]

The economy was heating up after a recession just as Congress passed temporary restrictions on immigration. Factory gates of the North had rarely opened like this for Black workers since the end of Reconstruction in the previous century. African Americans had been denied the rights they had been promised in the 1860s Civil War Emancipation, in part because few could earn incomes outside the South. [2]

No federal action had done more to deprive Black citizens of economic advancement than the government's mass immigration policies.

Now, a small percentage of Black southerners were able to leave homes and families fast enough to try to liberate themselves, starting at the train stations.

They had to hurry.

During the first year after passage of the short-term immigration restrictions, arrivals of foreign workers and family members had plummeted from 805,000 to 310,000. But in this final year of the law, it was proving inadequate to hold the numbers that low – too many loopholes. [3]

Later in 1923, ever-larger flotillas of ships would again be unloading their cargo of immigrant workers. Without a new law, immigration was headed back toward old peaks. Randolph wrote of the frenetic Jobs Rush in the early months of the year:

"[Northern] labor agents are active in the South. They are securing Negro laborers so rapidly that the stations in Atlanta and large Southern cities are crowded with Negroes going through to Northern cities."

Black editors and other leaders across the country urgently called for deeper and permanent restrictions on foreign workers. ***The Messenger***, Randolph's Black labor advocacy magazine, reported:

"The Negro papers are opposing any let-down in the immigration restrictions. They are pooh-poohing any liberal sentimentality. They say self-preservation is the highest interest and they will give no quarter to 'foreigners.'"[4]

The editors dared to think of a country where the gates to the entire national job market would be open to African Americans permanently – not just in rare short-term scrambles.

The Day that Propelled the Great Migration

The editors of the Black newspapers got their wish the next year with passage of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924.

Courtesy of Library of Congress

The reduction had no expiration! It didn't slash annual numbers of foreign workers as low as many of the Black editors and other leaders had desired. But the cuts were enough to give them high hopes about the future they believed the law would enable for all African Americans.

Few of the editors, however, were likely to have imagined just how dramatically the 1924 law would transform the lives of most descendants of American slavery over the next four decades. And, really, for the country as a whole.

For that reason, July 1, 1924, may be the most important date in American history you've never heard of.

Federal bureaucrats on that Tuesday began implementing the new permanent immigration-reduction law that reactivated the promises of the Civil War Emancipation of the 1860s.

Those Emancipation promises of social, economic, and political freedom for Black Americans had been broken and largely abandoned since 1876.

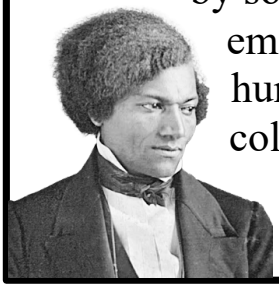
The Immigration Act of 1924 came to the rescue by doing one simple thing:

It made it more difficult – over the decades – for employers to import foreign workers instead of recruiting Black U.S. citizens.

The new law kept the factory gates outside the South propped open for the descendants of slavery. Black southerners responded spectacularly in what came to be known as the Great Migration, one of the most transformative epochs in United States history.

It was a triumphant moment for African American leaders who had railed against immigration's unfair competition to Black workers since Frederick Douglass lamented in 1855:

> "The old avocations, by which colored men obtained a livelihood, are rapidly, unceasingly and inevitably passing into other hands; every hour sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived emigrant, whose hunger and whose color are thought to give him a better title to the place." [5]



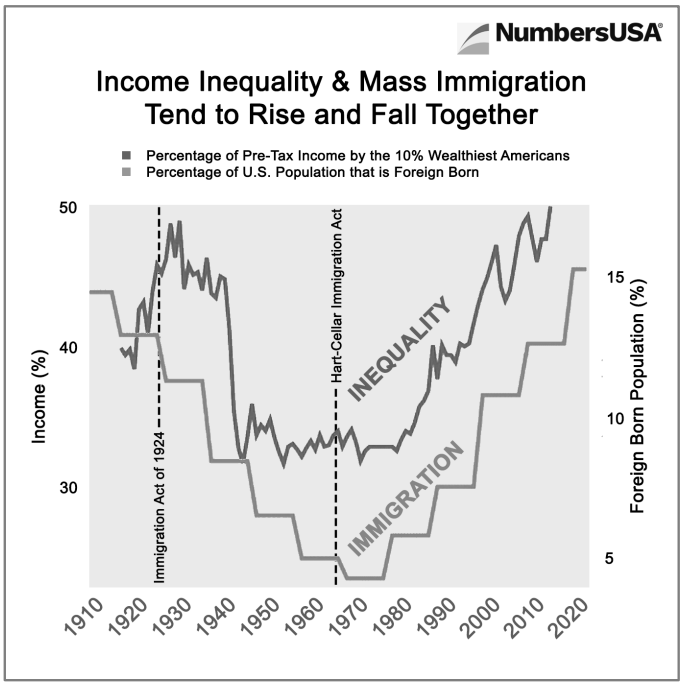
The 1924 law's steep reduction in annual immigration started a steady and astounding series of employment changes over the next four decades that radically changed the United States, particularly by freeing African Americans from living under the bondage of Jim Crow laws.

> "…the stopping of the importing of cheap white labor on any terms has been the economic salvation of American black labor."
>
> ~ W.E.B. DuBois

The results were what Black leaders had for a century hoped and predicted would happen if the government stopped allowing immigration to undercut African American workers. Only a year after the 1924 law's enactment, ***The Messenger*** explained: [6]

"Immigration from Europe has been materially cut, which means that the yearly supply of labor is much less than it formerly was. This gives the organized workers an advantage, greater bargaining power by virtue of this limited supply."

"It also gives the negro worker a strategic position. It gives him the power to exact a higher wage... on the one hand, and to compel organized labor to let down the bars of discrimination against him, on the other."



Under those and other influences of the 1924 Immigration Act over the next four decades, economists and historians agree: [7]

- ❖ the United States became a middle-class country;
- ❖ the sustained tighter labor markets were instrumental in the fastest income growth for workers in U.S. history;
- ❖ inequality among classes and races shrank as workers shared in the fruits of their labor as never before;
- ❖ the increased incomes nurtured the rise of a new class of Black professionals who opened the political gates for the passage of the civil rights acts of the 1960s.

Trapped Working in the Shadow of Enslavement

What a change the next decades would be from the way most Black Americans were still living in the early 1920s.

Before the 1924 immigration-reduction act, nearly nine of every 10 Black workers were still toiling in mostly poverty-level jobs in the former Confederate states where their ancestors – and even some of these elderly workers themselves – had been enslaved. [8]

Sixty years since Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, most descendants of slavery continued to live in the shadow of lynching and other intimidations under local government-enforced Black codes and government-accommodated vigilantism in a stifling apartheid society nearly as oppressive as the slavery that once shackled their parents and ancestors.

Why were they still there?!

Why did most African Americans remain in such horrific conditions in the South?

Why hadn't they moved during the previous 50 years of ever worsening restrictions?

Short answer: Where could they have gone?

The booming Northern factories had basically closed their gates to Black southerners since 1880, when employers turned to accelerated mass immigration as their preferred method of filling new jobs. Until that

immigration began, former slaves had found their skills were valued in the North. But not since then.

The Power of Smaller Numbers

The 1924 Immigration Act was the first long-term restriction on the annual level of immigration ever enacted.

Foreign immigration immediately dropped by nearly 60% from 707,000 in 1924 to 294,000 in 1925. Over the next four decades, it averaged less than 200,000 per year! [9] That led to a powerful chain of events: [10]

1. The labor market tightened and forced open the gates of the nation's factories to Black southerners.

2. Black workers and their families hit the rails and roads in the historical phenomenon known as the Great Migration in which an estimated 6 million of them left the South. (Most Americans are well aware of the Migration's enormous impact. But histories have tended to omit the support of Black leaders for the immigration reductions necessary for the Migration to really take off.)

3. Labor unions, without the constant flow of new waves of immigrant members, began to open up and even seek Black members, giving them access to better-paying jobs previously barred to them.

4. In the tight-labor markets, the "real" (inflation-adjusted) incomes of White men expanded two-and-one-half-fold between 1940 and 1980. The "real" incomes of Black men expanded even faster (four-fold!).

5. The number of middle-class African Americans more than tripled so that nearly three-fourths of families enjoyed the independence of a middle-class lifestyle.

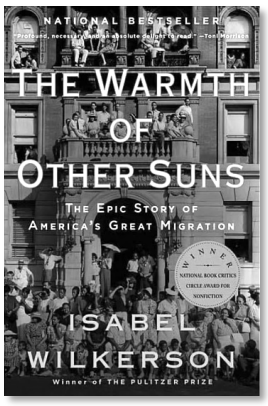
6. Eventually, nearly half of African Americans were outside the South with markedly increased incomes. And their departures from the South tightened the southern labor market enough for those remaining to see steady improvements in *their* wages and civil rights.

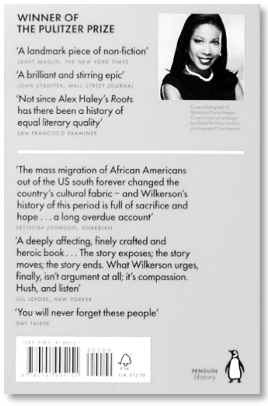
Black leaders were immediately impressed. Within five years of the 1924 Act's enactment, W.E.B. DuBois was writing in ***The Crisis*** magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: [11]

"[T]he stopping of the importing of cheap white labor on any terms has been the economic salvation of American black labor."

Finally, descendants of American slavery were being freed to aggressively work toward the promise of economic independence that had been so long delayed.

Freed slaves and their descendants had for decades desired to leave the restrictions of the South but **"the masses did not pour out of the South until they had something to *go* to,"** wrote historian Isabel Wilkerson. [12]





By 1924, some 25 million new immigrants had arrived since 1880. They had provided more than enough manpower for an expanding economy. Industrialists of the North and West felt they had little need of the labor of the country's 11 million Black citizens.

On Tuesday, July 1, 1924, that began to change in earnest – with no expiration date. President Calvin Coolidge had issued an Executive Proclamation with instructions for starting to implement the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 on that day. The overwhelming bi-partisan congressional majorities which passed the law in May had several reasons for doing so. Black support, however, was laser-focused on just one – a major reduction in the number of new foreign workers each year.

Keeping annual immigration at a low level eventually helped reclaim, restore, and reassert many of the rights and advantages that the Civil War Emancipation had intended and promised.

Progress was often slow.

The continuing racism of many Americans and systems greatly inhibited reaching goals of full political and economic liberty over ensuing decades.

But the 1924 Immigration Act liberated millions of African Americans to use their freedom of movement to pursue their own economic destinies and the political and social freedoms that could follow.

What Black Americans were able to do with that new freedom proved Booker T. Washington right in his optimistic insistence that economic power would lead to increasing political power and social acceptance:

> "No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized." [13]

Washington and others at the time were contending with doubts of many Americans whether Freedmen had the natural abilities and intelligence to compete in the modern industrial economy.

What most doubters likely didn't know was something that in-depth researchers have further established in recent decades: the ancestors of Black Americans in Africa included those with advanced skills in steelmaking, textiles, trade, and other areas that were on a par or even superior to that of European industry at the time the two continents began to interact. [14]

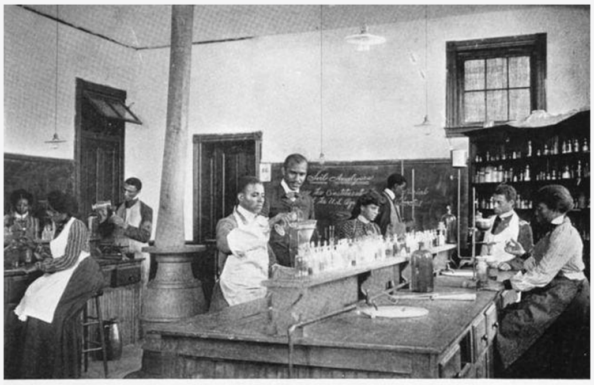
That research has confirmed Washington's and others' steadfast belief that former slaves and their children did indeed have the innate abilities to compete with any European-descent Americans or new immigrants in industrial trades. Once Congress slashed immigration numbers, Freedmen were able to prove the point on their own: America didn't need European immigrants to do that work.

It was the importance of Black labor and consumption to the U.S. economy during low immigration that helped create space for the rise to prominence and subsequent successes of Martin Luther King Jr. and other mid-century civil rights leaders.

The Great Migration and the resulting rapid rise in Black incomes spurred the increased enrollment at Historic Black Colleges and the elevated numbers of Black lawyers, physicians, clergy, and other professionals whose ranks produced the leaders of the civil rights movement.

The Great Depression of the 1930s *slowed* the momentum for a while. But on July 1, 1924, it was all set in motion. Seemingly nothing could stop the progress -- that is, not until Congress restarted mass immigration in 1965 and quadrupled the annual flow by the 1990s.

(But that's a story for later on page 28.)

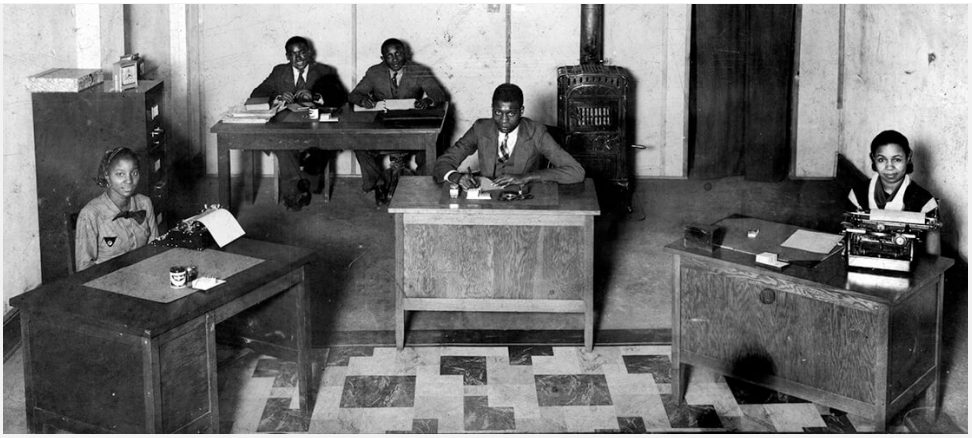


CHEMICAL LABORATORY

THE TAILOR SHOP

IN THE AGRICULTURAL LABORATORY

Courtesy of Library of Congress



Courtesy of D. Hiden Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC

The Moral Clarity of Black Media

The Immigration Act of 1924 had a major flaw in its quota system that was racially discriminatory in how it distributed the much-reduced number of immigrant visas among countries (a story on page 30).

