

**An Immigration Policy for the United States and Europe**  
**Congressman Jim Kolbe**  
**(remarks as prepared for delivery)**

Thank you for having me here today and for that kind introduction.

I can think of few subjects that are richer in content, or more consequential in impact, than international migration. There is no more powerful determinant driving globalization.

I approach this issue as a politician who values the contributions immigrants make, as one convinced that the developed world must find a sensible, orderly way to embrace immigration, and to welcome its participants.

Let me be candid and honest with you. Not everyone in America – certainly not in my own state – shares my views on this subject. Fear of immigration – about loss of jobs, about loss of cultural identity, about threats to security – area as real in my country as they are in Europe. But what is different in the United States is a long history of immigration. Indeed, it is the warp and woof that makes the very fabric of our society. We are a nation of immigrants, and no politician can escape that reality. It is with this bedrock principle in mind that I approach tonight's remarks, to offer some thoughts on the politics of immigration, and on some of the ideological trends that shape the debate we're having in Congress today.

One of the risks in this debate, regardless of which side you are on, is a natural tendency to focus on exceptional cases – on immigrant success stories that could be replicated again and again – if only policy makers would get their act together. Conversely, opponents focus on the worst case scenario – usually alleged – the tale of terrorists in the midst of immigrant populations, or the native born working man or woman, whose job was taken by a lower-paid immigrant, and who now finds him or herself and family on the welfare rolls.

Let me make it clear to you – if it isn't already so – that I come down firmly on the side of support for legal immigration, yes, even expanded immigration for a country that already accepts more legal immigration than the rest of the world combined.

So, to be sure, on the pro-immigration side of the equation, the achievements of immigrants are real, and often astonishing. Since World War II, 70 percent of Nobel laureates in physics hailing from non-English-speaking countries have either studied, taught, or carried out research in the U.S. and Britain. Two of the greatest authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Joseph Conrad and Samuel Beckett – penned their work as immigrants, using the language of their adopted countries.

Yet, as compelling as such stories are, the politics of immigration will be defined more by culture – by broad ideas – than by individual biographies. And it's these ideas that I want to discuss tonight.

First, there is the large umbrella of issues that shelters under the rubric of “human rights” issues. It’s remarkable how the notion of human rights, especially after World War II, has fundamentally altered how we think of immigrants. At the beginning of the last century, the U.S. Supreme Court could still describe immigration from Asia as – quote – “foreign aggression and encroachment.” Prior to World War II, the public debate over immigration was littered with statements explicitly catering to racism, xenophobia, and nativist sentiments that would be unthinkable today.

What is the difference between that era and ours? Simply put: shame. World War II, the Holocaust, put an end to eugenicist fantasies, at least in most of the Western world. We cannot forget that the United States, much of Europe, and the rest of the world stood idly by in the 1930s in the face of mounting, and then incontrovertible evidence of extermination of Jews in all Europe by the Nazi regime. We are reminded in books and TV shows of the plight of the ship, *St. Louis*, wandering through the oceans of the Western Hemisphere, searching for a home for its load of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, denied a landing in country after country, and finally sent back to Europe where many of its passengers were ultimately swallowed in the horror which followed.

But, we don’t have to go back, beyond the mid-point of the last century, to find examples of genocide. There is still ethnic conflict, forced migrations, genocide: We have Cambodia three decades ago, Bosnia and Rwanda in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to remind us that the human condition may not have improved much. But what has changed is that modern media shames us with the immediacy and the visual impact of these horrors as never before.

Of course, this growing awareness of foreigners as human beings who can make a positive contribution to the life of a nation has been uneven, and it’s spread at an uneven pace. I can still remember, as a young naval officer serving in Vietnam in the 1960s, going to Australia for R & R – rest and recreation – and being struck by the absence of any but European citizens – other than the occasional, and usually embarrassing, aboriginal person panhandling on the sidewalks of Sydney. The cosmopolitan Sydney that we know today was nowhere in sight. But it did emerge over time – actually, quite quickly. And it emerged in large measure because of an immigration policy that was informed by human rights and economic reality.

So human rights have changed the tone of political debate, both in America and elsewhere. No longer does the U.S. Congress deliberate – as it once did – over whether certain nationalities, regions, or political groups should be excluded from the immigrant pool. Instead, today we speak in terms of skill levels, language ability, costs to public programs like welfare and health care, and immigration’s impact on jobs and employment.

To some, this is a distinction without a difference. I disagree. There are plenty of colleagues I differ with on immigration reform, but our arguments are based almost entirely on differing views of what will work economically or what is right juridically.

The other issues – race, culture, religion – may be there, but they are always sub rosa, hidden, never discussed in polite, politically correct company.

There will always be people on the fringe, whose rhetoric recalls an earlier, uglier time – but they are just that: the fringe. They’re not the ones propelling the debate or shaping the law. And if recent polls and elections indicate anything, they won’t be making law for a long time.

In my home district, in Arizona, the Republican candidate who won the nomination to succeed me has taken a strongly anti-immigrant platform as a base for his campaign. However, he challenged me in 2004 on this single issue and lost. It is highly likely that he will lose his current campaign next month, thus converting his seat to the Democrat column. That would be one of only 15 conversions needed for the Democrats to take control of the House. The bottom line is clear: while the politics of fear and anti-immigration policy may energize a base within Republican constituencies in some districts, it is not broad enough to carry the day with the population as a whole.

This outcome should surprise no one. After all, polls constantly show that 75 percent of likely Republican voters in the U.S. support an immigration policy that combines heightened border security with a guest worker program, and even includes provisions that allow those now in the country in an undocumented status to legalize that status – an amnesty provision, if you will. This last issue is, of course, the supposed “third rail” of immigration – the supposed topic sure to cause instant political death if spoken of at all in a favorable light.

