# Trump’s Move to End DACA and Echoes of the Immigration Act of 1924

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From the outset, the rearguard movement that is Trumpism has been honest, at least, about its intentions to deliver the United States back to an earlier era in its history. We have heard this sort of appeal to an Edenic past from conservative politicians for decades—for so long, in fact, that those who wished to avoid the more alarming implications of Donald Trump’s resentment agenda could see him as simply a more rough-hewn version of that variety. They imagined him capable of the fabled “pivot” that would allow a more mature, statesmanlike version of Trump to emerge. When this didn’t happen—when his campaign compiled such a vast collection of bigoted actions and statements that it began to seem as if a case study from a syllabus for a course on intersectionality had sprung off the page and run for high office—they held out hope that he would “grow into” the Presidency. That faith was never warranted, but the past month effectively revealed the difference between unfounded optimism and an outright delusion.

In the span of three weeks, Trump has equivocated on the moral character of Nazi sympathizers, pardoned a former sheriff found guilty of racial profiling (though that is possibly the least egregious of the sheriff’s list of civil-rights affronts), and, finally, [announced his plan to rescind](http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trumps-daca-decision-puts-dreamers-future-in-the-hands-of-congress) President Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (*daca*) initiative, imperilling the future of eight hundred thousand people who are Americans in all but the most technical sense of the term. This move is part of a larger vision of immigration. Last month, Stephen Miller, one of Trump’s senior policy advisers, [sparred](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-J4FvxtD9I" \t "_blank) with CNN’s Jim Acosta during a press briefing on the proposed *raise* (Reforming American Immigration for a Strong Economy) Act. If passed, the legislation would slash legal immigration by fifty per cent, and prioritize highly skilled English speakers among those who are allowed to immigrate. But even the preference for highly skilled immigrants should be viewed skeptically, given Trump’s campaign rhetoric about reducing the numbers of people allowed into the country on H-1B visas. The issue is not whether these immigrants are in the country legally; it’s that they are in the country at all.

It is not coincidental that Trump, the leader of the most significant xenophobic movement in modern American politics, hails from Queens, the most ethnically diverse county in the continental United States. Trump’s generation of Queens residents has watched the borough transform from a majority-white interior suburb of New York City into a polyglot model of global diversity. The ethnic anxieties that the fictional Queens resident Archie Bunker articulated in the nineteen-seventies formed the motivations of an actual electorate forty years later. Norman Lear created Bunker as a throwback; in reality, he was a harbinger—recall that Trump consistently referred to Judge Gonzalo Curiel as “Mexican,” not “Mexican-American,” despite the fact that Curiel was born in Indiana. Trump also elided the distinctions between Syrian refugees who were seeking asylum in the United States and Omar Mateen, the Pulse night-club shooter, who was a second-generation Afghan-American, born just a few miles from where Trump was born.

This is how Trump could find common ground with Joe Arpaio, the disgraced former sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona. Trump gave his much-criticized encouragement of police brutality in Brentwood, Long Island, a community that has struggled with violence associated with the largely immigrant MS-13 gang. To recognize racial profiling as a wrong, one would first need to recognize that large racial or ethnic groups are composed of distinct individuals. Neither Trump nor Arpaio is particularly invested in this kind of nuance. Nor, apparently, are Trumpism’s most committed adherents. Critics protested Arpaio’s deputies’ targeting of people for their ethnic background, but to the hardest core of Trump’s base this is an inscrutable objection—ethnic background is precisely the issue.

In this view, the real target is the world created by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which eliminated the racialist immigration quotas that were set by the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act. Johnson-Reed was born of familiar concerns: a fear that the nation was endangered by a tide of questionable newcomers, many of whom held secret allegiances to hostile foreign forces. Writers such as Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard agitated public fears that whites—a category that was far less inclusive than our current understanding of it—were on the verge of being outnumbered. Those fears, as Linda Gordon, a history professor at New York University, notes in her new book, “[The Second Coming of the KKK](https://aax-us-east.amazon-adsystem.com/x/c/QoxsNoQw5y7-_0Xbts7KwswAAAFfDD93mAEAAAFKAXxmlIw/https%3A//www.amazon.com/Second-Coming-KKK-Political-Tradition/dp/1631493698/ref%3Das_at?creativeASIN=1631493698&linkCode=w50&tag=thneyo0f-20&imprToken=3YrSGXLNs5zHuUzQpwpzMw&slotNum=0" \t "_blank),” formed the basis for the populist resentments that eventually shaped the politics of the era. Gordon writes of William Simmons, the architect of the Ku Klux Klan’s revival in the nineteen-twenties, that by “engendering and exploiting fear, he would warn that ‘degenerative’ forces were destroying the American way of life. These were not only black people but also Jews, Catholics and immigrants.”

The 1924 act regulated immigration by allowing only a two-per-cent increase of any given ethnic group’s numbers each year. But, rather than using the most recent census, from 1920, to determine the immigration totals, the act referred to the 1890 census—a neat means of avoiding the swell of immigrants, designated as undesirable, from Southern and Eastern Europe, not to mention from Asia, who had arrived in the United States mostly in the intervening years. The policy was so defiantly and arrogantly racist that, as James Q. Whitman, a professor at Yale Law School, writes in “[Hitler’s American Model](https://aax-us-east.amazon-adsystem.com/x/c/QoxsNoQw5y7-_0Xbts7KwswAAAFfDD93mAEAAAFKAXxmlIw/https%3A//www.amazon.com/Hitlers-American-Model-United-States/dp/0691172420/ref%3Das_at?creativeASIN=0691172420&linkCode=w50&tag=thneyo0f-20&imprToken=3YrSGXLNs5zHuUzQpwpzMw&slotNum=1" \t "_blank),” it earned praise from Adolf Hitler. “The American Union categorically refuses immigration of unhealthy elements, and simply excludes the immigration of certain races,” Hitler wrote in “Mein Kampf.” This, he said, made the country a leader in preserving racial purity through immigration policy. The Johnson-Reed Act largely held sway for forty-one years, until, amid the democratizing ethos of the civil-rights era, immigration policy fully shed the racial engineering that had previously defined it. This is the world that Trump seems to be attempting to resurrect.

In the innocent days of 2015, when it was not yet apparent what kind of threat Trump posed to global stability, it was easy to laugh off his grandiosity, to lampoon his grandiloquent pledge to “make America great again.” What Trump really wanted, many jeered, was to make America white again. The joke was on us. As the Administration’s immigration objectives come into focus, one thing has become clear: to their minds, those two things have been synonymous all along.