Black leaders universally opposed how the quota distribution system worked.

But the quota system had very little or no effect on Black citizens.

The direct impact of the 1924 law for Black citizens was the deep reduction in overall numbers of immigrants per year. Of all the legislation's supporters, Black leaders came out looking the best in the eyes of history by contributing moral clarity about what was and what wasn't important in the bill.

What was most important to Black leaders was the numerical reductions that ushered in the only lengthy and sustained period of rapid upward mobility for Black Americans in our history. And it did it while the rest of the country also enjoyed gains, albeit at smaller rates.

Most 21st century internet descriptions of immigration policies focus primarily on the effect of policies on immigrants and people who wish to immigrate; they largely ignore the effect of the policies on American workers, particularly African Americans. As a result, the role of immigration reductions in the "self-preservation" of Black U.S. citizens, as advocated by those Black editors in 1923, remains largely unknown.

After hundreds of years of African Americans' families living and working in this country...

After two and a half centuries of their families suffering until the shackles of slavery were broken...

After six decades of their waiting for the promises of the Civil War Emancipation to be fulfilled...

After four decades of being pushed to the back of the hiring lines during the mass immigration following the end of Reconstruction ... After all of that, who could argue that the time was not yet right for those Black editors in 1923 to say that their priority interest in immigration policies was the self-preservation of African Americans?

In truth, who could argue against the moral proposition that for all Americans a high priority for immigration policies would be to do no harm to the descendants of the nation's slavery and apartheid systems?

The story of the 41 years in which the 1924 law was in effect provides solid evidence for a superlative conclusion:

The Immigration Act of 1924 was the greatest federal action in U.S. history - other than the Civil War Constitutional Amendments – in advancing the economic interests of the descendants of American slavery, and perhaps of all American workers.

Reducing high levels of mass immigration was the mechanism for all that positive change. It worked then and is a model for something that could work again toward a society with truly equal opportunity for all.

For the gates of better employment and incomes to open wider for Black workers from 1924 to 1965, the gates of foreign immigration had to be far less open.

Who Closed the Gates in the First Place?

Regret mixed with hope for older Black citizens as they left the South after 1924 and traveled to better incomes in the North and West. The economic freedom and benefits they were gaining now from the sustained reduction of foreign labor couldn't help but remind them of what they had missed.

The gates that were opening for better jobs after 1924 could have been open all along. Why had they been closed in the first place? These older African Americans could have been improving their lives in this way decades earlier if not for the mass immigration that had been allowed and encouraged by the federal government in most of the years between 1880 and 1924.

The travelers in the Great Migration were decades behind where they should have been.

Some of their relatives – or the older travelers themselves – had made this northward journey to better jobs in the 1860s and 1870s before massive European immigration blocked everything.

That generation had blazed a trail for what looked like a brightening future for hundreds of thousands of former slaves to follow.

In those early years after the Civil War and alongside more moderate foreign immigration, former slaves established new lives in the North with a level of acceptance that was hard to imagine a few decades later. They worked in factories, climbed job ladders, became foremen and skilled tradesmen, started businesses, and occasionally held public office and joined police forces. [15]

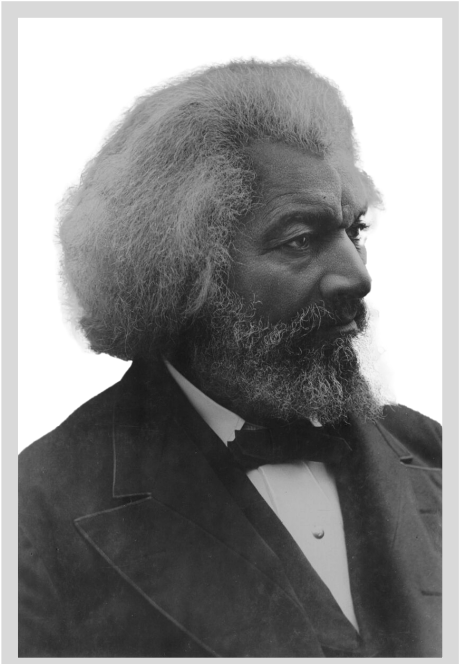
By the late 1870s, Black workers in the North were earning around 55% more than their relatives in the South. That was still only half of what northern White workers earned, but it represented an impressive closing of the gap in just a few years after slavery. [16]

Pressure to leave the South was growing as the federal government pulled its Reconstruction troops and allowed Black rights there to erode.

Frederick Douglass made something of a last-ditch plea for liberty in the South when he stood before the Republican national political convention in Cincinnati in 1876 and demanded:

> "But what is your emancipation—what is your enfranchisement? What does it all amount to, if the black man, after having been made free by the letter of your law, is unable to exercise that freedom; and after having been freed from the slaveholders' lash he is to be subject to the slaveholder's shotgun?" [17]

The defeated military and political leaders of the Confederacy were regaining control of their region. They were quickly dismantling many of the grand promises of the Civil War Emancipation that was a collection of actions far greater than Lincoln's Proclamation which began it.



It was purchased and broadened by the blood, sacrifice, and victory of two million Union soldiers. The emancipation was then broadened further and the promises ratified in three Constitutional Amendments.

Those amendments ended slavery and guaranteed full rights of U.S. citizenship to the more than four million African Americans. But only the elimination of chattel slavery was truly surviving by the time of Douglass' appeal in Cincinnati in the centennial year of America's Declaration of Independence.

Immigrant Political Strength Dilutes Northern Reconstruction Support

Douglass pleaded for new military interventions in the South to save the recently won voting rights, civil rights and most forms of economic freedom that were being nullified under spreading violence by local governments and vigilante groups.

His speech garnered much applause.

But Ulysses S. Grant – emancipation's vigorous and powerful champion as general and as President – would not come to the rescue this time. During his eight years as President, he deployed the military a number of times to reinstate voting and other civil rights. He crushed the Ku Klux Klan – for a while. But with only a few months left until retirement, he had lost the northern support to continue aggressive freedom efforts in the South. [18]

Immigration contributed to the loss of northern support for the Reconstruction program which involved federal personnel – including military enforcing voting and other civil rights for freed slaves in the states of the former Confederacy.

Before the war – even though annual immigration had been at levels far lower than would occur after 1880 – the cumulative effect was to increase the electoral power of the anti-emancipation Democratic Party in the North, which most immigrants joined for various reasons. As immigrant numbers rose, they helped Democrats take control of many northern cities. [19]

In the middle of the war, immigrant voters were an important part of the major electoral gains in Congress for Democrats who were pressing for peace without ending slavery. One issue that drove up the Democratic vote was Republican Lincoln's announcement before the congressional elections that he planned to issue an emancipation order the next January. Republican losses were heaviest in districts with high immigrant populations.[20]

Though anti-Black racism of many immigrants was one factor, the driving reason for their anti-emancipation feelings was fear of having to compete for jobs with hundreds of thousands of freed slaves moving north.

After the war, the growing number of immigrants helped propel the anti-Reconstruction Democratic Party close to majority status.

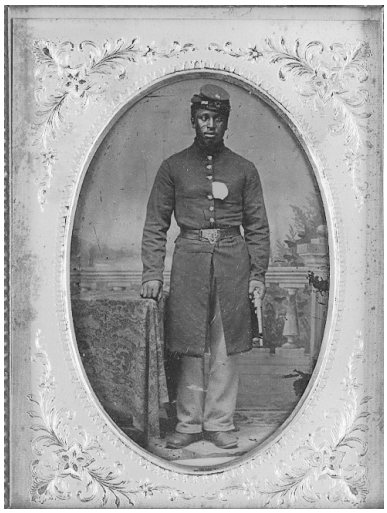
In November 1876, a few months after Douglass' Cincinnati speech, the anti-Reconstruction Democratic candidate for President carried nine of the former pro-emancipation Union states, including New York, Indiana, Connecticut, and New Jersey. Democrats won the national popular vote and lost the Electoral College by only one vote. After that wake-up call to the changing balance of power in the North, the Republican Party gave up the fight for enforcement of the Civil War Emancipation promises.

Union Army's Emancipation Sacrifices Squandered

Grant left office in 1876, despairing whether the previous 16 years of tumult had led to anything good and permanent. He wrote:

"It requires no prophet to foresee that the national government will soon be at a great disadvantage and that the results of the war of the rebellion will have been in a large measure lost." [21]

He said he didn't wish to be a "prophet of evil" but it was "impossible for me to close my eyes in the face of things that are as plain to me as the noonday sun." What the victorious Civil War general saw for the future of the country's Black citizens is described hauntingly by Grant's biographer Ron Chernow:



Courtesy of Library of Congress

"All those hundreds of thousands dead, the millions maimed and wounded, the mourning of widows and orphans – all that suffering, all that tumult, on some level, had been for naught.

"Slavery had been abolished, but it had been replaced by a caste-ridden form of second-class citizenship for southern blacks..." [22]

For the next half-century, nothing and nobody could successfully challenge the victory of the former enslavers as they regained control over the economic and social lives of most of the country's Black Freedmen and their descendants.

But the surviving former slaves and their children in the Great Migration northward after 1924 knew that, even when Reconstruction ended in 1876, their virtual re-enslavement had not been inevitable.

They knew they had been legally free to leave the South after 1876. They knew friends and family who had already done that successfully between 1865 and 1876. They also knew that soon after the federal Army left the South and Reconstruction collapsed, the northern job market for Freedmen collapsed, too. They knew the journeys north slowed down and nearly stopped. They knew something changed that closed the escape valve and kept them in the South for all those decades *before* 1924.

Immigration Drives Blacks Out Of The North

The change was the number of flotillas discharging their cargoes of foreign workers at U.S. ports. In 1880, the number exploded. The new mass immigration would add some 25 million more foreign workers and family members by 1924. In the North: [23]

- Employment and promotions of Black workers dropped.
- Black incomes dropped.
- Accumulated assets and generational transfers – meager as they had been – dropped.
- Many Blacks were driven out of their jobs altogether.
- Freed slaves mainly stopped moving north.
- The northern Black population declined as workers were forced to move back South.

Courtesy of Library of Congress

"It did not take Jim Crow laws to drive Blacks out of jobs in the North" wrote Lawrence Fuchs of Brandeis University; "… mass immigration was enough." [24]

Yes, it was White supremacists who denied African Americans the economic, civil, and social rights of the Civil War Emancipation in the South.

But it was the federal immigration policies that kept most African Americans from moving to find those rights somewhere else.

When the gates to those rights finally began to open during the decades after 1924, it wasn't by force of a military-led Reconstruction but by Congress simply and peacefully changing its immigration policies.

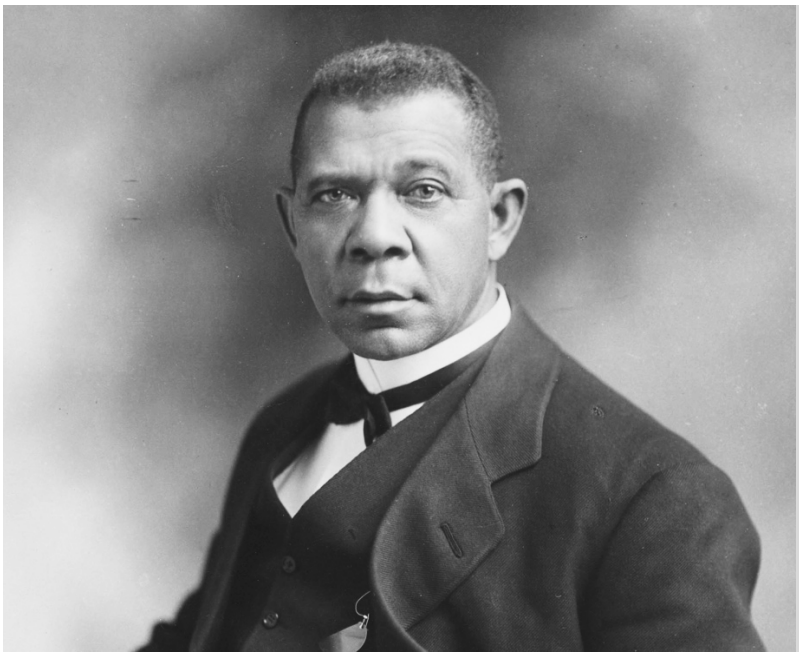
Keeping former slaves in agricultural work in the South after the Civil War was a major priority for many business leaders in both the South and the North.

High importation of foreign workers solved an immense problem for many.

Racist northern employers could avoid hiring Black southerners and benefitted from paying lower wages to the immigrants; the defeated southern landed aristocracy could restore their plantation system with the ex-slaves trapped in heavily indebted sharecropping. [25]

"It did not take Jim Crow laws to drive Blacks out of jobs in the North… mass immigration was enough." [24]

~ Lawrence Fuchs, Brandeis University



"If we do not wake up to our opportunities, do not put brains and skill into common occupations by whatever name called that are immediately about our doors, we shall find that a class of foreigners will come in and take our places, just as they have already done in relation to certain industries." [26]

- Booker T. Washington

Photo Courtesy of Library of Congress

Restricting All, Regardless Of Origin Or Race

Throughout his career at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Booker T. Washington had to train his students to compete in the uphill competition with the immigrants favored by most employers.

