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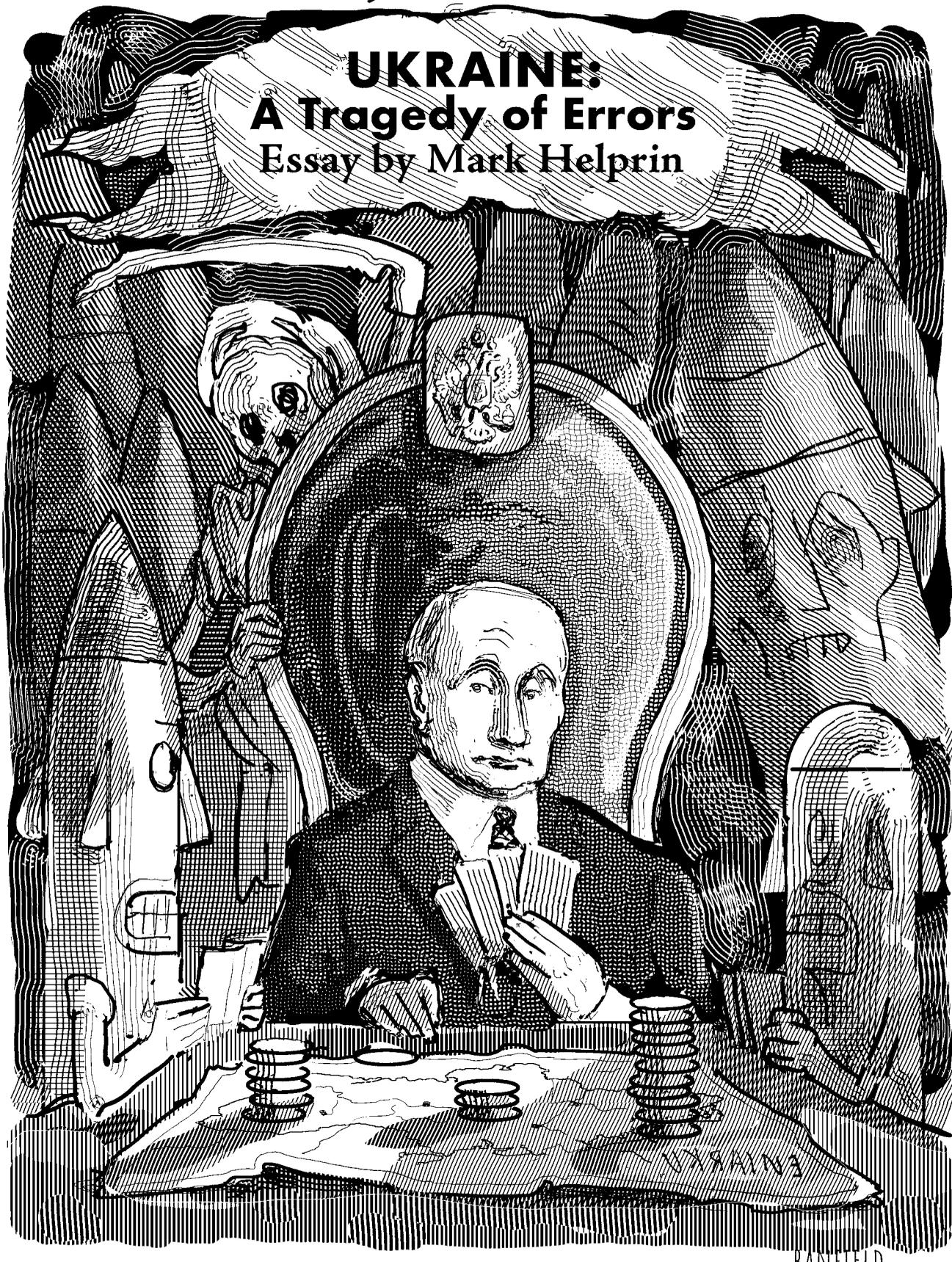
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Book Review by David P. Goldman

THE SKILLS TO PAY THE BILLS

The Immigrant Superpower: How Brains, Brawn, and Bravery Make America Stronger, by Tim Kane.
Oxford University Press, 304 pages, \$29.95



