

The End of Chinese Exclusion

Part 4 - House of Representatives Debates 1943

By Philip Chin

House debate resumed on October 21st. Representative John Bennett, Republican of Michigan, moved to strike the provisions granting an immigration quota for the Chinese and granting lawful resident aliens of Chinese descent the right to become naturalized American citizens. He argued that these provisions would just discriminate against other Asians who would still remain excluded by law and barred from citizenship.

"We are taking our immigration structure apart under the guise of war legislation to do a thing which will be appreciated by no nation and resented by many. It will not mislead anyone, even the Chinese whom it is intended to mislead and go down in history as one more master stroke of meaningless diplomacy at the expense of a very important part of our immigration system."

Representative Warren Magnuson, Democrat of Washington and writer of the bill, responded that Japanese propagandists were already quoting Bennett and other members opposed to the legislation in their propaganda broadcasts in China.

"May I say to the gentleman, and for the information of the House, bearing out what many Members said here yesterday regarding Japanese propaganda that last night at 11 o'clock the radio of Tokyo in a broadcast beamed all over the Orient quoted the minority report on this bill."

Magnusson argued that putting the Chinese in the quota system just made them equals with other nations. Other Asian allies, such as the Filipinos and Indians, couldn't be put under the quota system because they were not yet independent countries. He said, "I have no doubt that they will be put on an equality basis or a quota basis when their independence is given to them."

Representative Thomas Jenkins, Republican of Ohio, supported the Bennett amendments. By all means repeal Chinese exclusion but keep other limits in place. American immigration was based upon two tests he said, one national, the other racial. Both tests had to be passed to allow someone to immigrate to the US. They must first come from a nationality that was allowed into the United States under the quota system. They then had to pass a racial test. He gave the hypothetical example of someone with British nationality but Chinese ancestry.

"Let us suppose that a man living in England, born there of Chinese parents who were living there, and who were born there, wanted to come to the United States for citizenship. He would not be admitted. Why? Because he was not a white man, according to our immigration laws. He is an Englishman, but he still cannot be

admitted. Under our law, Great Britain, of which England is a part, has an enormous quota of 66,000. Englishmen, or citizens of British provinces are eligible to this quota if they do not come within the excludible class. A Chinese Englishman is now not eligible."

Representative James A. Wright, Democrat of Pennsylvania, addressed the weakness of these exclusion arguments, "If I understand this amendment, we will say in effect to the Chinese, 'We will not exclude you because you are Chinese, but we will exclude you because you are Orientals.' What weasel words, what an insult to a people! I would far rather vote against this entire act. I would far rather have Congress go on record as saying to the Chinese people, 'We do not consider you equals at all' than to be guilty of this double-dealing. The gentleman would remove the discrimination against them, because of the fact that they are Chinese nationals, and still retain it because they are orientals."

Representative Compton I. White, Democrat of Idaho, completely opposed the repeal of exclusion. As a child he'd moved with his father, a railroad station agent, from Mississippi to Idaho in 1890, and lived among the Chinese there. He claimed to understand the Chinese from these experiences.

"I think there were 200 Chinese coolies employed in the immediate environs of the little town where I landed. It was simply a station along the railroad line. I saw the Chinese. I know something of the Chinese mentality. I wonder how much these people here who want to open the gates to the Chinese immigration know of the perils that Chinese immigration raised in California in the early days, and all the troubles that the people had to maintain themselves against being displaced wholly and bodily by the Chinese coolies, exploited by a few whites... In dealing with this bill, you are opening the doors, if you please, to coolie labor."

Exclusion in the 19th Century had saved California and the Western United States from being overrun by the Chinese he argued, "There were enough Chinese on the Pacific Coast to have colonized that country and taken it over from the white people completely. San Francisco today would be a Chinese city if you had not enforced this law that we are now trying to repeal."

Ignoring the history of British and American traders in the 19th Century foisting opium addiction among the Chinese while backed by Western armies, White argued, "I know the habits of the Chinese. They are inveterate opium smokers most of the day. They brought that hideous opium habit to this country. These Chinese coolies provide a means of spreading it out among our boys and girls. If you stop and think about what you are doing here in dealing with this Chinese question, you will not repeal this law."

"I do not think we can take the Chinese with their habits and mentalities in this year and time into our great American melting pot and in 10 years or a hundred years bring them up to our standards of civilization. It is impossible. We may be placed in the same position as the sentimentalists were in the South after the Civil War who wanted to do

something grand for civilization. You have got a long, tough job to bring them up, and you still have race riots and other racial problems confronting you."

In a throwback to 19th Century anti-Chinese rhetoric he asked, "How many of you know anything of the devious ways of the 'wily Chinese?'"

White concluded his speech with an odd note that contradicted the points he'd just made, "I have no animosity towards the Chinese. We children loved the Chinese cooks and laundrymen who lavished Chinese 'goodies' on us on Chinese New Year's - and even remembered our own Christmas. Let us help the Chinese - but help them in their own country."

Representative John Martin Vorvys, Republican of Ohio, had been a former teacher at the College of Yale in Changsha, China. He had quite a different view of the Chinese.

"I cannot sit here in silence and hear things said about the Chinese through ignorance that simply are not true. The Chinese were a civilized people when your ancestors and mine were wearing skins for clothes and fighting with clubs..."

