The Debate Over Immigration: 200 Years & Counting
America may be a nation of immigrants, but we haven't always welcomed newcomers with open arms
By Sam Roberts

Few of their children in the country learn English." They "will never adopt our language or customs, any more than they can acquire our complexion."

A volley from today's heated debate over immigration? Not quite. That was Benjamin Franklin, worrying more than 200 years ago that German immigrants were overrunning his home state. "Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them?" Franklin wrote.

America's racial and ethnic makeup has been evolving since Spanish settlers and American Indians first mingled in the 16th century in St. Augustine and Santa Fe, in what are now Florida and New Mexico. But in spite of our heritage as a nation of immigrants, Americans have often been wary about welcoming foreigners, both legal and illegal.

America in 1776
The fears raised by Franklin in the 18th century flared periodically in the 19th and 20th centuries. The debate has been rekindled today by concerns about national security, America's cultural identity, and the economic impact of an influx of low-paid workers, many here illegally from Mexico.

Of course, most Americans can trace their ancestry back to immigrants at some point. In 1776, most Americans were immigrants (or their descendants) from the British Isles. The majority were white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who came to escape religious or political persecution, or in search of economic opportunity.

But the population also included large numbers of Dutch, Spanish, and Germans, in addition to American Indians, whose ancestors came from Asia thousands of years ago, and blacks, who came involuntarily from Africa as slaves starting in 1619.

The first U.S. Census in 1790 counted nearly 4 million people, the majority of them of English, Welsh, or Scottish heritage; 757,000 blacks made up the next-largest group, followed by Germans.
Even then, some worried that immigration was a threat to the nation's character, and in 1790, Congress passed a law that aliens who had lived in the U.S. for two years could apply for citizenship—if they were "free white persons" and of "good moral character."

The 19th century brought very different immigrants, starting with the Irish and Italians, who were both largely poor farmers and Catholic. Beginning in 1845, a potato famine in Ireland, caused by a fungus which destroyed that country's most important food source, killed a million people and left millions of others hungry. Within a decade, nearly 2 million people—almost a quarter of Ireland's population—had emigrated to the U.S., transforming the neighborhoods and politics of cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago. Irish immigrants also mined coal in Pennsylvania, and built bridges and railroads from New York to Illinois.

Italian immigrants followed, beginning in the 1860s. Many were long-term migrants—going home when they had made enough money and returning when they needed to make more (much like many Mexicans today).

Jews began to arrive in significant numbers starting around 1850, first from Germany, and then from Eastern Europe, including Russia, where many fled pogroms (deadly government-sponsored attacks on Jewish towns) and general anti-Semitism. Between 1880 and 1924, more than 3 million Jews, a third of Eastern Europe's Jewish population, left for the U.S., with most settling in overcrowded tenement neighborhoods like New York's Lower East Side.

Also in the mid-19th century, after the abolition of slavery produced a demand for cheap labor, Chinese workers were brought in to build railroads, including the Transcontinental route, which linked the east and west coasts in 1869.

Before 1875, there were few restrictions placed on immigration to America. The poet Emma Lazarus, herself the daughter of Portuguese Jewish immigrants, captured the nation's welcoming spirit in an 1883 poem—"Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." Those lines were later engraved on a plaque at the Statue of Liberty, which itself became a beacon of hope for millions of immigrants entering New York harbor on their way to Ellis Island.

Economics also helps explain 19th-century America's open arms. "Factory owners needed workers, as did the railroads pushing across the country," says Kenneth Prewitt, a former Census Bureau director. "The frontier was there to be settled."

But the surge in Irish and Italian immigrants to a mostly Protestant nation provoked a backlash against Catholics, and immigrants in general, with some believing that the Pope was plotting to undermine U.S. democracy. Out West, the presence of Chinese immigrants also provoked protests.

Eventually, calls for at least partially closing America's doors began to gain traction. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred all immigrants from China for 10 years (the ban was later extended).

Immigration from Europe, however, continued unabated for almost 40 years. In 1908, a record 1.7 million legal immigrants entered the U.S. The influx of Southern and Eastern Europeans—Italians, Poles, Russian Jews, Greeks, and others—generated growing
concerns about political radicalism (some of the immigrants were Communists or leftists) and about their effect on wages (having a larger pool of workers willing to work for less can help hold down wages).

**Immigration Quotas**

In the 1920s, Congress imposed quotas that sharply reduced the number of immigrants allowed in, and gave preference to those from Northern Europe in an attempt to re-create the ethnic profile of 19th-century America. The quotas worked against Southern and Eastern Europeans, and during World War II, prevented millions of Jews and other refugees from escaping the Nazis. In 1965, spurred in part by the civil rights movement, America eliminated immigration quotas altogether, leading to the immigration system basically still in place today.

About 3,000 legal immigrants now enter the U.S. every day from all over the world. Most are admitted under four major categories: those who have relatives here, are sponsored by employers because of their special skills, are refugees from persecution, or are selected in a visa lottery.

But today's heated debate is largely about *illegal* immigration. The U.S. has periodically left its back door open for illegal immigrants, mostly Mexicans, who have crossed the border into the U.S. looking for jobs. Today, there are an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. Fears that "undocumented" workers hold down wages for Americans workers, cost millions of dollars a year for services like health care and education, and present a security risk post-9/11, have led to calls for a crackdown.

*Will They Become Americans?*

In May, the Senate passed a very different plan. It would increase border security, but also create a guest-worker program and put most illegal immigrants on a track to citizenship, once they have paid fines and learned English. The Senate plan is similar to that of President Bush, who has said immigrants help the economy by taking low-wage jobs that Americans don't want. "America can be a lawful society and a welcoming society at the same time," Bush said. It was unclear by early summer if either plan would become law.

For those with a sense of history, today's debate sounds familiar. "The basic dynamics do not change," says Aristide R. Zolberg, a political scientist at The New School in New York. "Wanting immigrants because they're a good source of cheap labor and human capital on the one hand, and then posing the identity question: But will they become Americans?"