Washington died in 1915 before seeing the beginnings of the respite from mass immigration that he and so many others had sought. But his speech in 1912 to the National Negro Business League in Chicago anticipated the economic abilities that would be unleashed by the 1924 Immigration Act: [27]

"If the Italians and Greeks can come into this country strangers to our language and civilization and within a few years gain wealth and independence… the Negro can do the same thing… Now is the time — not in some far-off future, but now is the time — for us as a race to prove to the world that in a state of freedom we have the ability and the inclination to do our part in owning, developing, manufacturing and trading in the natural resources of our country…"

In the five years of debate before the 1924 Act, Black voices increasingly concluded that for Booker T. Washington's vision to happen there had to be a lot fewer Italians, Greeks, and every other kind of immigrant arriving in the country.

Indeed, labor union activist A. Philip Randolph called for a complete pause in new foreign workers and stated: [28]

"We favor shutting out the Germans from Germany, the Italians from Italy, the Russians from Russia, the Irish from Ireland, the Japanese from Japan, the Hindus from India, the Chinese from China, and even the Negroes from the West Indies."

Randolph and most Black restrictionist leaders had always opposed immigration rules that discriminated among countries based on race or ethnicity. They were remaining consistent in favoring a non-discriminatory stop to immigration from all countries.

The issue was not the traits of the immigrants; there simply had to be far fewer of them.

It was a lesson they had just learned during World War One.

The Pilot Episode: Proof of Concept

The First World War had crashed America's immigration system between 1915 and 1919. Northern industries realized they needed the labor of Black U.S. citizens (even if only temporarily). Black workers began crowding train stations all across the South.

This lasted only through the war. But those northbound trains burned an image of a possible future in the minds of Black leaders who spoke forcefully for the deep reductions in the Immigration Act of 1924.

If a war could so quickly slash immigration numbers and dramatically change the fortunes of Black workers, they reasoned, why wouldn't an act of Congress accomplish the same economic miracle.

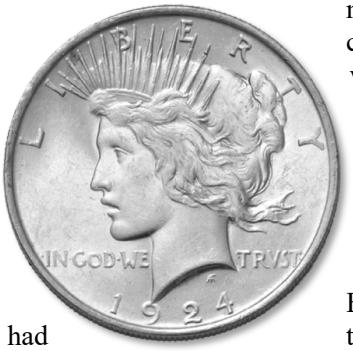
So, Black leaders and publications were supremely confident in the 1924 Act's script for unending seasons of fewer foreign workers and more African American advancement – because they had seen the pilot episode during the war.

A Rigged System Exposed

When the war began, the volume of new arrivals of foreign workers and families collapsed from the recent average of more than one million a year. The numbers shrank by two-thirds to just over 300,000 in 1915. Even fewer came in each of the next four years during an expanding war economy.

In crisis, the northern industrialists finally saw a potential workforce in the underemployed descendants of slavery in the South. They had been there all along. Isabel Wilkerson, the historian of the Great Migration, wrote: [29]

"The North faced a labor shortage and, after centuries of indifference, cast its gaze at last on the servant class of the South. The North needed workers, and the workers needed an escape."



In their emergency hiring from the South in 1915, America's industrialists unintentionally exposed just how unnecessary their long-time system of mass international labor recruitment had been.

From The New York Public Library

Why send ships for new workers across the ocean and throughout the Mediterranean when all they needed to provide were short train rides from within their own country?

The emergency domestic recruitment also revealed how much the policies of mass immigration had denied economic progress for freed slaves and their descendants ever since mass immigration exploded in 1880.

If those Black workers were needed now during low immigration, they could have gotten those jobs decades earlier if Congress had limited immigration.

Booker T. Washington in 1882 had sounded the alarm almost immediately, noting what was happening to the hundreds of thousands of freed slaves who successfully found northern jobs soon after the Civil War: [30]

"The first-class carpenters, tinsmiths, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, brick masons and other skilled workmen, made so by slavery, are disappearing… Northern competition has completely shut the skilled Negro workman out from that section, and the continual stream of well-trained European laborers that is continually flowing into the West leaves [Negroes] no foothold there."

The great cost of the mass international recruitment system for all American workers was enormous. Economists who studied the 1890-1910 period calculated that, if not for large-scale foreign immigration, the real (inflation-adjusted) wages for urban workers would have

been 34 percent higher in 1910 than they were actually earning. [31]

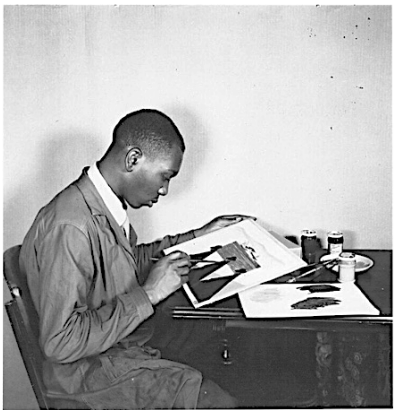
Soon after World War One, the ***Chicago Defender*** newspaper, the leading champion for Black northward migration, expressed dismay at the larger cost to Blacks of earlier being kept out of industry altogether: [32]

Photo by Jack Delano, Courtesy of Library of Congress

"The war, of course, showed us just how keen a competitor cheap European labor had been for the less skilled among us and the skilled alike ... [I]f it had not been for the harsh competition of the Southern European brought here by American capital to perform those tasks which the American white man had outgrown we would have been a much larger factor in industry than we are today."

"Until the war we figured chiefly as strike breakers in the more basic industries and not at all in the more technical branches of manufacturing and producing concerns."

Jacob Lawrence and His *Migration Series* of Paintings



Jacob Lawrence, National Archives

Jacob Lawrence, a young Harlem artist, captured the drama in a series of 60 canvases. They are like storyboards for the Black migrations during World War One and following the 1924 Immigration Act. The paintings continue to be treated as an epic and pioneering display in 21st century art galleries, presenting the essence of the World War One history that so influenced Black leaders in 1924. [33]

Panel No. 2 of Lawrence's paintings portrays a solitary White equipment operator with a caption stating: "The World War had caused a great [labor] shortage in Northern industry."

In Panel No. 4, a Black man drives a spike. The caption reads: "The Negro was the largest source of labor to be found after all others had been exhausted." [34]

Some people mistakenly have thought the shortage was caused by high U.S. military enlistments. But between 1913 and 1916, the size of the U.S. military grew by less than 25,000. It wasn't until 1917 that the U.S. military started drafting hundreds of thousands of workers from their jobs.

The main reason for the labor shortage was the war's disruption on the oceans, substantially halting the northern industrialists' long practice of hiring ships to go to ports of distant lands to bring back workers for their hiring lines. In addition, large numbers of previous immigrants went back to help their home countries just as the war was starting.

The freed slaves and their descendants had long desired to leave the restrictions of the South, Wilkerson wrote:

"They got their chance when the North began courting them, hard and in secret, in the face of southern hostility, during the labor crisis of World War One. Word had spread like wildfire that the North was finally 'opening up.'" [35]

Cast Down, At Last! Booker T. Washington's Vision

Public Domain Photo from New York Times Archive

The industrialists during the war were finally taking Booker T. Washington's advice in 1895 to "cast down their bucket" for the Black workers who already lived in the United States.

Washington had beseeched industrialists to stop looking to foreign immigration to man their factories. It was a last-ditch effort to give Black workers a chance at getting off the plantations and onto the ground floor of industrial skills and prosperity. [36]

The great educator from Tuskegee, Alabama used the story of a ship that had been lost at sea and had finally sighted another vessel. When the distressed ship signaled that its crew was dying of thirst, the other vessel signaled back, "Cast down your bucket where you are," a salty-sounding suggestion that made little sense. The exchange was repeated three times before the captain at last lowered his bucket. To his surprise, the bucket was full of fresh water because he was in the 200-mile-wide mouth of the Amazon River.

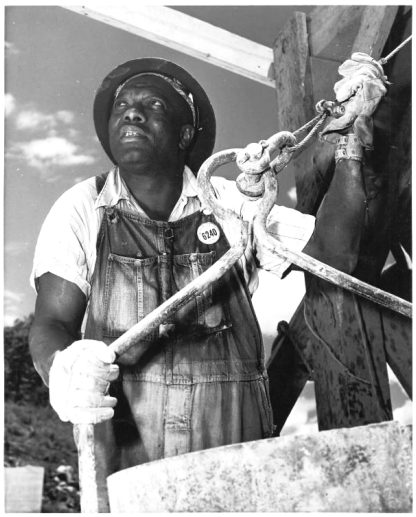
Washington then brilliantly illustrated the illogic of industries crossing oceans to recruit millions of workers in foreign lands when they were surrounded by vast pools of the very thing they were seeking. Washington implored the industrialists:

"To those of the White race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits… cast down your bucket where you are. Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know."

No matter how logical that may have sounded, it wasn't going to happen in 1895. And the economic emancipation wasn't going to happen in 1905, or any other time, as long as the U.S. government remained committed to the mass immigration of foreign labor.

Finally in 1915, though, industrialists had to start using Washington's domestic "buckets" instead of their foreign immigration ships.

Lawrence's Panels 28 and 29 illustrate northern corporation agents recruiting and signing up Black workers in the fields and in their homes. The tight labor conditions didn't just make it possible for Blacks to find jobs up north, the conditions forced employers to recruit -- and to recruit where the surplus domestic labor lived.



Construction worker at Douglas Dam, TN, 1939 - Courtesy of Library of Congress

Southern business owners tried to block the recruiters from enticing the local workers to leave, Wilkerson explained, and industrialists went to extreme lengths to hire Americans: "Steel mills, railroads, and packinghouses sent labor scouts disguised as insurance men and salesmen to recruit Blacks north." [37]

The northern labor agents offered the Black southerners free transportation (seen in Panel No. 5) and assurances of jobs. They were faced with economic opportunities in the North that were too powerful to resist.

"Labor agents roamed the South, promising the moon or better," wrote *Fortune* magazine in its November 1941 issue that included 26 of Lawrence's paintings. [38]

Courtesy of Library of Congress

To sense the elation on farms and small towns across the South, imagine what it would be like in the 21st century if U.S. employers actually had so much need of labor that they would actively recruit in the neighborhoods of the 4 of every 10 working-age, high-school-graduate African Americans who don't have a job. Or of the 2 of every 3 working-age African Americans without a high school diploma who don't have a job.

Proof of Concept:
Reduce Immigration, Value Black Labor

Up to a half-million Black southerners during the war moved to available jobs throughout the industrial belt stretching from New York to Chicago. It was a proof of concept that the freed slaves and their descendants had been capable of doing the work in the North during the decades when they'd been shut out.

The joy was short-lived, however. The war ended. Flotillas of ships again sailed the seas with their cargoes of cheap foreign labor preferred by the northern employers. Mass immigration was revived. The northern migration of Black workers stopped and then reversed just like after 1880.

But for one brief shining moment, the country had witnessed what an economic emancipation for the descendants of American slavery would look like, and how it could happen.

For Black leaders, what they witnessed between 1915 and 1919 was not something they could unsee. Or forget. Or fail to try to replicate with legislation like the Immigration Act of 1924.

Photo by Russell Lee
Courtesy of Library of Congress

As the National Urban League stated: [39]

"The World War had accidentally revealed to [Black workers] the enormous pressure of yearly European immigration against [Black] migration from the South to the industrial centers of the North… [T]his relationship has carried through the immigration legislation with a logic which seems to bind [Blacks'] industrial future to the policy of restriction."

Black leaders binding themselves to immigration restriction did not mean that most immigration restrictionists felt bound to Black leaders. Helping African Americans was not a primary reason Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924. That was a largely unintended consequence for the politicians.

Those who on May 15, 1924, voted for the bill in the 308-58 House of Representatives passage and the 69-9 Senate passage had varying other reasons for doing so, although the improvement in Black lives did not displease most supporters of the bill. But helping African Americans *was* the intention of the nation's Black leaders and publications who advocated the deep reductions in annual immigration. They didn't just hope for the substantial employment benefits that Black workers did indeed reap; they expected them.

From The New York Public Library

The ***Chicago Defender*** wrote: [40]

"The restrictions recently placed upon immigration to these shores ought to help us if they do not help anybody else."

But the World War One episode did help others. A 1977 study concluded that when the war abruptly cut off most immigration to the United States, the huge gap between America's rich and poor of all races closed incredibly fast:[41]

"Within three years' time, pay gaps dropped from historic heights to their lowest level since before the Civil War."

Just as quickly, though, inequality grew as soon as mass immigration resumed after World War One, and "income looked as unequal as ever," wrote the study's author.

Black leaders refused to accept a return to business-as-usual-inequality once they had seen all that activity on the railroads during the war, according to Howard University historian Daryl Scott (pictured):

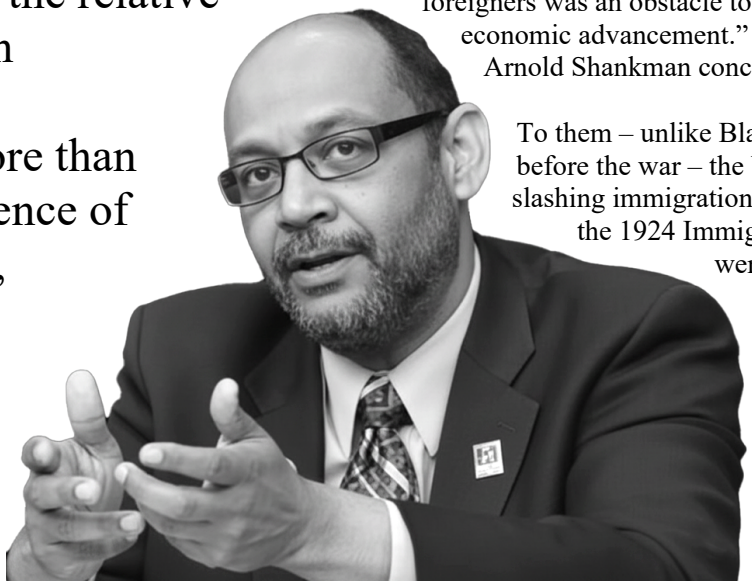
"Prior to World War I, the relative benefits of immigration restriction for African Americans were no more than conjecture. The experience of World War I, however, revealed how different black life could be if only there were fewer foreigners in the North."[42]

Scott's research found that "everywhere in the black press the connection was made."

