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Who Gets In

And what happens once they're here

BY PETER SKERRY

The *New Case Against Immigration* lives up to its title. Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, Washington's most respected restrictionist voice, has produced a radical but constructively provocative case for the fundamental incompatibility of mass immigration with mature modern societies. Arguing that America has outgrown mass immigration, he mounts a frontal assault on all its forms—legal as well as illegal, skilled as well as unskilled.

One does not have to agree with Krikorian to see that this is no screed by a neo-Malthusian doomsayer, or nativist zealot. Neither does it bear any trace of the outraged naiveté that characterizes so much restrictionist

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commentary. The grandson of Armenian immigrants, Krikorian has produced a well-researched, policy savvy book whose comprehensiveness and verve ought to embarrass Washington's major think tanks, which veer between narrowly technical and evasively high-

**The New Case
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Both Legal and Illegal
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minded approaches to the topic.

At the core of Krikorian's analysis is his refrain: "It's not the immigrants, it's us." He explicitly rejects the view that immigrants today, especially Hispanics, are unwilling or unable to assimilate. Rather, he argues that they are not assimilating because multicultural elites are encouraging them not to, through such misguided policies

as foreign-language ballots, bilingual education, ethnic studies programs, and dual citizenship. He also emphasizes how Spanish-language electronic media and easy air travel back home similarly retard assimilation.

Yet these familiar points do not represent Krikorian's strongest suit. In fact, he ignores abundant evidence that, despite such multicultural efforts, Hispanic immigrants and their children are learning English and adopting American values. And while he correctly highlights the potential problems posed by huge concentrations of immigrants from one social, cultural, linguistic group (Hispanics), Krikorian goes too far when he asserts that its largest component, Mexican immigrants and their offspring, is "marginalized from the American mainstream."

Nevertheless, Krikorian dismisses restrictionist nightmares about Chicano radicals bringing about a recon-

quista by Mexico of territory lost to the United States in 1848. Readily acknowledging “the genuine American patriotism of millions of Hispanic citizens,” he prudently chooses not to obsess about Mexican flags at street demonstrations and soccer games. “There will be no secession of the Southwest from the Union,” he concludes. Yet he does insist that the loyalty of Hispanics “doesn’t change the fact that Mexico is already actively involved in American domestic politics ostensibly on their behalf.” He argues persuasively that, while Americans are not paying attention, Mexico is advancing its own national agenda based on its sense of historical grievance, demanding for Mexican citizens in the United States, and even for Mexican Americans, prerogatives and rights that are not enjoyed by Mexico’s own foreign nationals, and even naturalized citizens. Yet again, Krikorian pushes the point too far when he concludes: “In a modern society there are two choices: mass immigration accompanied by a progressive loss of sovereignty, or protection of sovereignty through limits on immigration.”

Similarly strained is Krikorian’s perspective on immigration and national security. He is certainly correct to dismiss the foolish rhetoric that “there’s no relationship between immigration and terrorism.” Usefully, he shows how Homeland Security is overwhelmed by the monitoring of the entry and exit of millions of individuals every year. Emphasizing the customer service mentality that seeks to keep the traffic moving with minimal delays, he again stresses that the problem is not immigrants, but us. Focusing on America’s failure to grasp the full implications of today’s asymmetric warfare, he argues that immigrant communities are potential staging areas for terrorists.

This is undoubtedly true, but is that the end of the story? For example, he never considers the evidence that Muslim Americans can be valuable assets in the struggle against Islamist terrorists.

Krikorian is on more solid footing when addressing the demographic implications of immigration. He

points out that because immigrants only slightly increase America’s fertility rate, they reduce the average age of the population minimally. So immigrants won’t solve America’s Social Security problems. Nevertheless, they do contribute significantly to overall population growth, which he regards as too high to sustain Americans’ present quality of life: “The real population question for Americans is not whether a Malthusian catastrophe awaits us but rather what kind of life we will bequeath to our grandchildren.”

Krikorian is particularly deft when



Mark Krikorian

analyzing the impact of immigration on government spending. He lays out the data demonstrating conclusively that immigrants are a net fiscal burden, now and in the foreseeable future, especially at the state and local levels. As have others, he points out that one-fourth of those without health insurance are immigrants. But digging deeper, he points out that most of the growth in the uninsured is traceable to immigrants. He invokes Milton Friedman’s observation that “you can’t have free immigration and a welfare state.” But unlike many free-marketeters and libertarians, he rejects the notion that immigration can be used to undermine the welfare state. Self-conscious realist that he is, Krikorian sees that Americans lack the

political will to deny social welfare benefits to immigrants and their children, pointing to failed efforts to do so amid welfare reform during the 1990s. As he concludes, “Walling immigrants off from government benefits once we’ve let them in is a fantasy.”

Most compelling is Krikorian’s analysis of the economic impact of immigration. Drawing on the research of economist George Borjas and others, he demonstrates that immigrants represent an increasing proportion of the poor, and that the income gap between immigrants and natives has been widening, while the children of immigrants have been making gains relative to their parents but earning less than other Americans. One result is increased competition at the bottom of the labor market between immigrants and unskilled American workers, especially African Americans—though Krikorian is careful to note that this is hardly the only problem confronting poor blacks. Finally, he argues that the huge influx of unskilled immigrants is discouraging investment in innovative technologies that increase productivity.