TIM KANE'S *THE IMMIGRANT SUPERPOWER: How Brains, Brawn, and Bravery Make America Stronger* contains an almost-erudite and almost-objective case for expanded immigration, vitiated by two weaknesses. The first is the author's faith in time-series analysis of dodgy data. The second is what might be called agenda creep: after declaring "it's time to make total GDP growth the main point in the national debate on immigration," Kane proposes instead to make immigration an instrument of foreign policy and human rights promotion. That sort of bait-and-switch understandably makes Americans leery of even the most reasonable-sounding immigration reform. They don't think their leaders have told them the whole story. Kane validates such suspicions.

A visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution specializing in economic growth, immigration, and national security, Kane claims to prove "a positive relationship between states' GDP growth and the changing immigrant shares of the workforce." But no one knows the immigrant share of the workforce. In 2018

Yale University researchers estimated that the number of illegal immigrants in the U.S. was about 22.1 million, *double* the standard estimate. That's an astonishing number, equal to the total number of legal migrants from 1996 to 2019. Absent reliable statistics we cannot know immigration's current economic impact.

Kane finds a slight negative correlation between immigrant workplace share and per capita income growth but dismisses it as a "short-run effect." In any case, he states, "we should ask no more about the short-term pressure of a few pennies of hourly wages but about the billions of dollars in total economic output." Real hourly compensation and real median household income fell steadily from 1999 to 2015, and illegal immigration surely contributed to the decline. Just as surely, Donald Trump and other populists exaggerated immigration's impact. Different factors, such as the loss of manufacturing jobs (from 17.3 million in 1999 to just 12.3 million in 2015), probably played a bigger role. But large numbers of illegals affect quality of life in more ways than real earnings.

AMERICA'S AGING POPULATION, WHICH Kane mostly ignores, offers a much stronger economic argument for increasing immigration. America's fertility rate fell during the past ten years from replacement, at 2.1 children per female, to 1.7. The present generation is not raising enough children to provide for its retirement. America currently has 25 elderly dependents for every 100 employed workers. This will rise to 40 elderly dependents by mid-century, and to 50 by the end of the century [see chart 1 on page 47]. We are better off than Italy, which will have 70 dependents for every 100 working-age adults by 2040—but we're moving in the same direction, with a funding deficit over \$100 trillion for the Social Security and Medicare systems by some estimates.

According to Kane, adult immigrants are likely to pay \$259,000 more in taxes than they receive in government payments over their lifetime. If Americans won't raise the next generation of taxpayers in sufficient numbers, we should welcome adult, tax-paying immigrants. But the kind of immigrant



matters: we should promote skilled, high-earning immigrants over unskilled, low-earning immigrants.

Any theoretical benefits from new immigration laws, however, are moot without political consensus on reform. Kane decries our inability to form such a consensus. As chief economist of the Joint Economic Committee in 2008, he had an insider's view of George W. Bush's failed reform attempt. "Deep anti-immigrant feelings in both parties" scuttled the Bush plan, Kane reports. Trade unions opposed an expansion of temporary immigrant visas; then-Senator Barack Obama played a critical role in blocking it.

If Congress was log-jammed in 2007, today it is at daggers drawn. "Hyperpartisanship is quickly becoming the norm for government and one of the great threats to American democracy," Kane complains, blaming both progressive open-border Democrats and conservative Republicans who abhor normalizing the status of long-resident illegals. He is evenhanded in his assessment of President Trump, who in 2019 "made a proposal that surprised everyone with its centrist approach," but has no sympathy for Senator Chuck Schumer, who called Trump's plan "the same partisan, radical anti-immigration" policy Trump advanced in the campaign. "Of course, Schumer knew better," Kane avers.

Kane believes our political hyperpartisanship obscures broad public agreement on immigration. "[T]he American people have a consensus for immigration reform," he writes, citing opinion polls that show a 75% majority for an unspecified compromise. At the end of his book he outlines one such possible compromise: 1) "[u]tilize immigration as a foreign policy tool;" 2) "[d]evelop immigration alliance agreements;" 3) "[r]edefine the refugee program to promote human rights;" 4) "[s]et standards, not ceilings" for legal immigrants; and 5) allow unlimited foreign guest workers on temporary visas.

