On May 30th, 2020, President Trump celebrated the launch of America’s first manned space mission in almost a decade: “Today we launch American astronauts on American rockets from American soil,” he said. Yet he failed to note that the American who made it possible was a naturalized citizen who entered the country as an immigrant.

Elon Musk was born in Pretoria, South Africa. His parents divorced when he was ten years old. When he was 20, without a degree, he applied to the University of Pennsylvania, where he was admitted and completed undergraduate degrees in economics and physics. In 1995, after dropping out of graduate school at Stanford, he started his first company, Zip2, which he sold to Compaq in 1999 for $341 million. Three years later, Musk became a U.S. citizen. He then went on to found Paypal, Tesla Motors—America’s most valuable carmaker—and SpaceX, the first private company to launch Americans into space.

Yet today a young Elon Musk would not be able to readily gain American citizenship. In response to concerns regarding COVID-19, President Trump has essentially ended immigration to the United States. On April 22nd, the President signed a two-month ban prohibiting anyone outside the U.S., excepting current spouses and children of U.S. citizens, from obtaining permanent resident status. The goal of this proclamation was to prevent such new permanent residents from competing with existing U.S. citizens and permanent residents for jobs during the coronavirus recovery.1

Trump’s purpose, he claims, is to protect jobs for Americans as we emerge from the coronavirus-induced lockdown. Yet there have also been suggestions that such limits on immigration could be made permanent.2 If Trump’s goals are jobs and economic growth, he needs to rethink his approach to immigration. In American history, figures like Elon Musk are not the exception but are more commonly the rule. Without immigration, America’s economy would not enjoy the performance that has made it the world leader in innovation and technological growth.

There are, of course, many proposals to focus America’s immigration on higher-skilled workers, or those recruited by tech firms, universities, or other employers because they have established credentials and skills. The President’s proclamation itself emphasizes that where there are pressures on the job market, they would come mainly from unskilled, uneducated workers who compete with minorities and unskilled workers in the U.S. It seems that the objective of using immigration to strengthen the economy without hurting U.S. workers could then be best satisfied by discouraging and denying permanent residence to immigrants without exceptional skills, and limiting them to temporary work visas.

Reflecting on the history of America’s immigration experience reveals the real costs of adopting such an immigration model. Let us look at the stories of five unskilled immigrants who, like Elon Musk, entered America without any degrees or established skills, but found their way to American citizenship. What would have been the consequences had they been turned away and sent home?

Andrew Carnegie left his home in Fife, Scotland, where he was born in 1835, with his family at the age of 13, having no formal education. His father—a weaver who was put out of work by weaving machines—came to America and worked in a cotton factory. Young Andrew was determined to escape poverty, worked tirelessly to read and better himself, and became a telegraph operator. Quickly advancing, he helped organize the Union’s military telegraph system during the Civil War. Afterwards he worked for the railroads and saw the potential of steel over iron for rails and construction. He began investing in steel mills, and with his partner, H.C. Frick built the Carnegie Steel Corporation. Carnegie’s businesses created one of the largest fortunes in U.S. history. Not only did his steel mills provide jobs for many thousands of workers, his steel fed other industries employing hundreds of thousands more. Carnegie’s legacy is apparent on America’s main streets today. Universities, museums, libraries, Carnegie Hall, research institutions, and charitable endowments still bear the name of the once lowly Scot.3

Friedrich Trump was born in Bavaria in 1869. He immigrated to the U.S. at age 16, with no formal education, and started working as a barber. In the 1890s, he moved to the Northwest and made...
a fortune catering to the needs of new settlers and miners. Fried-
boomers retire, America’s over-65 population will increase by 35 million, putting pressure on our Social Security and Medicare programs, which are supported by payroll taxes on workers. By contrast, under a high immigration scenario, the number of working-age Americans would increase by slightly more than the number of Americans over 65, avoiding a massive burden on declining numbers of younger people having to support ever-larger numbers of seniors.

Under the current immigration projection, the U.S. projects that Social Security and Medicare will run out of resources shortly. According to their trustees, the surpluses set aside to deal with the retiring baby boomers will run out in just a few years: Medicare will become insolvent in 2026; Social Security’s Retirement and Survivors fund will be bankrupt by 2034. Both programs will then have to cut benefits by one-quarter or more or raise payroll taxes by a quarter or more to maintain current benefit levels. These projections also assume that Americans will continue to have children at a healthy rate of 1.95 children per woman. But in 2019, actual fertility fell to a record low of 1.71, or twelve percent less. These projections were all made before the COVID-19 lockdown and its devastating effect on workers incomes and payroll taxes.

In short, without immigration, America faces the tough headwinds of a fast-shrinking labor force, even as it deals with larger debts from the COVID-19 crisis, and rising obligations for Social Security and Medicare to support growing numbers of seniors.

How much immigration would be needed to achieve that balance of the working-age population not shrinking, but growing slightly faster than the number of those over 65? Not as much as one might think. Today, the percent of American residents who are foreign-born is 13.6%, and over three-quarters of those are lawful permanent residents and naturalized U.S. citizens. Under the U.S. Census “high immigration” projection described above, the fraction of foreign-born residents would increase to 21.6% by 2020.

That is higher than today’s level. But the world today is one of aging societies that will depend more on immigration. For comparison, several countries that are enormously successful today have a similar or greater percentage of foreign-born residents: Switzerland (30%); Canada (21.5%); Australia (29%). Thus America could adopt policies providing for a relatively high immigration scenario, which would bring a significant improvement in the ratio of workers to seniors, better enable America to grow, provide jobs, and pay its debts. Policy could achieve all of this and still adopt a legal limit that immigration would have to be constrained such that the foreign-born do not exceed 25% of the total population. That should relieve anxiety that the foreign-born would never overtake the native-born population. Moreover, America has proven extremely capable of assimilating immigrants. Like the penniless, non-English speaking András István Gróf, who became CEO Andy Grove, immigrants generally adopt American names and become enthusiastic American citizens.

America has been unique in being both the best country in the world to start a business and being relatively open to aspiring entrepreneurs and professionals from around the world. This has made coming to America the goal of the world’s most innovative and ambitious individuals and enabled America to stay on the leading edge of technological development for several generations. It is no accident that in the 1980s and 1990s, while other countries were trying to catch up to America’s leadership in mass production and consumer goods, American entrepreneurs, including such immigrants or children of immigrants as Steve Jobs (Syrian father, co-founder of Apple), Sergey Brin (Russian born, co-founder of Google), and Jeff Bezos (raised by a Cuban step-father, founder of Amazon) were launching a whole new frontier of the digital economy.

So yes, by all means, let us create additional immigration slots for individuals with visible skills or capital. Let us also set aside slots for foreign students, especially those who graduate from American universities and want to use their skills to start or help build companies in the U.S. But at the same time, let us also retain a sufficient number of openings for a mix of individuals striving for success from all countries around the world to bet on the future of America with immigrants. We have always done so throughout our history. We would pay a terrible price if we suddenly stopped banking on this element that truly made America great.

**Endnotes**


3. Full disclosure: I was named a 2020 Carnegie Foundation Fellow.


**Jack A. Goldstone** is the Virginia E. and John T. Hazel, Jr. Chair Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University.

