

Closing the door on immigration too quickly?

The Denver Gazette · 8 Dec 2025 · B6 · MICHAEL BARONE Michael Barone is the senior political analyst for the Washington Examiner, a resident fellow emeritus at the American Enterprise Institute, and the longtime co-author of The Almanac of American Politics.

Can the United States come up with an immigration policy that will prove sustainable? Two writers whom I respect and take delight in reading, despite their widely differing views, Tyler Cowen, who favors more immigration, and Christopher Caldwell, who favors less, have their doubts. Both, incidentally, are writing for the Free Press, Bari Weiss's eclectic startup.



They are writing at a time when President Donald Trump's Executive Branch is splashily and aggressively enforcing supposedly unenforceable immigration laws, and Congress still has Trumpish Republican majorities. Illegal immigration has been reduced toward zero, and the political stars seem in alignment, at least theoretically, for reductions in legal immigration as well.

But that seems unlikely. And not just because of timidity of lawmakers, but because the two writers take too mechanical a view of mass immigration. For people don't uproot themselves and head for unfamiliar lands for just marginal economic gain.

In my 2013 book, Shaping Our Nation: How Surges of Migration Transformed America and Its Politics, I argued that the unusual phenomenon of mass migration only occurs when large numbers of people are pursuing dreams or escaping nightmares.

Cowen, a market-friendly economist, sees it differently. Looking back, he thinks that America had "a fine policy" before 2016, "keep(ing) borders nominally restricted, ... but allow(ing) immigration, both legal and illegal, to become increasingly attractive to people around the world." Mordantly, he adds, "I call this 'asymptotically approaching open borders'."

To which voters, as he points out, react negatively as they do to mention of an explicit open borders policy. They're fearful that some large proportion of the 95% of human beings who don't live in the U.S. would like to come here.

That's probably unrealistic. Mexico has been at peace with the U.S. since 1848, and the U.S. has always had higher wage levels. But for more than a century, only a negligible number of Mexicans crossed the border. For most Mexicans, America was so geographically distant and culturally different that they never dreamed of coming.

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act imposed limits, for the first time, on immigration from Latin America, and few Mexicans arrived in the stagflationary 1970s. But mass chain migration to Ronald Reagan's sunny California began in the 1980s and crested in the 2000s as banks, incentivized to loan to Hispanics, issued \$300,000 mortgages to borrowers with no money down, no W-2s, no assets. That led to the 2007 housing market collapse, which turned immigrants' dreams of unloading their houses for \$600,000 into bankruptcy nightmares. Net migration from Mexico turned negative for a

decade, and the Biden era surge of illegal immigrants came not so much from Mexicans but from Central Americans and assorted others, crossing Mexico to be welcomed across the Rio Grande. The Trump administration's success in border and internal enforcement will, for a time, disincentivize illegal migration by turning would-be migrants' dreams into nightmares.

While Cowen thinks that's cruel, Caldwell hails it as a step toward "America's third great slamming of the Golden Door." The first, he dates from 1775 to 1815. But those were mostly wartime years — the American Revolution up through 1783, the world war between revolutionary and Napoleonic France and parliamentary and commercial Britain for all but one year from 1793 to 1815.

The second started with passage of the 1924 law, which virtually eliminated immigration from eastern and southern Europe, dominant in the Ellis Island era (1892-1914, 1919-24). But the law's effect was limited. It blocked several million migrants in the prosperous 1920s, but very few (though tragically, some refugees) in the depression 1930s, when there was little migration, internal or international. And world war, in 1939-45, as it had in 1914-18, cut immigration to essentially zero.

The 1924 law remained in effect till 1965, and limited postwar immigration from Italy and Greece, but many prewar immigrants from those countries returned home, and many southern Europeans postwar headed to newly prosperous northern Europe. And of course, there was no substantial postwar immigration from Eastern Europe, behind the Iron Curtain.

Caldwell credits the "pause" in immigration following 1924 for encouraging assimilation into an American mainstream. But that was furthered more by the sudden appearance of mass media — radio, movies, television — and by World War II, which put 16 million men in a nation of 131 million into the military, putting literally in uniform Americans of all origins.

They partook of a common popular culture transmitted by universal media and established a national consensus that dismantled the separate segregation system established and maintained in the South for 75 years. That, perhaps as much as changes in the 1965 law, may have made the dream of life in the United States seem achievable to millions in Latin America and Asia during the great immigration surge in the quarter century from 1982 to 2007. If the forces of assimilation were not as strong in those years as they were in the 1940s military or the New York City public schools a century ago, that's something to work on now.

In the meantime, it's an exaggeration to say that America is closing its doors when it swears in about 800,000 new American citizens every year. There are arguments for changing our legal immigration system to prioritize highskill migrants, as well as to reduce or (as I would prefer) increase the total flow of immigrants. But there are limits on what the law can do when, despite economic incentives, people only take the unusual step of uprooting themselves to pursue dreams or escape nightmares.