AND THERE'S THE BAIT-AND-SWITCH. Kane's case for immigration turns on the issue of economic growth. But his recommendations center on foreign policy, alliances, and human rights promotion. Americans are a generous people and would like to help the unfortunate. But we have our own unfortunates to help at home. How many refugees should we absorb for non-economic reasons? Kane proposes to set "standards" rather than "ceilings," so the answer is apparently as many as meet his criteria. American voters may be paranoid about immigration; Kane illustrates why their fears are not entirely irrational.

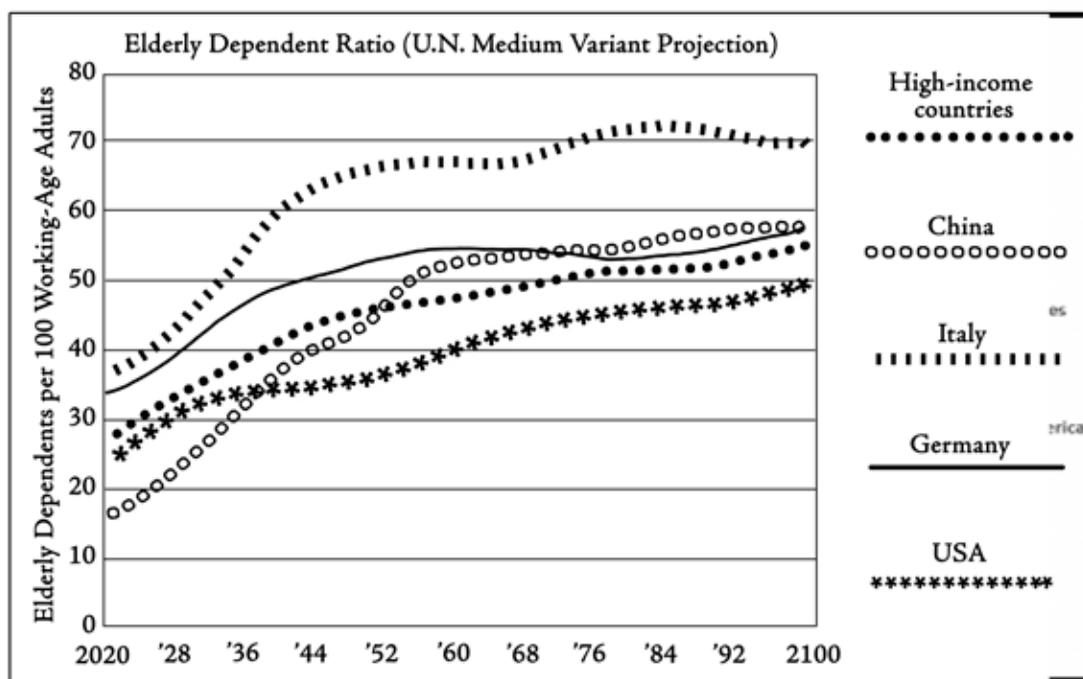