The ***Chicago Defender*** wrote:

"It is vitally important to keep the immigration gates partly closed until our working class gets a chance to prove our worth in occupations other than those found on plantations. The scarcity of labor creates the demand. With the average American white man's turn of mind, the white foreign laborer is given preference over the black home product. When the former is not available, the latter gets an inning." [43]

Black leaders who forcefully advocated for permanent restrictions were reflecting the mood of the majority of African Americans who believed "the steady influx of foreigners was an obstacle to their own economic advancement." historian Arnold Shankman concluded.[44]



To them – unlike Black leaders before the war – the benefits of slashing immigration numbers with the 1924 Immigration Act were not conjecture but preordained fact…

…because they'd seen the pilot episode.

I read in the papers about the Freedom Train
I heard on the radio about the Freedom Train
I seen folks talking about the Freedom Train
Lord, I've been a-waitin for the Freedom Train! ...
I hope there ain't no Jim Crow on the Freedom Train ...
Who's the engineer on the Freedom Train?
Can a coal-black man drive the Freedom Train? ...

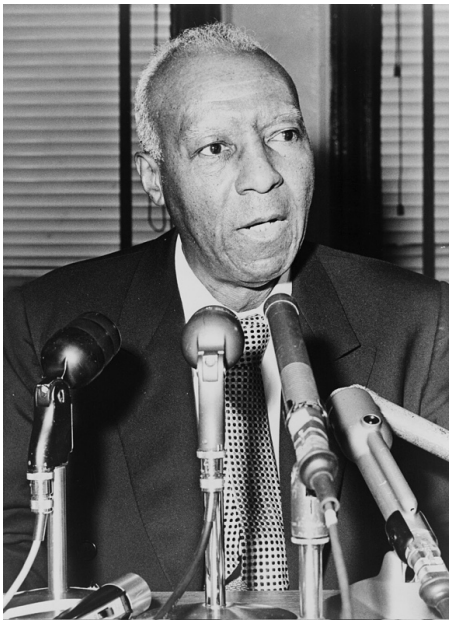
- "Freedom Train" by Langston Hughes (1947)

The Track to Civil Rights

The historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom came near the end of the greatest era for African American advancements in United States history – begun and enabled by the 1924 Immigration Act.

An aging A. Philip Randolph – who led the historic event he helped conceive – was the first to speak to the quarter-million marchers gathered at the Lincoln Memorial.

Perhaps more than any other, he might be considered the "engineer" Langston Hughes was seeking in his Freedom Train poem. Randolph had been on the tracks of the phenomenal economic and social changes for Black citizens through the entire period of low immigration. At the beginning of the era, he had risen to a new prominence when he successfully organized railroad porters into the first major Black labor union in 1925.



Courtesy of Library of Congress

That was a year after he called for annual immigration numbers to be reduced to "nothing," and when Congress did cut them two-thirds of the way.

More Freedom Always Linked to Better Jobs

Randolph's preference for low immigration was part of his lifetime strategy for building Black worker power and then leveraging it for more economic and political freedom. Over the next four decades of low immigration, his hand was constantly on the throttle of the civil rights "freedom train."

It was a slow train coming. But in the 1963 March on Washington, the movement was getting close to a prime destination: a federal guarantee of the political and social freedom that had been promised a century earlier by the Civil War Emancipation.

With the statue of the Great Emancipator in the background along with top national African American leaders, Randolph stepped to the microphone and delivered the opening speech as a revered elder statesman – some say "father" – of the modern civil rights movement. [45]

The historic event is widely credited with hastening the passage of the landmark civil rights acts in 1964 and 1965. Randolph declared: [46]

"We are the advanced guard of a massive, moral revolution for jobs and freedom."

For Randolph, jobs and freedom were always linked. The Black leaders on that journey from 1924 to the 1960s had navigated through and around constant racially discriminatory obstacles. But Congress had cleared the track of one enormous barrier with its long-term reduction of annual flows of foreign labor. Mass immigration no longer was making Black labor optional. As a result, historians say, the Great Migration of Black southerners soared in volume, and pushed the civil rights cause forward.

The 1924 Immigration Act slowed the immigration boats. It opened the jobs gates. It crowded the southern railroad stations and re-started the Great Migration after a couple of pilot runs.

Another estimated five and a half million African Americans moved out of the South after 1924.

Stanford's Gavin Wright concluded that the Great Migration so radically changed the South economically and socially that: [47]

"This change in the fundamentals of southern society ultimately made possible the success of the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s."

By re-starting the Great Migration that had its pilot run during World War One, the 1924 Immigration Act changed the country in the grand sweep of history captured by Isabel Wilkerson in her Pulitzer-Prize book, ***The Warmth of Other Suns***: [48]

"The Great Migration would become a turning point in history. It would transform urban America and recast the social and political order of every city it touched. It would force the South to search its soul and finally to lay aside a feudal caste system. It grew out of the unmet promises made after the Civil War and, through the sheer weight of it, helped push the country toward the civil rights revolutions of the 1960s."

Just a few years before 1924, none of that appeared to be around the bend in the nation's future. The young Randolph was convinced that African Americans would have to gain a lot more economic power before achieving major civil rights gains.

It did not seem inevitable at the time that Congress would renew the Great Migration by legislating a halt to the mass importing of foreign workers.

Instead, immigrant competition was likely to become much worse, Marcus Garvey warned soon after World War One ended.

Marcus Garvey, Courtesy of Library of Congress

The Jamaican-born Garvey cautioned his Black audience at Mount Carmel Baptist Church in Washington D.C. that the improved conditions they enjoyed during the war would not last because immigration of foreign workers was sure to rise back to its old levels: [49]

"If you think that the white man is going to share a part of what he has and give it to you, you make a big mistake. You have enjoyed a portion of what the white man has because the white man was unable to keep it away from you, because he wanted more, and in order to get that more he had to get help to get it, but the time will come when he will have all the help he wants, and that is why this sudden immigration has started to the United States of America at the rate of 15,000 a day - alien white men coming back to the United States of America at the rate of 15,000 a day."

The fiery leader of Black nationalism and separatism predicted what would happen by 1924 if mass immigration resumed:

"It means this: That in the next three or four years one-third of the Negro population of the United States of America will be in a similar condition or position as we were in 1913 before the war. We will be out of jobs, we will be starving, we will be living next door to starving and starvation except you start out to do something for yourselves."

Photo by Russell Lee, Courtesy of Library of Congress

Black Leaders Fought to Clear Track of Foreign-Worker Obstacles

Black publications that were more mainstream and integrationist were moderate in tone but similarly worried. The weekly ***New York Age,*** one of the most prominent of Black newspapers, hoped Congress could delay the resumption of mass immigration for at least a few years to give "the colored man" time to "entrench himself so firmly in the industrial field that he cannot be easily driven out."

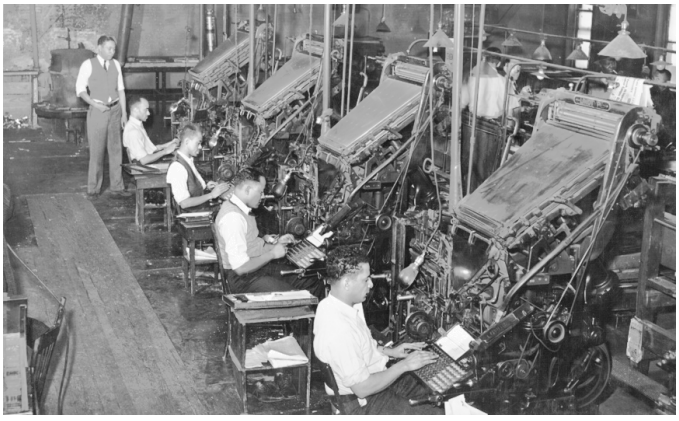


Photo by Russell Lee, Courtesy of Library of Congress

The lack of high immigration during the war had given Black workers a great opportunity to enter industrial employment and show what they could do, according to ***The Age***. The newspaper expressed concern about whether they had had enough time: [50]

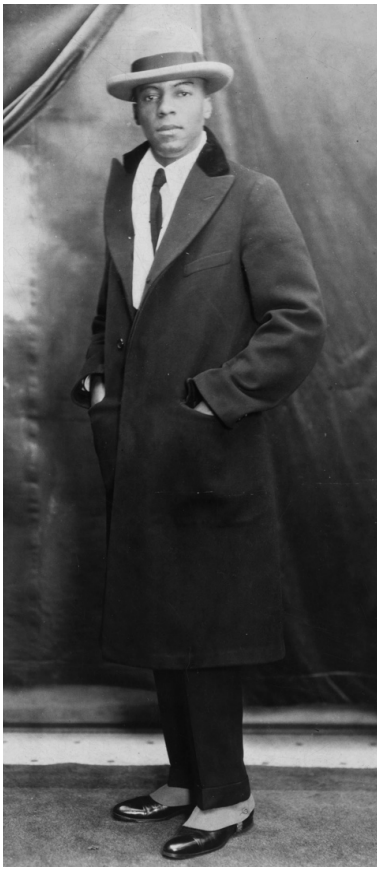
"[T]here have been many grave doubts about their [Black workers'] ability to keep this foothold when fierce competition sets in again. The question arose in many minds,

'Will the Negro be able to keep his new job when the aliens from Europe come back looking for work?'"

With great relief, Black leaders watched as White leaders of differing stripes began to agree about the need to cut immigration for differing reasons. Whatever the White leaders thought they were getting out of deep immigration cuts, most Black leaders agreed with ***The Age*** which stated that Black workers, without question, would have the most to gain from immigration restrictions.

Randolph at the time was busy trying to organize Black elevator operators in New York City and shipyard workers in Virginia, as well as running ***The Messenger***, his national self-proclaimed "World's Greatest Negro Monthly." He feared that the 1924 Immigration Act's slashing of annual admissions by two-thirds and more might be too little. Through ***The Messenger***, he editorialized: [51]

"[W]e think the bill went in the right direction but not far enough…This country is suffering from immigrant indigestion. It is time to call a halt on this grand rush for American gold, which over-floods the labor market, resulting in lowering the standard of living, race-riots, and general social degradation. The excessive immigration is against the interests of the masses of all races and nationalities in the country – both foreign and native."



A. Philip Randolph
Courtesy of Library of Congress

The next year in an already tightening labor market amidst a strong economy, Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids labor union.

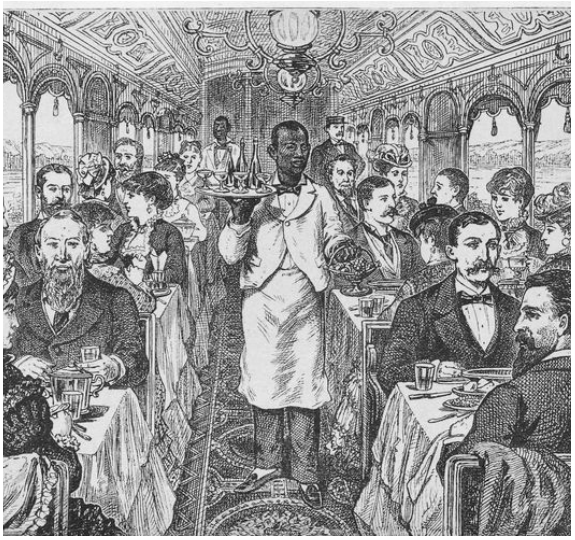
The Pullman company responded with violence and firings. The union was a long way from winning a contract. The labor market wasn't yet tight enough. And Randolph needed the improved labor organizing regulations that would come under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

But for many African Americans, there were unmistakable improvements as early as 1928, according to the ***Pittsburgh Courier***, one of the nation's premier Black-owned newspapers: [52]

Courtesy of The Robert L. Drapkin Collection
Smithsonian American Museum

"So far as the Negro is concerned, it is exceedingly doubtful whether he has been benefited by these successive waves of foreign labor. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that the economic progress of our group has been hindered by immigration.

"As proof, one has only to point to the great strides made by Negroes, in all classes, since European immigration has been so markedly curtailed [in 1924]. This is especially noticeable in the North and East, where, despite the present temporary period of unemployment, the Negro has more industrial opportunities than at any time since the Civil War."



Dining in a Pullman Railway Car
From New York Public Library

Randolph's union efforts became even more difficult once the Great Depression set in during the 1930s. In those conditions, the union lost almost all of its members for a while. But his unrelenting investment in labor unions as a powerful instrument of necessary collective action eventually paid huge dividends in his quest for political rights.

He continued to work for all Black Pullman employees, using further immigration restriction as one of his tools. Early in the Depression, Pullman intimidated Black workers from supporting union recognition by showing it could replace them with foreign workers from Asia. Randolph solved the problem by throwing his union's support behind a 1933 law that restricted all railroad service jobs to American citizens.

Immigration Restriction Improved White Union Cooperation

As his aggressive protection of Black American workers from foreign labor competition became better known, he began to soften the traditional anti-Black attitudes of major labor unions which had long histories of immigration restrictionism; they had enthusiastically worked for passage of the 1924 Immigration Act.

When he called for an immigration moratorium, Randolph had sounded like Samuel Gompers, founder and president of the American Federation of Labor. An immigrant himself, Gompers had earlier written of his union's earnest desire for Congress to issue an order "absolutely prohibiting immigration during times of unemployment." An AFL letter to Congress complained that "laborers are imported from other countries to reduce our wages and thereby our standard of living." [53]

At the end of a 12-year drive in 1937, Randolph further gained respect and cemented White union relationships when his railroad porters union finally won a positive contract with the Pullman company. He leveraged those relationships to gradually create major civil rights allies among many unions. Using his rising influence and networking, Randolph led a campaign strong enough to pressure President Roosevelt in 1941 to ban employment discrimination in defense jobs in the government, industry, and unions.