Reading Krikorian’s uncompromising critique, one cannot help but wonder what drastic policy recommendations will follow. Yet his actual proposals fall far short of his radical views. Relying on a “zero-based budgeting” approach to the question of how many legal immigrants to admit annually, he comes up with 400,000—less than half the approximately one million we have been admitting in recent years. To achieve this, he would limit family-based admittances to spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens, excluding parents, adult siblings, and the adult children of legal residents and citizens.

To support his “pro-immigrant policy of low immigration,” he urges increased funding for immigration services, including expanded English-language instruction and the establishment of immigrant welcome centers. As for the 12 million or more illegals here, he rejects mass deportations but also opposes any kind of amnesty, proposing instead “attrition through enforcement”—that is, rigorous appli-

cation of existing immigration laws, especially in the nation's interior. Over time, he maintains, illegals here would leave and subsequent newcomers would be discouraged from coming.

None of these recommendations will pass muster with immigration advocates or their sympathizers—or with rabid restrictionists, for that matter. But the main problem with Krikorian's proposals is that they fly in the face of his own analysis. If immigration is fundamentally at odds with contemporary America—weakening the nation fiscally and economically, squeezing the most vulnerable of our citizens, and threatening our sovereignty—then surely 400,000 immigrants a year is still too many.

Krikorian identifies himself as a conservative addressing “Americans in the patriotic mainstream, liberal and conservative.” But his approach might be more aptly described as a curious blend of populism and technocratic policy-wonkery. On the populist side, he articulates a defense of “the revealed preferences” and “natural” choices of millions of ordinary Americans whose freely made decisions are being “artificially” controverted by their government's immigration policy. He sees immigration overwhelming the stable or slow population growth resulting from “the reproductive free market” in which Americans have opted for small families. And while he does not defend suburban sprawl when driven by increased population pressures from immigrants, he does insofar as it results from choices made available to Americans by technology and affluence.

Up to a point, this stance is prudent, even admirable. Too many Americans today feel besieged by immigrants, while their grievances are ignored or smugly dismissed by elites. But surely Krikorian pushes his populist perspective too far when he opposes skilled immigration on the grounds that it would hurt the earnings of college-educated Americans. This is a concern, to be sure; but he never explains why such relatively well-off Americans should be shielded from competitive global labor markets.

In Krikorian's view, America's

immigration policy is a vast social engineering project overseen by transnational elites insulated from popular pressure. In the one faint echo here of Lou Dobbs, Krikorian invokes the specter of a remote, out-of-touch government that makes contemporary America sound like pre-revolutionary Russia. Yet while elites have behaved irresponsibly, they have not simply foisted mass immigration on the American people. Krikorian underestimates the extent to which immigration is tied to our understanding of ourselves as a nation. This self-image is rooted in history and ideology, but also embedded in the fabric of daily life. In this regard it is telling that he never addresses the perspective, most elegantly put forward by MIT economist Michael Piore, that far from being a threat to modern societies, immigrants are essential—not merely because they work for less, but because their flexibility and drive overcome the rigidities and constraints arising from affluence and entitlement.

At some level, Krikorian must understand this—hence, his goal of 400,000 immigrants annually. Yet rather than articulate a broad rationale capable of sustaining responses to the inevitable demands for fewer (or more) immigrants, he arrives at this number with the spare logic of an accountant. Such is the curious nature of Krikorian's technocratic populism, which is extremely well informed about policy details, but tone-deaf and too reactive to sustain a new direction for U.S. immigration policy.

For example, Krikorian holds up Japan as a low-migration society from which the United States has much to learn. Arguing that America's reliance on low-skilled immigrants retards innovation, he points admiringly to Japan's advances in robotics. Yet he fails to consider the myriad ways in which Japan's antipathy to immigrants and foreigners reflects a way of life quite antithetical to fundamental American values. Certainly those millions of freedom-loving, patriotic Americans feeling squeezed by immigrants are not going to be drawn to Japan as any kind of model.

Similarly cramped is Krikorian's reasoning about illegals. He rejects mass roundups and deportations because of the fiscal cost, the economic disruption, the ability of immigrants' rights attorneys to derail such efforts, and the pervasive media presence that would broadcast the inevitable missteps. Completely missing is any suggestion that mass deportations might be unfair to a significant number of people. Krikorian simply fails to consider that immigrants who live and raise families here might, over time, come to have claims on this society. These are complicated and emotional questions, too often pushed toward a predictable open-borders conclusion by advocates and their sympathizers. Nevertheless, these are more wrenching dilemmas for many Americans than Krikorian's cold logic allows.

Finally, Krikorian proposes a limit of 50,000 humanitarian admittances (refugees, asylum-seekers, and others) per year—about half what we have typically been accepting, at least before 9/11. The problem is not that the figure seems too low or too rigid, but once again, that it is too narrowly arrived at. Krikorian seems to have opted for this number because it was the target set by the Refugee Act of 1980, not because it somehow speaks to the larger question of why a nation like the United States accepts refugees. Nor does he offer any broader exploration of how doing so might be central to American ideals or responsibilities as the most powerful nation on earth. Indeed, he does not even acknowledge these dimensions of America's refugee policy.

These days the *New York Times* clearly believes that immigration policy can be reformed on the basis of the genuinely wrenching personal tragedies that it features almost daily. Serious analysts might well react in frustration. Yet melodrama and moralism must not be permitted to obscure the moral underpinnings of this nation's immigration policy. In this regard, the limitations of Krikorian's perspective are clear. Still, those who reject his perspective would do well to provide as sober and reasoned an articulation of their own position. ♦