Chart 1

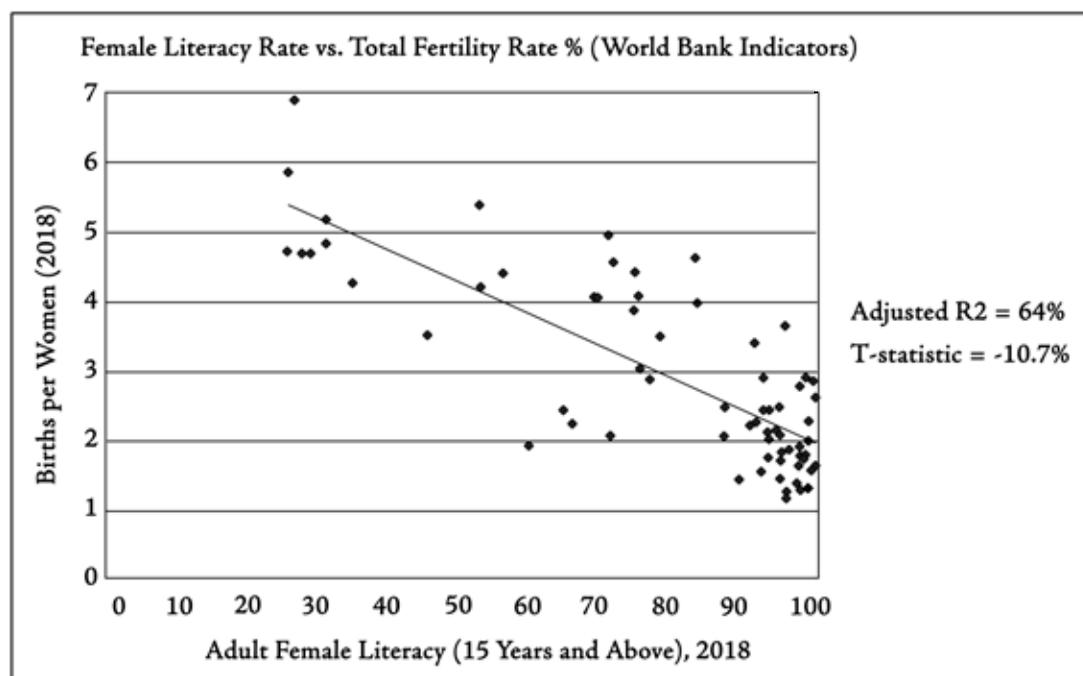


Chart 2

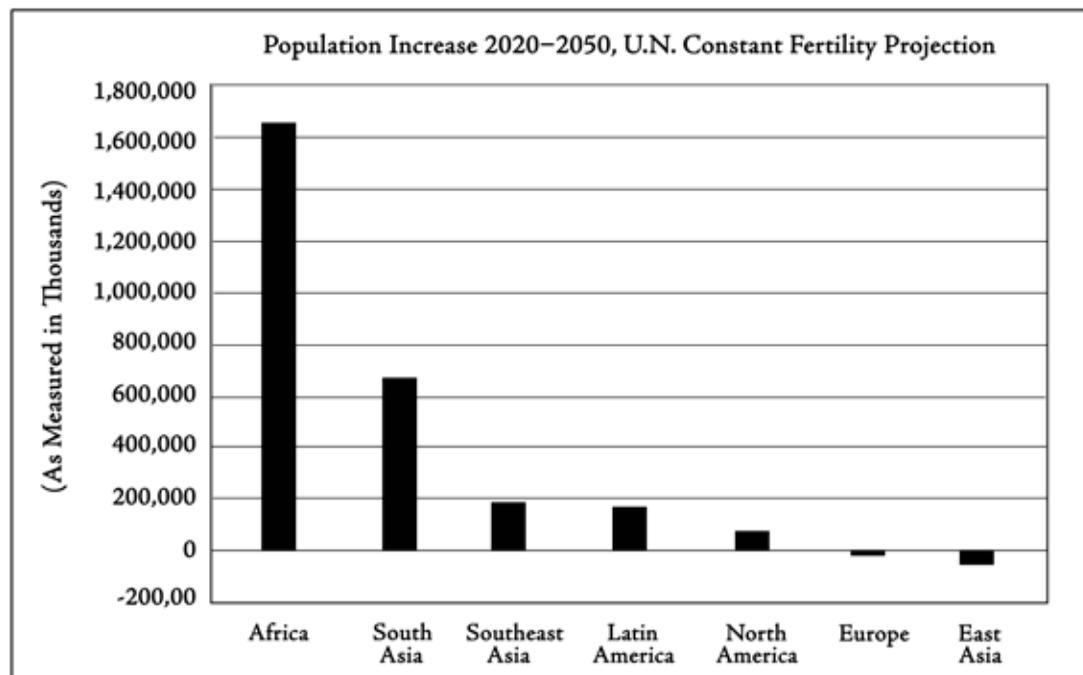


Chart 3



What foreign policy does Kane want to promote via immigration? What are his criteria for human rights intervention? He doesn't tell us enough to permit a conclusion. Sadly, the number of refugees in the world is likely to rise by an order of magnitude over the next 30 years. Nearly all the world's population growth will come from countries with weak economies, low literacy rates, and high risks of state failure. The developed nations are infertile and aging rapidly, while poor countries retain pre-modern fertility rates.

