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The RAISE Act: Protecting First-World Privilege via Strategic Racism

The new immigration legislation will not achieve its ostensible goal. The criteria it proposes for new immigrants thinly conceal its racist motivations.

by [Grant J Silva](#) March 6, 2018

Trump's merit-based RAISE Act (Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment) aspires to protect U.S. workers, halt wage-decline, improve the national economy, and be fairer to taxpayers. It accomplishes the above by stopping the flow of low-skilled and unskilled immigration into the United States. This bill rewards immigrants for having an education, speaking English, possessing wealth and entrepreneurial ambition, as well as recognizes significant past achievements of would-be immigrants. It prioritizes the admission of immediate family members (spouses and children) of current U.S. residents, and makes available temporary (renewable) visas for elderly parents.

On account of what its authors describe as “questionable economic and humanitarian interests,” the RAISE Act eliminates the Diversity Visa lottery and limits refugees to 50,000 a year.

Unfortunately, this bill will do little, if any, of the above. Worse, it is a perfect example of **strategic racism** coming to the rescue of “first-world privilege.”

First off, since the mid-1990s, almost all immigrants into the United States are barred from receiving federal welfare assistance for 5 years or longer (notwithstanding governmental benefits awarded to children and human trafficking victims). The bill also ignores the fact that the U.S. economy, especially construction, farming, the hotel industry, and more, stands in need of cheap low-skilled labor. Unless people in the U.S. are willing to pay \$10 for a gallon of milk and thousands of dollars more for their homes on account of increases in construction costs, this plan will fail to accomplish its promises. You cannot protect the economy by hindering the economy. Sadly, since we as a nation are unwilling to give up our addiction to low-skilled immigrant labor, the RAISE Act would contribute to factors that increase the levels of “illegal” immigration, thereby undermining the wall Trump wishes to build (in this sense I guess ‘RAISE’ is quite apropos).

By “rewarding” English-speaking skilled immigrants, this bill perpetuates the global economic status quo and protects first-world privilege by curbing immigration from the developing, “post-colonial” and (I guess coincidentally) non-white world. It targets for admission immigrants who were fortunate enough or could afford to be educated in English, completed the equivalent of high-school education (or more), or have “something” to offer — easily exploitable time and energy is not good enough anymore. Without sought after skills or wealth of some kind, this bill virtually bars entry into the United States unless one’s immediate family member is already here (a notion reserved to the nuclear family) or they qualify for a refugee visa (a highly politicized category for sure). Supporters of the bill say it rewards hard-work. I contend it allows the globally lucky to further their luck.

While there are, of course, countries besides the U.K. or Australia where people speak English, the RAISE Act favors immigrants from well to do economic backgrounds, from those places or sectors of foreign economies where wealth has historically pooled, that is, former colonial metropolises or amongst former colonial elite. It is also partial those who share certain ideological leanings and socio-economic investments serving U.S. interests (private interests, of course). As such, the RAISE Act is a reminder of the ways in which global migration patterns are not spontaneous events but the consequence of decades, if not centuries, of economic exploitation, colonial domination and imperial aspirations. It is when migrants follow the flow of wealth, jobs, and resources from the global south to the north, that immigration becomes “a problem.”

This bill says: Immigrants from Denmark or Norway welcome! Those from the poorer (and darker!) parts of Latin America or Africa, go home!

As such, the RAISE Act wields racial prejudice strategically. It is not racist in the way most people think about racism, that is, the Confederate flag waving bigot spewing racist epithets. It nonetheless relies upon racial dog-whistles by making low-skills, lack of English speaking ability, the absence of significant accomplishments and wealth, or the likelihood that one might stand in-need of federal benefits (which in our nation’s national imaginary are exclusively reserved for nonwhites) factors for exclusion. It crystallizes a concern many have regarding post-1965 immigration into the U.S., an era which saw an influx of migrants from Latin America, Asia, Africa and other parts of the developing world. Migrants who happen to be, for the most part, unskilled and nonwhite or ethnically-different from the U.S. imagined community. The architects of this bill, most notably Stephen Miller, are aware of the backlash they would face if they try to ban nonwhites from entering the United States (recall the backlash generated by talk of “shithole” nations). Instead, the RAISE Act instead goes after the other main attribute of post-1965 immigration: lack of skills.

The RAISE Act betrays the immigrant narrative central the U.S. national mythos, a narrative that is by no means a perfect story (for instance, it alienates

native peoples and ignores the ways migrants have routinely been treated badly). Nevertheless, like most other settler-nations, the U.S. is and has always been a nation of “immigrants.” No one said anything about rich immigrants. To the delight of nativists and neo-nationalists, this bill transforms the U.S. from a nation of immigrants to a nation-state, the home of the “American” people (read “white” people), the kind of individuals who deserve jobs, welfare benefits (unless they’re nonwhite), a thriving economy, absolute safety and security, and more, on account of having won the birth-rite lottery, thereby making entitlement out of privilege. It seeks to replenish this American people, if not through the outright growth of its own population, then through literal gate-keeping tactics that surely are not racist because they never mention a word about “race.”



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