

*from*  
**A LETTER REGARDING  
IMMIGRATION RESTRICTIONS  
1924**

----- *Louis Marshall* -----

Nearly 1 million immigrants a year flooded the United States following World War I. Congress responded by enacting legislation in 1921 that set a total immigration quota at 350,000 per year and banned all Asian immigration. Three years later, the National Origins Act lowered the quota to 150,000. In this letter written to a woman in favor of immigration quotas, Louis Marshall (1856–1929), one of the leading lawyers of his time and the son of German Jewish immigrants, argues in favor of a culturally diverse America.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Issues**

Based on your analysis of this document and an understanding of the 1920s, what were some of the specific economic, social, and political issues affecting immigration at that time? Do any of these issues remain relevant today?

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...If The New York Times quoted me as saying that there was no demand for a restriction of immigration, it was an inaccuracy. Knowing of the existence of the organization of which you are an official and of other similar organizations, I could not possibly have made the remark. What I argued was that there was no reason for the restriction of immigration beyond that contained in the basic Immigration Act of 1917, which I described as a highly selective immigration law. By its terms all persons who are mentally, morally and physically unfit, who are likely to become public charges, who are opposed to organized government, and who are followers of anarchistic and communistic theories, are excluded. If properly administered by an adequate staff of public officials there is no possible doubt in my mind but that the law to which I have referred would prove in every way advantageous to the country.

I also called attention to the fact that much of the objection to immigration is due to a lack of understanding of the immigrants who have come to this country and to hatred and prejudice, which, unfortunately, prevail all over the world and which bode ill for the happiness of mankind. I emphasized the fact that, for the first time in our history, we are seeking to legislate along racial, nationalistic and religious lines, to differentiate between the various inhabitants of our country, to create a class spirit, to sow the seeds of jealousy and suspicion, and to forget our finest American traditions and the underlying spirit of our Government.

You refer to the members of Congress who have voted against the Immigration

Bill as being cheap politicians, who pander to what you term “the foreign vote.” May I not retort in kind by saying that there are many Congressmen who voted for the bill who were the cowards and whose votes were dictated by political considerations, knowing as any calm observer must know the great debt which our country owes to its immigrants, who have advanced its development in every direction and who have brought to it noble spiritual, moral and ethical gifts? Taking our population in its entirety, on an average there are not two generations which separate our present population from the steerage of an immigrant ship. Among the most exalted contributors to science in this country are such immigrants as Tesla, Marconi, Steinmetz, Prof. Pupin and Prof. Jacques Loeb. President Wilson’s mother was an immigrant. Both parents of our present Secretary of State were immigrants. I could present to you thousands upon thousands of names the very enumeration of which would afford an unanswerable argument in favor of immigration. Are you aware of the number of immigrants, many of them unnaturalized, who served in our army during the late war, and so far as that is concerned in every war in which we have been engaged, not excluding that of the Revolution? It is a very easy thing to indulge in denunciation, but after all is said and done the record of our industrial, commercial and intellectual life refutes the appeals of fanaticism....

There are others in this country who have made remarks which are inconsistent with American ideals. I refer to those of the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan....

Your statement that during this last Congress foreign blocs threatened our Government and the Republican Party if they passed the Johnson bill, is incorrect. Of course foreign governments have nothing to say about our legislation. Under the Constitution it is within the power of Congress to pass any law it desires on the subject of immigration. There are always, however, two ways of reaching a result—one which is right and the other which is wrong; one calculated to give unnecessary offence and irritation, and the other of a conciliatory character. The fact that our honored President—and I speak not only as an American citizen, but also as a Republican—has been greatly embarrassed by the manner in which Congress dealt with the Japanese phase of immigration, shows that it has been attempting to make laws in a superheated atmosphere not congenial to that calm thought which should accompany the formulation of far-reaching national policies.

You voice the fervent wish that you can live to see America speaking one language, reading one language, and united in ideals. It is my wish that we shall always have a united country, that it shall not be impervious to the thought that there are other parts of the world in which there are human beings actuated by noble motives who seek the advancement of humanity, that although it is desirable that every person living here shall, as soon as possible, speak and read the English language, I trust that the time will never come when we shall be so chauvinistic as to refuse to be receptive to the intellectual sustenance to be derived from the literatures of other peoples, not only those of England, France, Germany, Italy

and Spain, but even those of Russia and Poland, and of that language in which the greatest spiritual possession of the world, the Bible, was written. We have been a liberal nation, broad in our sympathy, lofty in our aspirations. Let us not become narrow, provincial and bigoted. If there is one thing more than another that immigration has done for the United States, it has been to give it a wider and more extensive perspective and a better understanding of its mission as a great civilizing influence based upon the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Source: From *Louis Marshall: Champion of Liberty*, edited by Charles Reznikoff. Used with the permission of the American Jewish Committee.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER**

Students may answer that a mixture of economic, social, and political issues influenced the passage of immigration restrictions during the 1920s. Students may argue that many workers feared competition from immigrants for their jobs. Students may also cite the prejudice against certain ethnic groups of immigrants, such as Italians and Japanese. Such nativist groups as the Ku Klux Klan encouraged this prejudice. Students may note the popular fear, sparked in part by World War I, that immigrants were not loyal to the U.S. government. Students may argue that today some people are still concerned about competition from immigrants for jobs, while other people still show prejudice against certain ethnic groups of immigrants.