Quantitatively, the variable that best explains national differences in fertility is female literacy. Chart 2, on page 47, plots adult female literacy rate against total fertility rate for the world's 66 most populated countries. The variation in literacy explains nearly two thirds of the variation in fertility, with very high statistical significance.

By far the largest contribution to world population growth will come from Africa, with some contribution from South Asia (mainly Pakistan and Bangladesh) [see chart 3 on page 47]. If war and famine tear the social fabric of Africa, displacing tens and perhaps hundreds of millions of people, will the United States take in large numbers of the refugees? I don't know the answer, but Americans have a right to a transparent debate and a democratic decision about this question.

THE ONE COMPELLING FOREIGN-POLICY objective immigration could credibly serve is America's competition with China. According to the National Science Foundation, in 2016 China awarded about 1,230,849 science and engineering bachelor's degrees, versus 131,286 in the U.S. One-third of Chinese college students major in engineering versus 7% in the United States. American K-12 education doesn't properly train enough students for engineering programs.

Any remedial action we might pursue would take years before having an appreciable effect on our domestic human capital. To

maintain our technological edge in the face of China's challenge we need Chinese and Indian engineers. Skilled immigration would serve a dual purpose: it would replenish the ranks of prospective taxpayers supporting our medical and retirement systems, and secure our technological supremacy.

Would Americans support an increase in *skilled* immigration? That depends on the total package. According to Kane's polling data, large majorities support vigorous measures to reduce illegal immigration (including electronic verification), penalties against sanctuary cities, prison terms for criminal illegals who re-enter after deportation, and the end of catch-and-release. Majorities just as large support green cards for STEM graduates of U.S. colleges (67%) and a shift to merit-based green cards (64%). A minority of respondents supports higher refugee quotas (46%) or open borders (32%).

IT'S HARD TO ESCAPE THE CONCLUSION that Kane's preferences for immigration policy run counter to the views of American voters as reported in his own surveys. Americans welcome immigrants who contribute to their welfare—less so refugees and others who come at a cost. And they're more concerned about enforcing existing law than they are about changing the laws.

Australia—unmentioned by Kane—provides a possible model for our immigration reform. It's the only Western nation that detains all prospective immigrants who arrive unlawfully, a policy response to the waves of refugees who began arriving in the late 1970s. It also doesn't limit the number of temporary work visas for skilled foreigners, and requires employers to pay them as much as local workers. And it offers residency to skilled workers. Human rights advocates decry Australian practice, but it enjoys a degree of political support that has kept immigration policy unchanged for a generation under shifting governments.

Australians may be self-interested and callous toward the suffering of others—but it's their choice, and their immigration policy is an undoubted success both politically and economically. By a two-to-one margin Australians affirm that "Overall, immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Australia," according to a 2019 Lowy Institute poll. A majority (54-42) also supports detaining boat arrivals in Papua New Guinea. Imagine the outcry if America detained illegal entrants at Guantanamo. But some degree of harsh treatment to discourage prospective illegals is unavoidable when migrants flee deep poverty and physical insecurity.

Yet even were Americans to agree on reform, the administrative state might quash it. Illegal immigration's expansion in the United States to possibly more than 22 million occurred not through public policy, after all, but by bureaucratic diktat. If the number of illegals is equal to a quarter-century's legal immigration, then immigration laws are next to meaningless. In Kane's opinion survey, the largest majority for any question supported mandatory electronic verification of residency status (77% strongly agree or agree). The technology required for such verification is trivial. The political class simply refuses to employ it. Until government enforces the laws that the people's representatives have passed, it is pointless to speak of political consensus.

For all Kane's hand-wringing about excessive partisanship, the shape of a national consensus is clear. It looks remarkably like the immigration policy that enjoys bipartisan support in Australia. The American people appear to know what they want. The problem is the failure of their leaders to offer it to them.

David P. Goldman is deputy editor of Asia Times, a Washington Fellow of the Claremont Institute's Center for the American Way of Life, and author, most recently, of You Will Be Assimilated: China's Plan to Sino-Form the World (Bombardier Books).



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