But, just as there is a fringe element that opposes immigration on racial or cultural grounds, there’s also a fringe on the other side of the political spectrum, and it’s just as misguided. That side does see the compassionate, human rights side of immigration policy – but that’s all it sees. They would open our doors to those who seek refugee status – the suffering people of Darfur, Haiti, perhaps even Iraq. But they would deny entry to immigrants who come to work the jobs we need to keep our economies humming.

This is economic isolationism with a kind face. It is pro-immigrant – but only up to a point. It says: we want immigrants who come for humanitarian reasons, but not those who seek to better their economic circumstances. If this movement’s supporters ally themselves with nativists who would curtail or stop all legal immigration, even if done unintentionally, the chances for sensible immigration reform will be slim. And the consequences for America’s economy will be substantial – substantially harmful, I should say.

But facts are stubborn things, and I believe the economic arguments for immigration will win out in the end. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the expected demand in the fastest growing, low-skilled jobs in America will require an additional 4.9 million workers between 2002 and 2012. Who will fill those positions in a nation that is both older and better educated? The question of whether Americans are better educated is

debatable, but that's a topic for another day. What is not in question is that an increasing percentage of adults have college degrees.

The U.S. has done a reasonably good job at preparing its people for skilled work. While there is much to point to in the inadequacies of the elementary and secondary education system in the U.S., the fact remains that over the past 40 years, the share of adults who did not finish high school has plummeted: from more than 50 percent in the 1960s, to less than 15 percent in 2004. The result is that other job skills go begging. In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 13 different job categories would have suffered a collective shortfall of half a million workers if it hadn't been for immigrants. That statement is true even if all the jobless Americans who were qualified for those positions had taken them. Clearly, we need a steady supply of immigrant labor to replenish our workforces, just as we've needed them since the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. The only question is whether we will get this supply legally or illegally, temporarily or permanently, and what we do with them once they are in our midst.

The facts arguing for immigration are supported not just by data, but by anecdotal evidence as well. Cindy Smallwood, owner of a landscaping business, was recently interviewed on television after searching in vain for employees to fill a \$34 per hour job. That's hardly low-paying work. Thirty-four dollars an hour, and no takers, at least not from anyone remotely qualified. She just couldn't interest Americans to do the backbreaking work that her business requires. That's just one employer, but multiply that by millions of small businesses all across the United States and you begin to see signs of a looming economic crisis.

Even more striking is the developing agricultural crisis in the United States, a story getting no attention in the mainstream press at home, much less here in Europe. In California, pear growers lost nearly 80 percent of their most abundant crop in 45 years – \$10 million worth of pears, simply because they couldn't find workers to pick them. And these aren't low-paying jobs either – a picker can earn up to \$150 a day in some cases. Now, multiply this one crop by scores of different crops, and this one state by the dozens of other states that rely heavily on agriculture and you begin to understand the problems our countries could face without the needed workers. As one California pear grower said, "Americans do not raise their children to be farm workers." I think much the same can be said for European children, too.

Yet there are significant differences between the United States and Europe. Europeans often remark at how surprised they are that American politicians will speak in Spanish or other languages to woo the votes of newcomers. Indeed, it *is* remarkable in the European context, where assimilation has been such a difficult – even failed – process. But the American experience has been quite different.

There are a number of reasons for this, but chief among them is the very nature of the way American was founded. There were pilgrims who sought religious freedom, Catholics persecuted in Germany who settled in Maryland, convicts who populated Georgia. Then there were later waves of Irish seeking to escape the potato famine,

Chinese who came to build railroads in the west, an more recently, Jews seeking refuge from persecution in eastern Europe and Vietnamese escaping communism in that country. The founding fathers of our nation understood this phenomenon. In 1783, George Washington wrote, “The bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions; whom we shall welcome to participation of all our rights and privileges, if by decency and propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment.”

For George Washington and all American politicians who followed in his footsteps, “Participation of all our rights and privileges” meant bringing immigrants into the political fold. They enhanced immigrants with alacrity – some might say with a vengeance.

Tammany Hall built its fabled New York political operation with the thousands of Irish who flooded the city in the 1880s and 1890s. Miami is not called “Little Havana” today without reason, and no Florida politician would dare to embrace reconciliation with Castro’s Cuba given the influence of the Cuban immigrant population. Members of Congress from the Detroit area of Michigan often demur on resolutions overly praising of Israel or condemnatory of Middle East immigrants in that urban population.

And as it goes, region by region, immigrant group by immigrant group. The bottom line is that immigrants speak with a political voice, and elected office holders listen.

Thus, we can see that America was founded not on bloodline or nationalities, but on a common belief in democracy, freedom and the rights of man. European nations have embraced those same principles, but largely in the context of historic nationhood. European countries still struggle today with how they can assimilate large groups of people who are not, by nature, European. America faces similar challenges. I believe we can learn a great deal from each other.

The challenges are great, but ultimately, I believe that the benefits of immigration far outweigh the costs. Too often we talk about winners and losers when it comes to immigration. In fact, there are winners and winners. Those of us who believe in the value of economic immigration, as well as immigration based on compassion, on opening our borders to the poor and persecuted, should be far more vocal about that, more willing to trumpet the good news of immigration.

We can’t let ourselves be shouted down by people, on the one hand, who advocate cultural backwardness, or by those on the other, who unwittingly advocate economic stagnation. Debate on a topic fraught with such emotional content as immigration requires a thoughtful dialogue that proceeds from reason and from facts. I hope that conferences like this will help us do that.

Thank you again.