It was the first federal civil rights directive since Reconstruction. [54]

In 1948, Randolph helped lead a group that persuaded President Truman to end segregation in the armed services.

Founders of the PWOC (Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee) melded Randolph's joint passions of labor unionism and civil rights activism. Created deliberately as a multi-racial union of slaughterhouse workers, its White members locked arms with their Black co-workers in knocking down racial barriers in their communities across America, not just in the workplace. [55]

Additionally, that union supplied critical funding for civil rights activism through the 1950s and 1960s.

The inter-racial bonds in the United Packinghouse Workers of America were forged in tight-labor markets in which both White and Black workers needed each other. The UPWA's activism created a model for others as an aggressive and successful force that historian Marshall Stevenson Jr. called "the essence of racial egalitarianism."[56]

Unions thrived in the low-immigration era. The tight-labor conditions enhanced by the 1924 Act gave them an edge in bargaining that tended to raise the wages for all races and ethnicities.

Black workers were finally gaining from the successes of the unions which had largely barred them from membership during mass immigration. Early in Randolph's efforts to organize Black workers, only about 1% of Black male workers, for example, were in a union. But that had soared to 40% by 1970, much higher than any other group. [57]

The economic bottom of society gained on the middle, and the middle gained on the top during the second half of the 1924 Act era and of the Great Migration.

Photo by Russell Lee
Courtesy of Library of Congress

How much of that would have happened *without* the 1924 Act putting a lid on annual immigration of foreign workers?

History provides a fairly clear answer: The American economy would still have boomed during and after World War Two. But African Americans would not have been likely to share in the prosperity.

We can assume that scenario because during every period of high U.S. economic growth before the 1924 Immigration Act: [58]

- immigration surged
- employers preferred to fill their expanding number of jobs from the overflowing pool of foreign workers instead of hiring African Americans
- former slaves and their descendants always were left out of most benefits of the "good times"
- racial apartheid in the South remained secure
- inequality between classes and races grew.

Great Migration Changes the South

Because of the immigration restrictions in the 1924 Act:

- Foreign immigration did not surge during the industrial/defense buildup of World War Two or the booming post-war economy of the 1950s. Immigration remained low.
- Expanding industries throughout the North and West could not ignore the underemployed Black labor of the South. They opened their job gates.
- The Great Migration of Black southerners quickly rose to its highest levels throughout the 1940s and 1950s.
- The South lost most of its surplus labor. (That included large numbers of underemployed White workers, as well, who joined the northward migration when they didn't have to compete with masses of new foreign workers.)
- Southern businesses could no longer rely on a loose supply of under-educated, under-skilled U.S. citizen workers in those tight-labor conditions. They finally had to mechanize, modernize, and improve education, working conditions, productivity, and wages for both Black and White workers who remained.

Southern employers watched wage rates in the North and tried to match them enough to slow down their workers deciding to leave. [59]

The growing economic and political power of the remaining southern Black Americans convinced more and more owners and employers to shun segregation as "bad for business."

Courtesy of Library of Congress

Meanwhile, the growing Black population in the North and West began to organize politically in ways never possible in the South. Not only did Black northerners protest their own conditions of discrimination but they also applied pressure on northern lawmakers to cease support for the southern system of racial apartheid.

The change in the labor economics of the country was putting pressure on both federal lawmakers and southern businesses to end racial segregation in the South.

In the changing new economy of the South, a complete domination of Black Americans based on terror no longer was essential to the ruling class, concluded sociologists Piven and Cloward: [60]

"*[E]conomic* modernization had made the South susceptible to *political* modernization."

Randolph's magazine had predicted an outcome like that in a 1923 editorial. It stated that a continuing Black migration from the South would cut so severely into the profits of "Southern planters, railroad, lumber, coal, and banking magnates" as to force them to make major changes to hold on to their employees: [61]

"In order to retain profits that come through exploitation of Negro labor ... protection of life and property will be accorded the Negro if that be the price of his remaining there. Better and more schools; better and more houses; the right to vote and the abolition of the jim-crow car and lynching... Yes, we will have no lynching if the migration goes on, not because the South hates the Negro less but because it loves wealth more."

That progress was greatly delayed by the huge nationwide labor surplus caused by the Great Depression. In 1940, leaders in the South were still organizing their state governments largely around protecting White supremacy.

But thirty years later, because of the economic changes wrought by the Great Migration, the southern governments were primarily focused on development as part of a national economy. To the extent that segregation policies retarded industrial development and outside investment, business leaders were open to appeals to break down racial barriers.

When Black Americans finally got federal protection for voting rights in 1965, they had already enjoyed decades of rapidly rising wages. On average, their incomes still remained well below those of White Americans.

But over that period leading up to the new civil rights laws, Black workers' real wages rose almost twice as fast as the rapidly rising wages of those White workers.

The 1924 Immigration Act and the Great Migration that followed had achieved far-reaching consequences, wrote historian Gavin Wright: [62]

"The out-migration of Blacks from the South after 1940 was the greatest single economic step forward in Black history, and a major advance toward the integration of Blacks into the mainstream of American life."

The 1924 law didn't legislate or directly create all the positive economic and political outcomes for African Americans. But it cleared immigration out of the way so that it wasn't a factor that continued to block the track toward those outcomes.

The Economic and Political "Virtuous Circles"

The reduced immigration levels created a "virtuous circle" of economic and political responses that for decades fed on each other to benefit most parts of the American population, especially the African Americans who so long had been restrained by racial apartheid. [63]

The 1924 Act tightened the labor market, something that nearly always makes employers pay higher wages for scarce labor...

which pushed employers to get more out of each worker through major advances in mechanization and efficiencies...

which resulted in new technological applications...

that made it possible to mechanize enough unskilled operations and hand work to release many workers into more skilled jobs...

which increased output per worker hour...

which made it possible to raise wages still further...

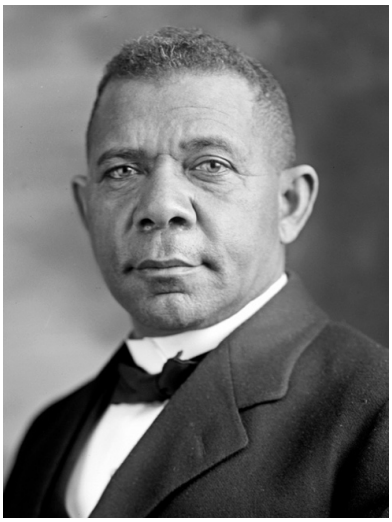
and convinced American parents they needed to spend more money for their children to obtain a better education to qualify for the higher-skilled jobs…

which improved the quality of the workforce...

which increased productivity per worker...

and repeat.

African Americans benefited more than other Americans by this powerful economic virtuous circle in part because they had so many abilities that they had long been unable to fully use at fair compensation. The Great Migration finally freed them to prove their critics and doubters wrong in a more open jobs market.



Courtesy of Library of Congress

As Booker T. Washington assumed, whenever the country needed their labor, disadvantaged African Americans gained advantage. The Great Migration had confirmed it. It had also (belatedly) fulfilled a prediction he made in 1912, based on his confidence in the innate intelligence and ability of the oppressed descendants of slavery: [64]

"Now is the time... for us as a race to prove to the world that in a state of freedom we have the ability and the inclination to do our part in owning, developing, manufacturing and trading in the natural resources of our country."

When he said that, it must have seemed outlandishly optimistic at a time when even the education of Black teachers for Black schools was so controversial that the Tuskegee Institute had to mostly hide what was its top priority activity. What was the chance of Black southerners "owning, developing, and manufacturing" when Tuskegee's teacher graduates were always in danger of having their schools torched by a business community that insisted Black teenagers were incapable of making use of a high school education which would only "ruin" them for manual field work.[65]

But what may have seemed an outrageous prediction at the time Washington made it did not seem all that remarkable by the 1950s because the Great Migration had so radically changed the country, including the South.

Of course, the country still had a long way to go. African Americans who went north encountered segregation in housing, education, and other areas that was both *de jure* (enforced by the government) and *de facto* (created by the common private practices of individuals and institutions). This discrimination kept the improvements in quality of life and wealth accumulation that African Americans achieved via the Great Migration from being as strong as they might have been.

But the move had been worth it, Isabel Wilkerson found when interviewing more than a thousand Black southerners who had transplanted themselves during the Great Migration. Despite the forms of discrimination they still encountered in their new cities, the general impression was that they felt a great burst of new freedoms, self-determination, and economic independence after their relocations - moves that had been made possible by the immigration reductions. [66]

The wisdom and talents of dozens of great civil rights leaders in the 20th century, and the courage and tenacity of millions of descendants of slavery, had powered them to a quality of life and freedom at the time of the 1963 March on Washington that few could have dared to imagine in 1924:

- In 1963 – unlike in the early 1920s – almost half of Black workers were now under the protection of unions.
- Almost half no longer lived in the South restrained by Black codes.
- The country was on the verge of federal civil rights acts that would continue the destruction of Jim Crow laws and begin to knock down de facto discrimination in the rest of the country.
- Defense industries and the government were legally bound to hire Black workers.
- The military was integrated.
- And now national media were providing generally favorable coverage of a quarter-million citizens demanding that their "freedom train" not stop before reaching its still-distant destination.

A. Philip Randolph and other veteran activists had earned a victory lap for all they had accomplished on an exhausting, lifetime journey since he set about forming railroad porters into the first major Black labor union four decades earlier.

He never took his eyes off the prize of jobs.

The message of Randolph and his co-leaders that was embedded in the goals of the 1963 March on Washington was said to be that civil rights cannot transform people's quality of life unless accompanied by economic justice. [67]

The growing importance of Black labor in all regions of the country was a powerful and perhaps decisive factor in allowing the descendants of slavery to move themselves much farther down the track toward economic and civic equality in 1963 than they had ever been before.

Under the protection of the 1924 Immigration Act, African Americans made significant gains in industrial employment, particularly in the steel, automobile, shipbuilding, and meatpacking industries.

Without the immigration reduction of the 1924 Act, the Great Migration of Black southerners to the North and West would not have occurred as massively or as soon or at all.

Courtesy of National Archives

And without the magnitude of the Great Migration, it is difficult to imagine the civil rights movement successes in the 1950s and 1960s.

At the end of the long 1963 ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial, Randolph introduced Martin Luther King Jr. who delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech. "1963 is not an end, but a beginning," King said. He, Randolph, and all the other speakers focused almost entirely on the future – and the remaining goals of economic and political equality.

Even after the rapid gains of four decades under the 1924 Immigration Act, African Americans were still a long way from making up for the four decades when their progress had been sidetracked and derailed by the mass immigration before 1924.

L to R: Lester Granger, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., E. Frederic Morrow, Eisenhower, A. Philip Randolph, William Rogers, Rocco Siciliano, and Roy Wilkins
Photo by Abbie Rowe,
Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library

Immigration issues were not mentioned in the 1963 ceremonies. Immigration really had not been a topic for many years because the 1924 Act had decidedly removed the volume of foreign labor as an impediment to the economic, social, and political progress of the descendants of American slavery.

To reach their lofty goals, the 1963 civil rights leaders needed their freedom train track to continue to be clear of mass immigration obstructions – for many years to come.

From the New York Public Library

Emancipation Setback

In September of 1965, Congress terminated the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924. The new Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965 restarted the mass worldwide migration of foreign workers into the United States.

President Lyndon Johnson signs the Hart-Celler Immigration Act
Photo by Yoichi Okamoto, Courtesy of Lyndon B. Johnson Library

The era of protecting American workers' employment, wages, and incomes from unfair foreign labor competition was over.

Just as all trends had seemed to be in the right direction for the nation's 20 million African Americans, Congress got rid of the law that had done so much to help make those trends possible.

For the next six decades after 1965, the federal government has allowed more than 70 million additional immigrants. (That contrasts with one-tenth as many immigrants – 7 million – who were allowed in the 1925-65 period.)

As a result, nearly every aspect of life for the Black working class has been different -- and not in a good direction.

Annual immigration numbers doubled by 1978 and quadrupled by the 1990s. That influx is at the levels that had kept most descendants of American slavery trapped in a violent economic bondage just before passage of the 1924 Immigration Act.

The 1965 Act set in motion a series of immigration policies that were yet another betrayal of the Civil War Emancipation promises, such as the betrayal of 1876.

One can imagine the ghosts of Frederick Douglass and Ulysses S. Grant warning Congress in 1965 as it terminated the 1924 Act's protection for Freedmen: "Be careful. We've seen this play before, and the next act is a tragedy."

Douglass and Grant were on the stage of that 1876 drama when the federal government terminated the era of Reconstruction and then allowed the explosion of mass immigration soon after. Emancipated from slavery in the 1860s, Freedmen had achieved rapid improvements in employment and income over a short period. But after 1880, they found the jobs ladder overloaded with foreign workers; their economic progress halted and then reversed.

Much the same fate awaited their descendants in 1965, after enjoying big economic gains in the "emancipation reclamation" era of 1924-65.

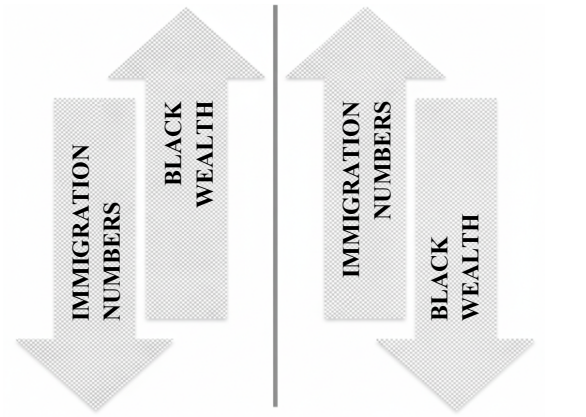
If the trends in Black progress during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s had continued, America would be a far different society today. But progress for most Black Americans stalled in the 1970s.

