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Yesterday the National Economic Council called a meeting of the Supply Chain Disruptions Task Force, which the Biden-Harris administration launched in 2021, to discuss the impact of the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge and the partial closure of the Port of Baltimore on regional and national supply chains. The task force draws members from the White House and the departments of Transportation, Commerce, Agriculture, Defense, Labor, Health and Human Services, Energy, and Homeland Security. It is focused on coordinating efforts to divert ships to other ports and to minimize impacts to employers and workers, making sure, for example, that dock workers stay on payrolls.

Today, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg convened a meeting of port, labor, and industry partners—ocean carriers, truckers, local business owners, unions, railroads, and so on—to mitigate disruption from the bridge collapse. Representatives came from 40 organizations including American Roll-on Roll-off Carrier; the Georgia Ports Authority; the International Longshoremen’s Association, the International Organization of Masters, Mates and Pilots; John Deere; Maersk; Mercedes-Benz North America Operations; Seabulk Tankers; Under Armour; and the World Shipping Council.

Today the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Federal Highway Administration announced it would make \$60 million available immediately to be used as a down payment toward initial costs. Already, though, some Republicans are balking at the idea of using

new federal money to rebuild the bridge, saying that lawmakers should simply take the money that has been appropriated for things like electric vehicles, or wait until insurance money comes in from the shipping companies.

In 2007, when a bridge across the Mississippi River in Minneapolis suddenly collapsed, Congress passed funding to rebuild it in days and then-president George W. Bush signed the measure into law within a week of the accident.

In the past days, we have learned that the six maintenance workers killed when the bridge collapsed were all immigrants, natives of Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Around 39% of the workforce in the construction industry around Baltimore and Washington, D.C., about 130,000 people, are immigrants, Scott Dance and María Luisa Paúl reported in the *Washington Post* yesterday.

Some of the men were undocumented, and all of them were family men who sent money back to their home countries, as well. From Honduras, the nephew of one of the men killed told the Associated Press, “The kind of work he did is what people born in the U.S. won’t do. People like him travel there with a dream. They don’t want to break anything or take anything.”

In the *Philadelphia Inquirer* today, journalist Will Bunch castigated the right-wing lawmakers and pundits who have whipped up native-born Americans over immigration, calling immigrants sex traffickers and fentanyl dealers, and even “animals.” Bunch illustrated that the reality of what was happening on the Francis Scott Key Bridge when it collapsed creates an opportunity to reframe the immigration debate in the United States.

Last month, Catherine Rampell of the *Washington Post* noted that

immigration is a key reason that the United States experienced greater economic growth than any other nation In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The surge of immigration that began in 2022 brought to the U.S. working-age people who, Director Phill Swagel of the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office wrote, are expected to make the U.S. gross domestic product about \$7 trillion larger over the ten years from 2023 to 2034 than it would have been otherwise. Those workers will account for about \$1 trillion dollars in revenues.

Curiously, while Republican leaders today are working to outdo each other in their harsh opposition to immigration, it was actually the leaders of the original Republican Party who recognized the power of immigrants to build the country and articulated an economic justification for increased immigration during the nation's first major anti-immigrant period.

The United States had always been a nation of immigrants, but in the 1840s the failure of the potato crop in Ireland sent at least half a million Irish immigrants to the United States. As they moved into urban ports on the East Coast, especially in Massachusetts and New York, native-born Americans turned against them as competitors for jobs.

The 1850s saw a similar anti-immigrant fury in the new state of California. After the discovery of gold there in 1848, native-born Americans—the so-called Forty Niners—moved to the West Coast. They had no intention of sharing the riches they expected to find. The Indigenous people who lived there had no right to the land under which gold lay, native-born men thought; nor did the Mexicans whose government had sold the land to the U.S. in 1848; nor did the Chileans, who came with mining skills that made them powerful competitors. Above all, native-born Americans resented the Chinese miners who came to work in order to send money home

to a land devastated by the first Opium War.

Democrats and the new anti-immigrant American Party (more popularly known as the “Know Nothings” because members claimed to know nothing about the party) turned against the new immigrants, seeing them as competition that would drive down wages. In the 1850s, Know Nothing officials in Massachusetts persecuted Catholics and deported Irish immigrants they believed were paupers. In California the state legislature placed a monthly tax on Mexican and Chinese miners, made unemployment a crime, took from Chinese men the right to testify in court, and finally tried to stop Chinese immigration altogether by taxing shipmasters \$50 for each Chinese immigrant they brought.

When the Republicans organized in the 1850s, they saw society differently than the Democrats and the Know Nothings. They argued that society was not made up of a struggle over a limited economic pie, but rather that hardworking individuals would create more than they could consume, thus producing capital that would make the economy grow. The more people a nation had, the stronger it would be.

In 1860 the new party took a stand against the new laws that discriminated against immigrants. Immigrants’ rights should not be “abridged or impaired,” the delegates to its convention declared, adding that they were “in favor of giving a full and efficient protection to the rights of all classes of citizens, whether native or naturalized, both at home and abroad.”

Republicans’ support for immigration only increased during the Civil War. In contrast to the southern enslavers, they wanted to fill the land with people who supported freedom. As one poorly educated man wrote to his senator, “Protect Emigration and that

will protect the Territories to Freedom.”

Republicans also wanted to bring as many workers to the country as possible to increase economic development. The war created a huge demand for agricultural products to feed the troops. At the same time, a terrible drought in Europe meant there was money to be made exporting grain. But the war was draining men to the battlefields of Stone’s River and Gettysburg and to the growing U.S. Navy, leaving farmers with fewer and fewer hands to work the land.

By 1864, Republicans were so strongly in favor of immigration that Congress passed “an Act to Encourage Immigration.” The law permitted immigrants to borrow against future homesteads to fund their voyage to the U.S., appropriated money to provide for impoverished immigrants upon their arrival, and, to undercut Democrats’ accusations that they were simply trying to find men to throw into the grinding war, guaranteed that no immigrant could be drafted until he announced his intention of becoming a citizen.

Support for immigration has waxed and waned repeatedly since then, but as recently as 1989, Republican president Ronald Reagan said: “We lead the world because, unique among nations, we draw our people—our strength—from every country and every corner of the world. And by doing so we continuously renew and enrich our nation.... Thanks to each wave of new arrivals to this land of opportunity, we're a nation forever young, forever bursting with energy and new ideas, and always on the cutting edge, always leading the world to the next frontier. This quality is vital to our future as a nation. If we ever closed the door to new Americans, our leadership in the world would soon be lost.”

The workers who died in the bridge collapse on Tuesday “were not ‘poisoning the blood of our country,’” Will Bunch wrote, quoting Trump; “they were replenishing it.... They may have been born all

over the continent, but when these men plunged into our waters on Tuesday, they died as Americans.”

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Notes:

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