"We have all heard about 'face,' how important 'face' is in China - 'face,' pride, dignity. Although the Chinese have their own standard of 'face,' we have that same thing in our country. If the situation were reversed, and we were doing more for a certain nation than any other nation, and they treated us with contempt, we would 'lose face.' 'Face' is not just oriental. It is universal."

"You say this is only a gesture. Gestures are important. Shaking our fist is a gesture, but an important one. Shaking hands is a gesture, but an important one. This is an important gesture to a people to whom we owe much and for whom we are in a position to do so little at a crucial time..."

He addressed those who worried that allowing the Chinese a quota would lead to increased demand for further changes in immigration laws, "If the precedent we are creating here is that we will remove discrimination against any nation on this planet that is fighting our battles for us at a time when we cannot do much about it, who are a race of great people, a civilized people, a fine people, all right, let us create that precedent; it is an excellent precedent to create. It will not only help the Chinese, but will help us."

Representative Thomas F. Ford, Democrat of California, regretted Chinese exclusion legislation.

"I have always felt that Chinese exclusion was a mistake. It has deprived us of a type of citizenship that would have been a real contribution to our body politic. I sincerely hope that the Congress will promptly rectify this erroneous discrimination against a great people who, if permitted to enter on equal terms with other nations in our American body politic, will make a distinct and tremendously valuable contribution to freedom as conceived by democracy."

Representative Walter Judd, Republican of Minnesota, argued that what was at issue was equality of treatment, not equality in quota numbers. He quoted from a magazine article that had interviewed Bishop Paul Yü Pin, exiled Catholic Apostolic Vicar of Nanjing residing in the United States, who would later become a Cardinal in 1969.

Bishop Yü Pin had said, "We do not wish to have you open your country to a flood of Chinese immigrants. That is your own problem, for you to solve precisely as you wish. It is an internal problem. But we do object to being branded not only as inferior to you but as inferior to all other nations and races in the world."

"Certainly China will keep in the fight until Japan is defeated. In this defeat you, of course, will play a great part. But if your attitude of superiority continues, if the Far East becomes convinced that the United States has forfeited her moral right to leadership, and is fixed in her determination to look down upon the colored races, I can foresee only a prospect which makes me tremble at its horrors."

"In that case, the next war would almost inevitably be a war between the races..."

Judd insisted that the possibility of major racial conflicts was a distinct possibility being fanned by Japanese propaganda broadcasts. He cited recent events in the United States. In June 1943, thousands of white servicemen had roamed the streets of Los Angeles at will under the protection of the Los Angeles Police Department, randomly beating and humiliating Mexican Americans, Filipinos, and African Americans. The "Zoot Suit Riots" had spread across the country with racist violence reported in Texas and Arizona as well as in Detroit, New York, and Philadelphia. Without any evidence these ugly incidents were thought by many American politicians and the public to be fueled by Axis propaganda broadcasts which had been quick to report on these events but in reality hadn't caused them. Judd nevertheless urged Congress to reject the Bennett amendments for this reason.

The Bennett amendments were rejected with 128 votes in opposition and only 21 in favor.

Representative A. Leonard Allen, Democrat of Louisiana, then proposed an amendment to allow no immigrant into the United States until the number of unemployed fell to fewer than 1 million persons. He said he was offering this on behalf of the American Legion, which had adopted such a resolution in 1943 to insure that veterans would have jobs after the war. He also cited a national resolution adopted by the Veterans of Foreign Wars to oppose any relaxation of immigration laws.

This proposal to add an amendment to ban all immigration to the United States altogether went far beyond the scope of the effort to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act. On a point of order it was ruled not germane and out of order.

Representative Bennett next tried to send the bill back to the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization with instructions to remove the quota of Chinese allowed into the country. This failed on a voice vote.

Viewed from the perspective of seventy years later, the Allied victory in World War II seems inevitable. We can look back and say the Battle of Midway in 1942 was decisive in turning back the Japanese in the Pacific or the Battle of Stalingrad in Russia that ended in early 1943 was decisive in turning back the Germans. People living in 1943 though had no such reassurance. Germany and its Italian ally still controlled most of continental Europe. Japan still controlled most of the Western Pacific putting Allied bombers a long way from Tokyo and the Japanese home islands. The Western Allies in October 1943 only held Sicily and were slowly grinding their way north from the southern tip of Italy. American forces had only just taken Guadalcanal, a tiny speck in the southern Solomon Islands chain from the Japanese. The war still had a long way to go and people in the United States were still intensely worried about the survival of the country.

Members of Congress were products of their time. Most believed without question or at least acquiesced in the idea of white racial supremacy. The civil rights movement of the 1950s was still just a figment of some people's imagination. Indulging in racist sentiments in peacetime immigration legislation was all well and fine to most members of Congress but engaging in such frivolity when the very survival of the nation was in question was a different matter. The intense debates over the end of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the admittance of 105 immigrants of Chinese descent seem farcical today but it was all deadly serious in 1943. Many American men and women would die if China came to a separate peace with Japan and members of Congress knew full well that the very survival of the country could rest with their actions over the Magnusson Act. These factors far outweighed lingering racist sentiments and the desire to keep immigration laws as they were for most of the members of the House.

With no further amendments being offered, and with the outcome of the vote not in any doubt, the bill was put up to a voice vote. H.R. 3070 was passed and sent to the Senate for consideration.

Chinese American Heroes would like to thank **Martin B. Gold** for his book, ***“Forbidden Citizens - Chinese Exclusion and the U.S. Congress: A Legislative History”*** upon which this work is based.