From The New York Public Library

What was different from 1876, though, was that politicians in the 1960s were tearing *down* barriers to *social and political* equality for African Americans; in August of 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act. But then one month later, it passed the mass immigration renewal act which *erected* a new barrier against *economic* equality.

Employer behavior *after* 1965 imitated employer behavior *before* 1924. Provided with overflowing pools of foreign labor, employers tended to hire the immigrants ahead of African Americans.

The accumulating impact of the higher and higher annual immigrant admissions took hold by the late 1970s. Employment rates and inflation-adjusted incomes for all groups of Americans without a college degree began to stagnate and then fall.



And just as Black Americans' incomes *rose* the fastest during low-immigration, their income *fell* the fastest during high-immigration.

While all Americans in the economic bottom enjoyed the biggest boosts under the Act of 1924, they have been hammered most mercilessly after the Act of 1965.

For example, the Labor Department reported that the employment rate of all working-age Black men with a high school diploma was a robust 91% in 1967. But by the year 2000, the rate with jobs had plummeted to under 71%. (It has continued to fall since then.) [68]

Anti-discrimination laws and policies have helped to substantially narrow the racial wage gap within occupations. But the overall income gap has grown much larger because of many trends, including the increase in Black Americans having no job income at all.

During the low-immigration economy of 1940 to 1970:

- Median "real" (inflation-adjusted) incomes rose sharply for both Black and White prime-age (25-54) men.
- The gap in Black and White medium income narrowed significantly.

But a 2017 National Bureau of Economic Research study shockingly found that during the looser-labor economy of renewed mass immigration since 1970: [69]

- The Black-White difference in median annual earnings among all men has widened substantially.
- This era has not been a good one for prime-age White men, either; their median annual real earnings fell by 19%.
- But the decline has been far worse for prime-age Black men who have suffered a staggering plunge of 32% in median real earnings.
- Even with White men's real earnings dropping by 19%, the median prime-age Black man in 2014 earned only half as much as his White counterpart. The difference is primarily because of the percentage of Black men not having a job.

The typical Black man's annual income - not wages - was only half as much as a White man's in 2014?

That is no better than what economists have estimated for freed slaves in the North earning about half that of White workers five years after the end of the Civil War. [70]

Is there any way to look at this as progress?

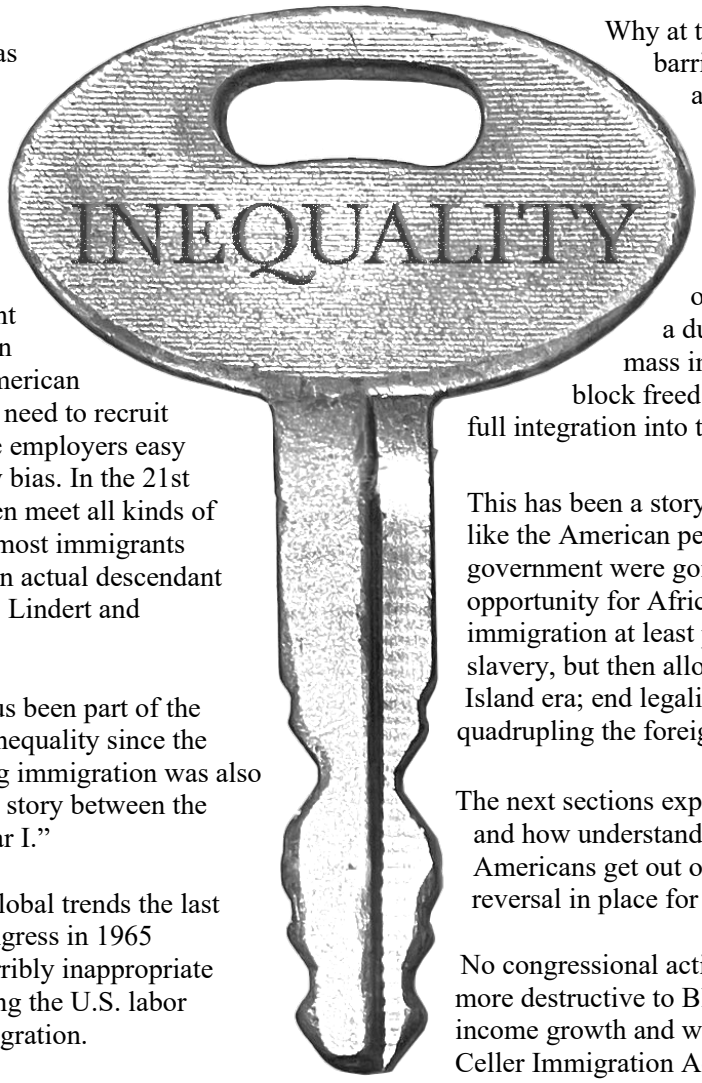
Of course, immigration policies are not the sole cause of this disheartening reversal in the fortunes of African Americans.

In their magisterial 2016 history of inequality, economists Peter Lindert and Jeffrey Williamson identified a handful of worldwide trends that have been key in *stopping* the wonderful narrowing of inequality most industrial nations enjoyed during the middle of the 20th century.

But they found that in only a few countries has inequality gotten *worse*: the countries with high immigration.

Most of the key factors they identified as having stopped the improvement in inequality worldwide – such as global financial, technological, and trade trends – are difficult to change, especially by a country on its own.

The key factor of high immigration, though, is a self-inflicted wound that nations like the United States, Canada, and Australia could easily fix, as Congress did in 1924.



High immigration was also a key factor in widening income disparity during the Ellis Island-era of mass immigration a century earlier. In both eras, the constant supply of new foreign workers left most American employers with little need to recruit Black labor and gave employers easy space to exercise any bias. In the 21st century, they can even meet all kinds of diversity goals with most immigrants without ever hiring an actual descendant of American slavery. Lindert and Williamson stated: [71]

"Immigration has thus been part of the story of rising U.S. inequality since the 1970s, much as rising immigration was also part of the inequality story between the 1860s and World War I."

Given the negative global trends the last several decades, Congress in 1965 certainly picked a terribly inappropriate period to be increasing the U.S. labor supply through immigration.

Why would the 1965 Congress do that?

Why would Congress restart mass immigration and impede the economic progress of the very African Americans it was trying to help with the landmark Civil Rights Act of the previous year and the Voting Rights Act just one month before scrapping the 1924 Immigration Act?

Why at the time it was tearing down legal barriers of discrimination and ending apartheid and other government-enforced racial discrimination would Congress erect *new* barriers to Black *economic* progress?

Why would the Congress of 1965, of all Congresses, be the one to create a duplicate of the Ellis Island wave of mass immigration that had done so much to block freed slaves and their descendants from full integration into the prosperity of American life?

This has been a story of interruptions. Each time it looked like the American people through their elected government were going to open the gates for far more opportunity for African Americans, sustained spikes in immigration at least partially closed them - abolish slavery, but then allow the mass immigration of the Ellis Island era; end legalized segregation, but then begin quadrupling the foreign labor competition.

The next sections explain how the latest reversal happened and how understanding it might help 21st century Americans get out of the stalemate that has left the reversal in place for six decades.

No congressional action in the last hundred years has been more destructive to Black Americans' employment, income growth and wealth accumulation than the Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965.

Refusal to Correct a Mistake

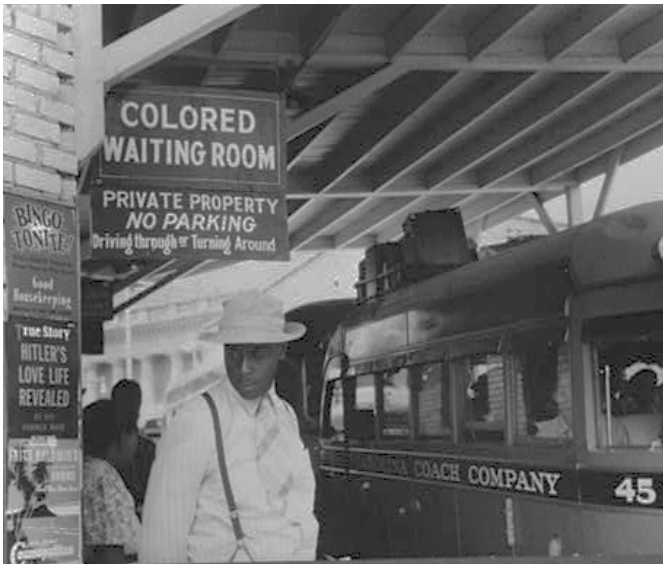
Sixty years later, no Congress had fixed the mistake of 1965. And it *had* been a mistake. No evidence has ever suggested that the sponsors of the 1965 Immigration Act intended to restart mass immigration. They most certainly had not thought their law would erase the gains Black workers had accomplished in the previous four decades. But rising immigration and falling economic conditions for Black workers was becoming obvious just four years later when a bipartisan joint federal commission began studying the results.

The flaws in the 1965 Act could have been fixed long before much damage was done. Multiple high-level commissions and researchers over the next decades warned politicians of the declining employment rates and real wages of most African Americans. They told Congress that immigration levels needed to be much lower.

Each Congress and President ignored the warnings and recommendations.

Mass immigration may have originally been an unintended mistake. But from the mid-1970s onward, it was the federal government's clearly intended priority.

Given a choice between helping struggling Black Americans by tightening the labor market through lower immigration or helping businesses lower labor costs through mass immigration, each Congress for the last half-century has always chosen the same priority. And it wasn't Black Americans.



Courtesy of Library of Congress

The sad irony of all of this was that it all began by trying to do the right thing to combat racism in how the country chose who got to immigrate here.

Doing the Right Thing: Ending 1924 Racist Quota System

In 1972, the first federal commission delivered its review of the 1965 Act. [72]

Known as the Rockefeller Commission, it did not criticize Congress for the intent behind its termination of the 1924 Act.

The intent had been about ending the "WHO" portion of that 1924 immigration policy.

Immigration policies in every country are primarily about two things:

- HOW MANY new workers and family members will be admitted each year?
- WHO will get the allowed visas?

No leader for the 1965 Act advocated significant increases over the HOW MANY portion of the 1924 Act.

It was the WHO portion that prompted replacing the 1924 Act. The 1924 law's WHO provision was racist. Although no potential individual immigrant was blocked on the basis of their race or ethnicity, the 1924 law contained a per-country quota system that was apportioned on a racist formula that violated what its authors claimed to be trying to do.

The main promoters of the quota system said they wanted the national-origin makeup of future immigration to be the same as the very diverse national-origin makeup of the country found in the 1920 Census. The purpose was to avoid radical shifts in the nation's culture. To do that, the government had to look through Census records and estimate what percentage of the population was from each country in the world or had ancestors from them. [73]

Glaringly, though, the baseline of the apportionment of the quotas did not include the nation's 10.5 million citizens with African origins who had been counted in the 1920 Census! Nor did the baseline include the relatively small number of Americans from Asia.

That was a blatantly racist violation of the stated intent of the quota system. It pretended Black citizens weren't Americans at all, even though the culture of the United States had been profoundly affected by their large-scale presence from well before the beginning of the country. The 1965 Congress killed that WHO portion when it terminated the entire 1924 Act. In the spirit of the nation's new civil rights laws, the racism of the 1924 quotas had to be ended.

Black leaders over the decades had uniformly condemned the WHO conditions of the 1924 Act before and after it became law.

A. Philip Randolph was still fighting to remove the national-origins quotas in the 1950s. He urged the abolition of the "intolerable exclusion of American Negroes from the census for quota determination purposes." [74]

But Black leaders from the 1920s onward did learn to live with the quotas about WHO could *come* because the restrictions in the HOW MANY portion of the 1924 law soon provided such great progress for the Black Americans already *here*.

Public Domain

Jamaican-born J.A. Rogers reflected this balancing of priorities in the compromise of the 1924 Act. A naturalized U.S. citizen who had gained his education while a Pullman porter, Rogers became one of the most widely read and traveled journalists and authors of Black history of his time. He strongly disagreed with those supporters of the quota system who based it not on cultural concerns but on their beliefs in racial differences and abilities to assimilate.

Ideas about eugenics and assimilation had nothing to do with the issues at hand, Rogers said; rather, the justification for the 1924 law was overwhelmingly about labor issues: [75]

"America's duty is to solve her own race problems and this she cannot do as long as the limited labor market is flooded with cheap European labor... Under present conditions the curtailing of immigration, at large, is a wise move."

Decades later, the self-acknowledged pro-immigration historian John Higham echoed Rogers' practical assessment, noting that "the country had needed an effective numerical restriction to protect the living standards and the bargaining power of the American working class." [76] Historian Otis L. Graham Jr. declared that with the 1924 Act, "The last progressive reform was in place." [76]

Making Things Worse: Ending 1924 Low Numbers

Unfortunately, while appropriately killing the WHO portion of the 1924 Act, the 1965 Congress also killed the HOW MANY portion of the 1924 Act when it terminated the entire law.

The HOW MANY part had been working just fine. It was a significant cause of all the improvements cited in earlier sections.

Because of the HOW MANY portion, **the 1924 Immigration Act could be considered on balance as supremely anti-racist; it had helped African American citizens more than any other group of Americans, and more than at any other time of history.**

The sponsors of the 1965 Act did not disagree. They repeatedly promised before its passage that they were creating a new law that would barely change the HOW MANY of the 1924 Act.

Nobody argued for changing the law to allow more foreign workers each year.

Public Domain

Polling showed U.S. citizens overwhelmingly agreed that they didn't want higher immigration. [77]

When annual numbers started rising immediately, the Rockefeller Commission recommended that Congress make changes to stop that from continuing. The HOW MANY portion of the 1965 law needed to be modified to be supportive of the nation's priorities for economic, environmental, and racial justice. [78]

From The New York Public Library

The congressional leaders' response?

Nothing.

They ignored the already accumulating losses to working-age Black men (age 18 through 64) that were especially deep. Their rate of employment fell by 16% just between 1967 and 1980 alone. (The rate would continue to fall over the next 40+ years of Congress running mass immigration programs.)

