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Editorial
Locking Out the Brainpower?

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Coming to America, even before Sept. 11, 2001, was always a bit like landing on Ellis Island. Yes, they were supposed to let you in, but you never really knew until making it past that Grand Inquisitor dressed up as an immigration inspector. What a relief when he banged the entry stamp into your passport. Here I come, land of the free and home of the brave.

It isn't so free any more. Yes, a country such as the United States (or Britain), where people need not carry a national ID nor register their residence with the authorities, has to take extra care at entry points. Once you are in, they'll never find you unless you leave a wide electronic trail behind with your Gold Card. Yes, Sept. 11 has raised the demand for security tenfold -- as would have happened in Europe, too, if Mohamed Atta had rammed his plane into Berlin's Reichstag or Paris's Eiffel Tower.

But the issue is not just the obvious one of security vs. liberty. Amid all the screw-tightening prescribed by the Patriot Act, the forgotten question is this: What is America doing to its most precious national resource by raising the barriers to legal entry?

That resource is neither coal nor oil but brains. Alas, brains come with bodies attached, and it is those millions of bodies (previously known as "tired, huddled masses") that have catapulted the United States to the top of the Nobel Prize roster and turned Harvard et al. into the world's greatest universities. Or take Silicon Valley. At the height of the bubble, executives of Chinese and Indian descent were running one-quarter of the Valley's high-tech firms; these accounted for $17 billion in sales and almost 60,000 jobs.

Why didn't these Asian whiz kids go to Munich or Madrid? Because only in America does "where do you come from?" matter less than "where did your get your degree in electrical engineering?" If it was the top school in Bombay or Shanghai, you're in, and the sky is the limit. Before Sept. 11, nobody hauled you in for questioning ("Why did you fly to China six times in the last eight months? What about these 86 telephone calls across the Pacific?")

Nor is it just a matter of easy entry, but also one of easy circulation, as Stanford scholar AnnaLee Saxenian points out in her book "Silicon Valley's New Immigrant Entrepreneurs." Because the United States is (or was) such a hospitable place, these folks could weave vast trans-border networks, both physically and digitally, that brought ever more talent, skill and investment to these shores. Globalization is above all the competition for the best and brightest.

This is why Europe has been lagging behind while the United States has forged ahead. In the old days, it was indeed those "tired, huddled masses." Today it's brains, brains, brains. And they keep coming, even without the murderous push by Hitler and Stalin, who emptied Europe of so many glorious minds.

Are they still coming? Tom Ridge, the secretary of homeland security, ought to have a look at some telling numbers. During the 2003 academic year (which ended Sept. 3), 214,331 student visas were issued by the State Department, down from 234,322 in 2002 and 293,357 in 2001. This is a 27 percent drop, not exactly a mere statistical fluctuation. Tourist and other visas are also declining, State says.

That's good news for Britain, Canada and Australia, which are enjoying a windfall in foreign students. But is it good for the United States, which has spent 50 years educating generations of international leaders, while profiting directly from those who have stayed (just count the Nobel laureates with a U.S. passport and a foreign place of birth)?

Take this example from Johns Hopkins, whose Department of Biostatistics earlier this year selected three students out of an applicant pool of 224 -- "three of the very top students in the world," according to the chairperson. But they didn't get to Baltimore this fall because their visas had been denied for reasons as yet unknown.

Now multiply this case a hundredfold -- or a thousandfold. Whose loss is it? China's or America's?

If this trio ends up in Cambridge, England, the answer is obvious. Of course the government should know who comes in and where he or she can be found. Nonetheless, there is a harsh trade-off between security and openness, especially for the United States, which grew into the greatest power on Earth because it values talent more than the color of one's passport.

Compare America with closed societies such as Japan or Russia, and then measure differences in economic dynamism, cultural pizzazz and intellectual output. It's an easy choice, and the choice becomes easier still after grasping a basic fact of the 21st century: It's brains, stupid, and if you want the brains, you have to take in the bodies, too.

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