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The Other Immigrants

Low quotas, long lines hurt U.S. competition for human capital.

The immigration debate has long been preoccupied with illegal aliens. But what about foreign-born professionals seeking green cards who stand in line and play by the rules? A new report by Stuart Anderson of the **National Foundation for American Policy** says the U.S. is mishandling this important human resource.

A former official at the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Mr. Anderson focuses on foreign nationals from India, who fill nearly half of the annual quota for H1-B temporary work visas. Indian professionals who want to become permanent U.S. residents face a wait time of at least 12 years and as long as 20. "To put this in perspective," says the report, "children today in kindergarten may graduate from college by the time Indians who file new applications for an employment-based immigrant visa would receive a green card."

One of Mr. Anderson's findings is that the multiyear waits aren't due to bureaucratic delays so much as to the impractical low annual limits on who can come. Under current law, no more than 140,000 employment-based green cards are issued each year. And since the spouses and children of these workers also count against the cap, the actual quota is much lower.

Congress hasn't raised the annual cap since 1990. Over the past two decades U.S. GDP has risen by 64%, and the demand for skilled workers, notably in technical fields populated by foreign-born professionals, has risen dramatically. Yet our immigration policies pretend nothing has changed.

"The problem facing skilled foreign nationals, employers and the U.S. economy is current law does not match the aspirations of these individuals or allow the country to harness their abilities," writes Mr. Anderson. "One result is many outstanding foreign nationals see potentially brighter futures in their home countries, leaving the America vulnerable to losing a pool of talent that has helped spur jobs, growth and innovation inside the United States."

The costs of losing this human capital are high. Between 1990 and 2007, an astounding 25% of publicly traded companies in the U.S. that were started with venture capital had an immigrant founder. Many foreigners come initially to study or do research at our superior colleges and universities. But the barriers to remaining are forcing them out. A survey of 1,200 international students taken in March shows we can no longer take for granted that skilled immigrants will want to stay and work in America. Some 55% of Chinese, 53% of Europeans and 38% of Indian students worried about being able to obtain permanent residence in the U.S.

Canada, Australia, the European Union and others have streamlined processes for hiring foreign workers to lure skilled immigrants away from the U.S. Unless Congress addresses these long wait times and low quotas, more immigrants will take the skills they acquire in U.S. universities and use them to help other nations prosper.