Immigration Priorities Different for Congress and the Public

Immigration policies reflect a national community's priorities. The "Rockefeller Commission" stated what it felt were the priorities of the American people at the time. Filled with leaders from the civil rights, labor, women's rights, religious, academic, and business sectors, the bipartisan commission in 1972 delivered recommendations that could have come from a committee of Black newspaper editors in the 1920s:

- Annual immigration should be at a low enough level to allow for a tight labor market – one that especially didn't impede Black upward mobility.
- Congress needed to add a maximum ceiling of how many immigrants could come in a year. That was something the 1965 Congress had forgotten to include in its law.

The priority of immigration policy was not to help ethnic leaders grow their political bases or to assist businesses to keep their labor costs down. That *had* been the ruling political priority during the 1880-1920 period.

But now, the diverse commission membership stated, the priority of immigration policy should be the citizens of the country who weren't succeeding.

Immigration policy should be set in a way to ensure "that immigrants do not compete with residents for work," the commission said:

"The Commission believes that it is imperative for this country to address itself, first, to the problems of its own disadvantaged and poor."

"The flow of immigrants should be closely regulated until this country can provide adequate social and economic opportunities for all its present members, particularly those traditionally discriminated against because of race, ethnicity, or sex."

The commission had specific concerns about what it found to be the traditional behavior of employers using immigrants to bypass African Americans for both employment and advancement.

A Second Try At a Fix of 'Out-of-Control' Immigration

In 1978, many Members of Congress were ready to take another look. Total immigration had gone from under 300,000 to over 600,000. Wage stagnation was becoming apparent. The long African American march into the middle class had stalled.

Having decided to ignore the Rockefeller Commission, Congress created the "Hesburgh Commission," chaired by Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of the University of

Notre Dame and a previous chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

The 16-member, blue-ribbon panel worked three years and reached much the same conclusions in 1981 as the Rockefeller Commission did in 1972. Furthermore, the new panel stated that immigration was now "out of control" and that the nation could not avoid dealing with "the reality of limitations." [79]

Black workers without college degrees who were seeing their occupations increasingly flooded by foreign workers could take some satisfaction that leaders at the highest level of the nation were identifying what their daily lives were becoming.

The commission urged Congress to guarantee an annual numerical cap on admissions. It suggested 350,000 a year (the Rockefeller Commission had suggested 400,000).

Polls showed that a large majority of Americans agreed with the recommendation to reduce legal immigration. [80]

Hesburgh himself warned Congress that two highly influential lobbies had gained so much money and/or influence from the unintended increases of immigration since 1965 that the nation was in danger of them having enough power to overturn the will of the American people.

Congress proved him right by ignoring the second commission's recommendations.

As during the Robber Baron era of high immigration 1880-1920, the priority of U.S. immigration policy by the 1980s was to assist businesses to keep their labor costs down and to help immigrant ethnic leaders grow their political bases.

American workers (of all ethnicities) were an after-thought, if a thought at all, when it came to immigration policy. Where was this generation's A. Philip Randolph to focus the nation on the American worker? (Randolph, sidelined for many years by failing health, died in 1979.) Majorities in Congress in the 1980s reacted with indifference to the commission's report less than two decades after the House and Senate floors had resounded with soaring speeches about the nation's obligation to create equity for the descendants of slavery.

Doubling Down On Immigration
To Avoid Recruiting Blacks

The anti-Black nature of the nation's immigration policies became much clearer in 1990.
The U.S. Department of Labor had commissioned a study entitled *Workforce 2000.* It looked at the results of lower American birth rates in the 1970s and noted that, in a few years, fewer White males would be entering their working age (18) than would be aging out of the workforce. [81]

That demographic change presented an "unprecedented opportunity" for the disproportionately large population of disadvantaged young African Americans," the introduction of the report stated to Members of Congress. The labor markets would be tightening, and employers would be forced to fill jobs by recruiting from populations they had been avoiding.

The nation had "a window of opportunity to integrate disadvantaged youth into the economic mainstream," Congress was told. "As employers reach further down the labor queue, they might be expected to provide better job prospects for historically disadvantaged groups and to invest more heavily in their education and training."

Congress did not see the good news in that. In fact, it seemed terrified at the prospect.

The majority of elected officials were persuaded to act by the business and immigrant lobbying organizations with their cries of an approaching labor shortage crisis. Once again, it was as though many of the descendants of American slavery didn't exist – or didn't matter.

The doubled annual immigration levels since 1965 weren't high enough for the congressional majority. They modified the law so that annual admissions nearly doubled again, soaring to around a million a year. Employers would *not* have to "invest more heavily" in the education and training of unemployed and underemployed African Americans.

Congress had passed a law that would make it even less likely those Americans would get back into the economic mainstream.

Frank Morris, sounding like a latter-day Frederick Douglass, thundered against the immigration increases in congressional testimony. A dean of a Historically Black College & University and former executive director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Morris stated: [82]

> “It is clear that America's Black population is bearing a disproportionate share of immigrants' competition for jobs, housing and social services.... Many of the immigrants compete directly with Blacks in the same labor markets and occupations and have become substitutes for Black workers more often than they have become complements... The pervasive effects of ethnic-network recruiting and the spread of non-English languages in the workplace have, in effect, locked many Blacks out of occupations where they once predominated.”

In the Senate, only three Democrats and five Republicans opposed the massive immigration increase.

The bill was much more hotly contested in the House by a bipartisan opposition of 65 Democrats and 127 Republicans. But the bill passed 231-to-192. President George H.W. Bush enthusiastically signed it into law – as had President Lyndon Johnson the 1965 Act.

The previous quarter century that began in 1964 and 1965 had started with such high promise for the remaining underclass of Black Americans, wrote University of Michigan Professor Reynolds Farley. Chief among the positive factors were:

“[C]ivil rights changes of the 1960s and the apparent removal of the many barriers that kept Blacks in the back of the bus, out of schools, confined to menial jobs, and away from the polling booths in southern states." [83]

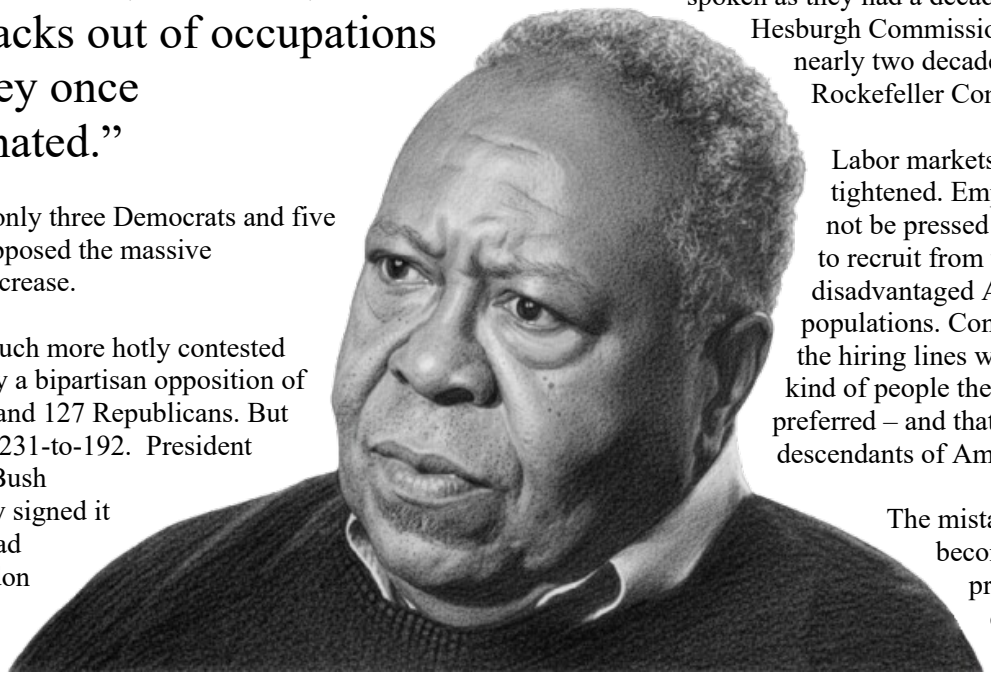
He said other factors that suggested more Black economic progress should have occurred were substantial closings of the large gaps in Black and White school enrollments that had been found in 1960, plus the national economic expansion of the 1980s.

With all those factors working in their favor, Black Americans should have been doing *much* better in 1990 than the statistics showed. Instead, Farley lamented, a large portion of Black Americans were mired in economic stagnation and regression. Business and political leaders looked into those expanding pools of potential Black labor and decided they did not want to rely on recruiting there. Like their industrialist counterparts during the Ellis Island wave of immigration before 1924, they felt they had little need of the labor of the country’s Black citizens. Instead, they had sounded their always politically effective warning of a labor-shortage crisis.

In 1990, the American people’s elected officials had spoken as they had a decade earlier after the Hesburgh Commission report – and nearly two decades earlier after the Rockefeller Commission report:

Labor markets would not be tightened. Employers would not be pressed by the economy to recruit from the most disadvantaged American populations. Congress would fill the hiring lines with more of the kind of people the business lobbies preferred – and that wasn’t descendants of American slavery.

The mistake of 1965 had become the embedded principle of the country.



Surely, once a century isn't too often for an immigration policy that reclaims the highest visions, principles, and hopes of emancipation.

Ready For Reclamation – Again: The Hope in Changed Minds

Even A. Philip Randolph had to change his mind. As a young Socialist labor activist, he argued for a free flow of foreign labor. Despite seeing African Americans' lives improve significantly during each little period of low foreign worker arrivals, his ideological ties and preconceptions seemed to tell him that it would be wrong to support immigration reductions.

His later change of mind provides both a lesson and a hope for correcting destructive policies in the 21st century. And for "emancipating" struggling Black Americans from the economic chains of the 1965 and 1990 mass immigration laws.

Courtesy of Library of Congress

Civil rights icon Barbara Jordan in the mid-1990s assembled an immigration policy that reflected principles similar to those of the Black editors early in the 1920s. A version of it was essentially test-driven during the entire Great Migration. Those "Jordan Commission" immigration recommendations remain a blueprint still valid in the 2020s.

Congress could easily enact the "Jordan Blueprint" at any time – if enough leadership minds change. Concerned citizens would have to push leaders to weigh the evidence and realize it is not wrong to prioritize the needs of descendants of American slavery when setting immigration policy. (*More on Jordan later*.)

The Great Migration Changed Randolph's Mind

In 1919, the evidence from the World War One immigration pause had still not convinced Randolph to change.

He issued a manifesto – "Reconstruction Program of the American Negro" – that included his bottom line principle on immigration: [84]

"Free egress and ingress between countries should be unrestricted just as it is between the states of the U.S."

In 1920, as other Black opinion leaders and the formidable American Federation of Labor were pressing for immigration reductions, Randolph editorialized in his magazine: [85]

"Of course, ***The Messenger*** welcomes all peoples to the shores of America…. Immigration is not a menace to the workers' standard of living, unless labor fails to organize the immigrants. Every worker, black and white, has a right to go anywhere he pleases."

But just four years later, when Congress passed the landmark 1924 immigration restrictions, Randolph had changed sides. He now stood firmly with the AFL unions, with most Black citizens, and with all the other Black editors and thought leaders of his time who extolled the value of immigration restrictions.

Randolph had to step away from idealistic partisan notions about open immigration as a type of human right and a natural friend of the international working class. He had to change so he could prioritize what was best for his fellow African Americans.

By the time of the 1924 congressional vote, the Socialist movement in America had splintered badly. The faction most enthralled with open borders regrouped as part of the Communist International. Eight days after the U.S. government began implementing the 1924 Immigration Act on July 1, the Communist International in Moscow condemned the law and passed a resolution advocating unrestricted worldwide immigration.

The same summer, Randolph and his magazine were favoring a complete time-out on all foreign immigration to the United States!

How had that dramatic turnaround occurred?

Certainly, a factor had to be Randolph's own observations of the ebb and flow of immigration to the United States and their effects on the ebb and flow of the fortunes of Black Americans. The in-country Black migration stories unfolding before his eyes in real time clashed with ideological and emotional preconceptions.

Randolph's core passions for practical advancements of African Americans, and the working class in general, won out.

He took off his preconceptions-colored glasses and stared at the clear, logical truth that the benefits of the Black migrations out of the South were due to restrictions on foreign immigration, something he had avoided saying in earlier years. Now he was writing: [86]

"A veritable flood of Negro workers is flowing North. Why? Not because of lynching, disfranchisement, the jim-crow car, bad schools and housing facilities. No, not at all. For these things have existed in the South ever since the Negro and white people have been there."

Life in the South had been barely bearable, if at all, for most descendants of slavery ever since the end of Reconstruction. But "no great movement" of them happened until World War One and then again in the 1920s, Randolph indicated.

"Hence the cause for this movement [to the North] must be sought somewhere else except the South. The cause is attractive not coercive. It is in front - not behind.

"It is the high wages offered Negro labor which never before existed in the history of the country.

"This situation is largely due to the limitation of immigration ..."

For four decades, African Americans did not in any significant number move out from under economic peonage, serfdom, government-enforced Black codes, vigilante intimidation, lynching and other violence until…

Until what?

How one answers the "until" question largely determines whether one favors lower immigration as an historic tool in fulfilling the Civil War Emancipation promises to descendants of American slavery.

For Randolph, the reality of the migrations seemed to have convinced him that the great "freedom train" of forward progress for most African Americans had not been able to move down the track until:

- World War One crashed foreign immigration temporarily,
- and Congress began passing immigration-reduction laws in the early 1920s.

The 1924 Immigration Act wasn't a perfect blueprint, but its contributions to tight labor markets propelled Black citizens like no other public policy.

Thought Leaders Today Are Understanding What Black Editors Saw

In the 21st century, growing numbers of thought leaders are shifting their opinion on mass immigration in a manner not unlike Randolph's. They are stepping back from looking at immigration through preconceptions and ideologies. They are paying attention to the *actual* role of immigration in the positive Great Migration of Black southerners. They are looking at the tragedies unfolding before them in real time today in the job deserts of Black communities across the country during an era of unrelenting mass immigration of foreign labor.

