

DEFINING MOMENTS
THE DREAM OF AMERICA:
IMMIGRATION
1870-1920



Kevin Hillstrom

*Omni*graphics

P.O. Box 31-1640
Detroit, MI 48231

Henry Cabot Lodge (1850-1924)

U.S. Senator and Anti-Immigration Legislator

Henry Cabot Lodge was born on May 12, 1850, into one of Boston's wealthiest and most powerful families. He was the only son of Anna Cabot and John Ellerton Lodge, a prosperous merchant whose ships traded all around the world. He earned a law degree from the prestigious Harvard Law School in 1874 before receiving Harvard's first-ever political science PhD in 1876.

Bright and opinionated, Lodge spent several years in the mid-1870s editing the *North American Review*, a leading scholarly magazine of the time. He also joined the faculty at Harvard, teaching U.S. history to undergraduate students until 1879. In the 1880s he wrote and published several biographies of famous Americans such as George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, as well as general works like *A Short History of the English Colonies in America* (1881).



Successful Career in Politics

Lodge made his biggest mark in the 1880s, though, in Massachusetts politics. In 1879 Lodge won elected office for the first time, claiming a seat in the state House of Representatives as a Republican. In 1882 and 1884 he failed in attempts to win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, but he remained a major force in the state Republican Party. In 1886 he finally won election to the U.S. House, where he quickly built a reputation as a serious-minded legislator who ably represented Republican interests. He easily won re-election in 1888 and 1890.

In 1893 the Massachusetts legislature selected Lodge to the U.S. Senate as a replacement for Senator Henry L. Dawes, who had decided to retire. Lodge held this seat for the next three decades, easily fending off challengers in election after election. During this time he rose to become one of the most powerful and formidable lawmakers in Washington.

Confident and ambitious, Lodge staked out bold positions throughout his senate career. He supported military involvement in the Spanish-American War and pushed to increase the size of the U.S. Navy—a position that contributed to a long friendship with President Theodore Roosevelt. He played an important role in the passage of laws designed to improve worker and consumer safety and reduce business corruption. Lodge also supported stiff tariffs on foreign goods, believing that such taxes helped protect American businesses from foreign competition. He resolutely opposed women's suffrage and voted against the Eighteenth Amendment, which ushered in the age of Prohibition in U.S. history.

Closing the Gates on Immigration

Few lawmakers spent as much time on the subject of immigration as Lodge, a native-born American who traced his ancestry back to England. As far back as the early 1890s, he spoke out against the waves of immigrants pouring into America from southeastern Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world. He declared that the United States did not have the resources to absorb all these newcomers. “Conditions have changed utterly from the days when the supply of vacant land was indefinite, the demand for labor almost unbounded, and the supply of people very limited,” he said.¹

Lodge also believed that the new immigrants were fundamentally inferior to early immigrants who had come to America from England and other parts of northwestern Europe. He felt that Americans of English descent were overwhelmingly responsible for the economic and cultural foundations of the United States—and that most other immigrant groups posed a threat to those foundations. Most new immigrants, he warned, came “from races most alien to the body of American people and from the lowest and most illiterate classes among those races.”²

These views led Lodge to become the leading Congressional ally of the Immigration Restriction League, an organization dedicated to halting the flow of immigrants into the United States. Lodge worked closely with Prescott F. Hall and other League leaders to craft bills that would drastically reduce immigration quotas. They eventually decided that the best way to accomplish their goal was to pass a law that would require all prospective immigrants to pass a literacy test. Lodge argued that such a test would help protect America from the perils of unrestricted immigration. “It is a truism to

say that one of the greatest dangers to our free government is ignorance," he explained. "We have the right to exclude illiterate persons from our immigration, and this test ... would in all probability shut out a large part of the undesirable portion of the present immigration."³

In 1895 Lodge was chief sponsor of an immigration restriction bill that would have required immigrants to show their ability to read and write in their own language. Vocally supported by the Immigration Restriction League, the bill passed Congress one year later, only to be vetoed by president Grover Cleveland. Undaunted, Lodge and the Immigration Restriction League continued to press for a literacy test for the next decade and a half.

In 1910 their cause received a major boost with the formation of a Congressional committee called the Dillingham Commission. This committee was charged with the task of studying American immigration policies and determining if any changes needed to be made. Lodge was appointed to the Dillingham Commission, and he played an important role in shaping the group's 41-volume report, which was released in 1911. The Commission announced that current immigration levels posed a threat to America's cultural and economic foundations, and it recommended that the United States impose strict limits on the number of people it accepted from southeastern Europe and Asia. It cited the literacy test as the best way of keeping "undesirable" aliens from entering the country.

The Literacy Test Becomes Law

Armed with the Dillingham report, Lodge once again led the fight to make the literacy test a part of U.S. immigration law. A bill containing a literacy test provision was passed by Congress in 1913, but it was vetoed by President William H. Taft. Three years later, Lodge and his anti-immigration allies passed another bill through Congress that would have imposed the literacy test. President Woodrow Wilson vetoed the bill, but this time Congress overrode the veto and the Federal Immigration Act of 1917 became law.

This act placed significant new hurdles in the path of prospective immigrants. It banned any mentally or physically disabled people from entering the United States. It also barred virtually all people from Japan and other parts of Asia from gaining entrance. But its most far-reaching provision was the long-sought literacy test. Under the law's provisions, every immigrant over the age of fourteen had to prove that they could read and write in their

native language. Those who passed the test could enter the United States. Those who failed were turned away.

Lodge was pleased by the passage of the Federal Immigration Act, but he still felt that immigration laws were too lax. He lobbied for further restrictions, and he was a vocal supporter of the Immigration Act of 1924, which further reduced the already diminished stream of immigrants entering the United States.

Battling with President Wilson

Lodge's clash with President Wilson over the Federal Immigration Act of 1917 was one of many battles that the two men waged during Wilson's eight years in the White House (1913-21). Lodge supported Wilson's decision to enter World War I in 1917, but when the war ended a year later, the two men became bitter political enemies.

Lodge wanted the defeated nation of Germany to pay heavy penalties for starting the war, and he urged the postwar United States to remove itself from Europe's conflicts and minimize its overall involvement in international affairs. Since he had been named Senate majority leader and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee after the 1918 elections, Lodge was able to take these stances from a position of power and influence. But Wilson, who was a Democrat, fiercely opposed the Republican leader's foreign policy views. He called instead for ratification of his "Fourteen Points" peace plan, which did not heavily punish Germany. The president also promoted American membership in a proposed League of Nations, which would use diplomacy to prevent future wars.

Lodge organized a strong Republican rebellion against Wilson's plans. He also introduced amendments to Wilson's proposals that he knew the president would not accept. His maneuvering successfully torpedoed both Wilson's peace plan and his hopes for U.S. participation in the League of Nations. As a result, the United States did not sign a formal peace agreement with Germany until 1921—by which time Republican President Warren G. Harding had replaced Wilson in the White House.

In the early 1920s Lodge suffered from a general downturn in his health and vitality. He tried to fulfill his Senate duties but was absent from Washington for extended periods of time. He finally died in a hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on November 9, 1924, shortly after suffering a stroke.

Sources:

Garraty, John A. *Henry Cabot Lodge: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.

Tichenor, Daniel J. *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Notes

- ¹ Quoted in Tichenor, Daniel J. *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 80.
- ² Quoted in Jasper, James M. *Restless Nation: Starting Over in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 57.
- ³ Quoted in Curthoys, Ann, and Marilyn Lake. *Connected Walls: History in Trans-National Perspective*. Canberra, Australia: ANU E Press, 2006, p. 218.