Nobel-prize economist Sir Angus Deaton, for example, took another look at all this history and wrote a boat-rocking "Rethinking My Economics" essay for the International Monetary Fund: [87]

"I used to subscribe to the near consensus among economists that immigration to the US was a good thing, with great benefits to the migrants and little or no cost to domestic low-skilled workers. I no longer think so."

The Princeton professor looked with fresh eyes at the Great Migration and the many benefits for African Americans. He said his and many economists' views have been shaped too much by "econometric designs that may be credible but often rest on short-term outcomes." He was impressed with arguments that the Great Migration would not have happened if foreign immigration had remained high enough for northern factory owners to continue to hire foreign workers instead of Black citizens.

Deaton also shared thoughts about ethical priorities:

"We certainly have a duty to aid those in distress (in other countries), but we have additional obligations to our fellow citizens that we do not have to others."

He said "longer-term analysis over the past century and a half tells a different story" from the one the public usually hears from economists featured by the media. He said the true story about changes in immigration is this:

"Inequality was high when America was open, was much lower when the borders were closed, and rose again post Hart-Celler [the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965] as the fraction of foreign-born people rose back to its levels in the Gilded Age."

Many highly respected economists and historians *have* been finding these conclusions through their scholarly research for decades. But they have not been the voices that most media have chosen to provide to the public.

Knowledge of the racist quota system in the WHO portion of the 1924 Act is likely part of the reason many otherwise thoughtful leaders today automatically dismiss immigration restrictions, associating them with bigotry. In doing so, they dishonor the Black thought leaders of the past who *did* favor numerical reductions while vigorously opposing the national-origin quota system.

Perhaps not knowing this Black history is why many strong supporters of African American equity today unthinkingly oppose all numerical restrictions even though that has historically been one of the best policy friends Black citizens have had.

Of course, part of the history is that it also took several years for Randolph himself to see past the racism of some restrictionists. His fellow Socialists in his young adult years were split on immigration, with many of the ones favoring restrictions wanting to do so by discriminating on the basis of national origins. He had to look beyond his objections to those allies' WHO views and adopt policies of the HOW MANY based on evidence.

Scholars such as Peter Lindert and Jeffrey Williamson – widely considered among the deans of economic historians of inequality – have combed through the economic evidence throughout American history and found that: [88]

- Whenever immigration surges loosened the labor supply, Black Freedmen have experienced stagnation or regression in their movement into the middle class.
- When immigration moderated and the labor market tightened, higher percentages of Black Freedmen attained jobs, moved up occupational ladders, and increased incomes and assets.

Roger House addresses this historic pattern as a frequent newspaper columnist. The Emerson College professor of American studies says Black American workers have always been "diminished by pro-immigration policies," which continues through today:

"[T]he surge of immigration since the 1980s provided a source of cheap labor that contractors desired and unions could not hold off, and Black labor was the odd man out." [89]

Roger House

Mass immigration since 1965 has watered down and even washed out the 1960s civil rights promises to Black Americans with slave lineage, in part by treating foreign workers as having the same historic claims, according to Pamela Denise Long, a Newsweek contributor and a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion consultant:

Pamela Denise Long

"The unrelenting population change caused by unfettered immigration and the incorporation of new arrivals into Freedmen's civil rights has diluted the potentially positive effects of reparatory policies for multiple generations." [90]

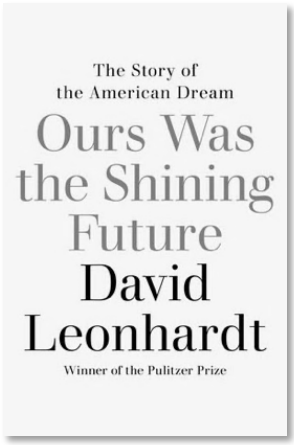
David Leonhardt, Pulitzer-prize columnist of the New York Times, is another example of emerging thought leaders who are struggling with the disconnect of the "common wisdom" about benefits of mass immigration and the counter findings about inequality.

He reviewed competing studies and histories for his book, "Ours Was the Shining Future." In the end, he concluded that the reduced immigration following the 1924 Act "contributed to the surge in working-class incomes" in a period that saw "wages of Black workers rising faster than those of White workers" with a shrinking of the pay gap "well before the great victories of the civil rights movement." [91]

Leonhardt wrote that he assumed some readers would feel uncomfortable reading his summary of immigration history that suggested not all immigration has been helpful for pursuing the nation's highest ideals. He understood why that would discomfort some:

"The celebration of immigration has become a core to the political beliefs of many Americans, on both the political left and right. Immigrants are underdogs, heroes, and – for most of us – ancestors."

He suggested that many people have had difficulty being open to stories that show benefits of lower immigration because some restrictionists – such as some of the promoters of the 1924 national origins quotas – have been xenophobes and racists.



Leonhardt wrote that leaders today should consider leaders of the past who were able to separate questions of the WHO and the HOW MANY in immigration policy:

"They honored immigrants and decried bigotry without believing that more immigration was always better."

Embodying that trait, according to Leonhardt, was Barbara Jordan who was:

"[A] modern version of A. Philip Randolph – an anti-racist voice for fairness and justice and a civil rights icon who became uncomfortable with the high levels of immigration in the United States."

Barbara Jordan's Immigration Blueprint for Today

In the mid-1990s, nearly 30 years after Congress re-started mass immigration, Barbara Jordan presented the nation with a blueprint for limiting immigration for the sake of the nation's underemployed and undercompensated.

The Black former congresswoman from Texas emerged into the thick of the debate with a voice, a delivery, and a message of economic justice as distinctive as that of Randolph's seven decades earlier. She told Congress: [92]

"Immigration policy must protect U.S. workers against unfair competition from foreign workers, with an appropriately higher level of protection to the most vulnerable in our society."

President Bill Clinton had appointed her as chair of yet another bipartisan federal commission on immigration. She had given the keynote address at the 1992 Democratic convention. There, she called for an economy "where a young Black woman or man from the Fifth Ward in Houston or South Central Los Angeles" could go to public schools and gain employment that would "enable her or him to prosper." [93]

That was more likely to happen in a time of more moderate immigration, Jordan concluded in the last act of an illustrious life of public service, with groundbreaking roles as a southern Black woman in state politics, Congress, law, and civil rights.

In simplest form, the Jordan Blueprint combines the principles of:

- the WHO portion in the 1965 Act (getting rid of de facto racist criteria for admissions)
- and the HOW MANY portion of the 1924 Act (keeping numbers low enough to raise employment and wage rates for American workers).

Jordan died a few weeks before Congress voted on the recommendations of her commission.

Many lawmakers – and the President – felt released by her death from honoring their promises to Jordan and switched their positions. Publicly and privately, they gave in to the groups that sought more money or influence by continuing high legal and illegal immigration.

The 1996 Congress somewhat narrowly turned down the Jordan Blueprint to fix immigration policies back to what the 1965 sponsors had promised their legislation would do, even though it did the opposite on the numbers.

Since 1996, an additional 30+ million foreign workers and family members have been allowed into the labor and housing markets of American communities. As usual, descendants of Americans who suffered under slavery and Jim Crow have suffered disproportionately from the flooded labor markets.

But the Jordan Blueprint remains just as valid today as three decades ago to serve as a North Star to a more equitable future for millions of left-behind Black workers – as well as other similarly disadvantaged Americans.

An optimistic sign for the reclamation of the Civil War Emancipation promises is that more and more people seem to be discovering – and rediscovering – Jordan and her blueprint.

It is a shame of the nation that its elected officials refused to correct the obvious mistake of the 1965 Act, especially when Jordan provided such a detailed way to do it three decades later. And now after spurning Jordan, lawmakers have for another three decades been indifferent to the harm that mass immigration always wields.

The good news is that, because of the HOW MANY portion of the 1924 Immigration Act, we know what kind of immigration policy works for the good of those who need the most help. We can see what happened between 1924 and 1965.

And we have the testimony of many of America's greatest historical leaders to remind us of some of our nation's highest principles. Barbara Jordan seemed to give voice to most of them in advocacy of her blueprint.

Courtesy of University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal To Texas History, and Texas Southern University

Like Randolph, Jordan said America's workers are the priority concern in immigration. She told Congress why annual immigration numbers had to be cut: [94]

> "The Commission is particularly concerned about the impact of immigration on the most disadvantaged within our already resident society – inner city youth, racial and ethnic minorities, and recent immigrants who have not yet adjusted to life in the U.S."

Jordan was especially forceful in condemning reckless flows of immigration that endangered the country's workers who were toiling – or attempting to get a job – in the lower-skill occupations:

> "The commission finds no national interest in continuing to import lesser-skilled and unskilled workers to compete in the most vulnerable parts of our labor force. Many American workers do not have adequate job prospects. We should make their task easier to find employment, not harder."

Most of today's African Americans agree with Jordan's conclusions, according to a 2023 nationwide survey of 2,514 Black likely voters. They were asked, "When businesses say they are having trouble finding Americans to take jobs in construction, manufacturing, hospitality, and other service work, what is generally best for the country?" [95]

By a 58-25 ratio, Black voters said it is "better for businesses to raise the pay and try harder to recruit non-working Americans even if it causes prices to rise," rather than "for the government to bring in new foreign workers to keep business costs and prices down."

Black voters were even more opposed to bringing in immigrants for higher-skilled jobs, siding with "the country already has enough talented people to train and recruit for most of those jobs."

Jordan called for rolling back annual immigration numbers to around a half-million, compared with the authorized level of around a million a year since 1990.

The 2023 poll found only 11% of Black voters favored increasing annual authorized immigration above one million. The majority preferred reducing immigration by at least a quarter, with 39% choosing the option of cutting the numbers by more than half.

Jordan would achieve those cuts primarily by eliminating the endless chains of extended family migration beyond the spouse and minor children and, generally, by reducing other immigration of people who might compete in the same job categories as struggling Americans. (Black voters in the 2023 poll favored eliminating chain migration by a 56-30 margin.)

As for illegal immigration, Jordan knew it imposed costly burdens on low-income communities, particularly those of primarily African Americans and previous immigrants. She saw that so-called hospitality and compassion for illegal border crossers and visa overstayers comes at the expense of Americans least able to afford it. Illegal presence on the part of foreign citizens, and illegal hiring on the part of U.S. employers, are not victimless crimes. To keep ethical priorities straight, Jordan stated: [96]

"[T]his country must set limits on who can enter and back up these limits with effective enforcement of our immigration law... Too many have abused the very hospitality that we grant so freely. Unlawful immigration is unacceptable. Enforcement measures have not sufficiently stemmed these movements…. There are people who argue that some illegal aliens contribute to our community because they may work, pay taxes, send their children to our schools, and in all respects except one, obey the law. Let me be clear: that is not enough."

The blame for illegal immigration, Jordan stated unequivocally, lay with businesses that preferred illegal

labor over recruiting and offering American-level wages and working conditions to non-employed Americans.

She saw little chance of curbing the flow of illegal labor without mandating an effective workplace verification system for all employers. That eventually was developed under the name of E-Verify. But Congress has made certain that E-Verify isn't mandatory so businesses that prefer can still fairly easily employ illegal labor without getting caught.

Black voters by a 61-21 margin favored mandating that every employer use E-Verify "to help ensure that they hire only legal workers for U.S. jobs."

For all her toughness in defense of American workers, however, Jordan reflected the generally kindly attitudes that Black leaders displayed toward immigrants a century ago. She championed programs to fully integrate immigrants into all aspects of American society. And she decried "hostility and discrimination against immigrants." Such behavior is "antithetical to the traditions and interests of the country," she said.

But kindness toward immigrants and toward those who wish to immigrate does not mean it is wrong or unkind for a country to set limits for the sake of the members of its own community, Jordan insisted:

> "[W]e disagree with those who would label efforts to control immigration as being inherently anti-immigrant. Rather, it is both a right and a responsibility of a democratic society to manage immigration so that it serves the national interest."

Like Black leaders in the 1920s, Jordan was not going to be distracted or deterred by the fact that some supporters of lower-immigration policies had racist attitudes (just as many supporters of *high* immigration have always been motivated by racist desires to protect employers from having to depend on Black workers).

Whatever might be the motivations of others for lower immigration, Barbara Jordan knew this was *her* blueprint based on *her* intentions. And the Great Migration had

Courtesy of Library of Congress

already proved that these policies would be supremely *anti*-racist in their benefits for Black citizens and could be supported with the highest American principles.

Not surprisingly, Jordan's blueprint with the racially sensitive 1965 WHO principle and the pro-Black 1924 HOW MANY principle is quite similar to what Randolph and most other Black editors were advocating a century ago.

It is a balanced immigration policy that remains to be tried in whole.

We know, however, that the HOW MANY aspect of the 1924 Immigration Act in dramatically reducing annual immigration led to the greatest positive transformation of African American lives since the Civil War.

We *don't* know what kind of "great migration" might occur if a version of the 1924 Act's reductions were tried again. Perhaps it would be a migration of capital to communities with large pools of unengaged workers – or a migration of jobs, training programs, work facilities. Or maybe a flurry of recruiting agents just like the last time.

At the very least, the Jordan Blueprint could reactivate the arc toward economic and political justice of the 1924 Immigration Act era that was so thoughtlessly bent backwards by passing the 1965 and 1990 Immigration Acts.

The Black newspaper editors of the 1920s did not know exactly how or how much, but they knew for certain that deep cuts in immigration would re-open gates to major economic and social advancement because they had seen a pilot episode.

As have we. •

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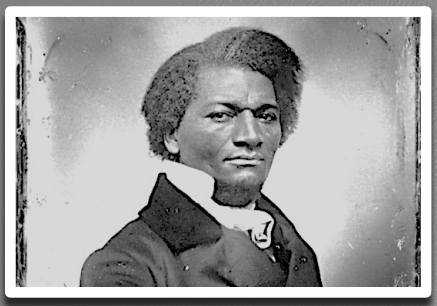

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