

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## 'Shut the Door' Speech

By Senator Ellison DuRant Smith  
1924

*In the early 20th century, there was an influx of immigration to the United States. The Quota Act of 1921 and the Act of 1924 prohibited the amount of immigrants allowed into the country, the latter more restrictive than the former. In the following speech delivered to Congress on April 9, 1924, Senator Ellison DuRant Smith of South Carolina argues that in order to preserve American resources, the government should restrict immigration. Although his argument is now largely considered racist, the Act of 1924 was instated with only six dissenting votes. As you read, analyze the points Smith makes to justify his argument.*

- [1] It seems to me the point as to this measure—and I have been so impressed for several years—is that the time has arrived when we should shut the door. We have been called the melting pot of the world. We had an experience just a few years ago, during the great World War, when it looked as though we had allowed influences to enter our borders that were about to melt the pot in place of us being the melting pot.



*"Ellis Island 1902" by Unknown is in the public domain.*

I think that we have sufficient stock in America now for us to shut the door, Americanize what we have, and save the resources of America for the natural increase of our population. We all know that one of the most prolific causes of war is the desire for increased land ownership for the overflow of a congested population. We are increasing at such a rate that in the natural course of things in a comparatively few years the landed resources, the natural resources of the country, shall be taken up by the natural increase of our population. It seems to me the part of wisdom now that we have throughout the length and breadth of continental America a population which is beginning to encroach<sup>1</sup> upon the reserve and virgin resources of the country to keep it in trust for the multiplying population of the country.

1. **Encroach (verb):** to intrude on; to disturb

I do not believe that political reasons should enter into the discussion of this very vital question. It is of greater concern to us to maintain the institutions of America, to maintain the principles upon which this Government is founded, than to develop and exploit<sup>2</sup> the underdeveloped resources of the country. There are some things that are dearer to us, fraught with more benefit to us, than the immediate development of the undeveloped resources of the country. I believe that our particular ideas, social, moral, religious, and political, have demonstrated, by virtue of the progress we have made and the character of people that we are, that we have the highest ideals of any member of the human family or any nation. We have demonstrated the fact that the human family, certainly the predominant breed in America, can govern themselves by a direct government of the people. If this Government shall fail, it shall fail by virtue of the terrible law of inherited tendency. Those who come from the nations which from time immemorial have been under the dictation of a master fall more easily by the law of inheritance and the inertia<sup>3</sup> of habit into a condition of political servitude than the descendants of those who cleared the forests, conquered the savage, stood at arms and won their liberty from their mother country, England.

I think we now have sufficient population in our country for us to shut the door and to breed up a pure, unadulterated American citizenship. I recognize that there is a dangerous lack of distinction between people of a certain nationality and the breed of the dog. Who is an American? Is he an immigrant from Italy? Is he an immigrant from Germany? If you were to go abroad and some one were to meet you and say, "I met a typical American," what would flash into your mind as a typical American, the typical representative of that new Nation? Would it be the son of an Italian immigrant, the son of a German immigrant, the son of any of the breeds from the Orient, the son of the denizens of Africa? We must not get our ethnological distinctions mixed up with out anthropological distinctions. It is the breed of the dog in which I am interested. I would like for the Members of the Senate to read that book just recently published by Madison Grant, *The Passing of a Great Race*. Thank God we have in America perhaps the largest percentage of any country in the world of the pure, unadulterated Anglo-Saxon stock; certainly the greatest of any nation in the Nordic breed. It is for the preservation of that splendid stock that has characterized us that I would make this not an asylum for the oppressed of all countries, but a country to assimilate<sup>4</sup> and perfect that splendid type of manhood that has made America the foremost Nation in her progress and in her power, and yet the youngest of all the nations. I myself believe that the preservation of her institutions depends upon us now taking counsel with our condition and our experience during the last World War.

- [5] Without offense, but with regard to the salvation of our own, let us shut the door and assimilate what we have, and let us breed pure American citizens and develop our own American resources. I am more in favor of that than I am of our quota proposition. Of course, it may not meet the approbation of the Senate that we shall shut the door—which I unqualifiedly and unreservedly believe to be our duty—and develop what we have, assimilate and digest what we have into pure Americans, with American aspirations, and thoroughly familiar with the love of American institutions, rather than the importation of any number of men from other countries. If we may not have that, then I am in favor of putting the quota down to the lowest possible point, with every selective element in it that may be.

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2. **Exploit** (*verb*): to make full use of; to benefit fully from

3. **Inertia** (*noun*): a tendency to do nothing and remain unchanged; inactivity

4. **Assimilate** (*verb*): to conform to the customs, attitudes, and habits of a group or nation

The great desideratum<sup>5</sup> of modern times has been education not alone book knowledge, but that education which enables men to think right, to think logically, to think truthfully, men equipped with power to appreciate the rapidly developing conditions that are all about us, that have converted the world in the last 50 years into a brand new world and made us masters of forces that are revolutionizing production. We want men not like dumb, driven cattle from those nations where the progressive thought of the times has scarcely made a beginning and where they see men as mere machines; we want men who have an appreciation of the responsibility brought about by the manifestation of the power of that individual. We have not that in this country to-day. We have men here to-day who are selfishly utilizing the enormous forces discovered by genius, and if we are not careful as statesmen, if we are not careful in our legislation, these very masters of the tremendous forces that have been made available to us will bring us under their domination and control by virtue of the power they have in multiplying their wealth.

We are struggling to-day against the organized forces of man's brain multiplied a million times by materialized thought in the form of steam and electricity as applied in the everyday affairs of man. We have enough in this country to engage the brain of every lover of his country in solving the problems of a democratic government in the midst of the imperial power that genius is discovering and placing in the hands of man. We have population enough to-day without throwing wide our doors and jeopardizing the interests of this country by pouring into it men who willingly become the slaves of those who employ them in manipulating these forces of nature, and they few reap the enormous benefits that accrue therefrom.

We ought to Americanize not only our population but our forces. We ought to Americanize our factories and our vast material resources, so that we can make each contribute to the other and have an abundance for us under the form of the government laid down by our fathers.

The Senator from Georgia [Mr. Harris] has introduced an amendment to shut the door. It is not a question of politics. It is a question of maintaining that which has made you and me the beneficiaries of the greatest hope that ever burned in the human breast for the most splendid future that ever stood before mankind, where the boy in the gutter can look with confidence to the seat of the Presidency of the United States; where the boy in the gutter can look forward to the time when, paying the price of a proper citizen, he may fill a seat in this hall; where the boy to-day poverty-stricken, standing in the midst of all the splendid opportunities of America, should have and, please God, if we do our duty, will have an opportunity to enjoy the marvelous wealth that the genius and brain of our country is making possible for us all.

[10] We do not want to tangle the skein<sup>6</sup> of America's progress by those who imperfectly understand the genius of our Government and the opportunities that lie about us. Let us keep what we have, protect what we have, make what we have the realization of the dream of those who wrote the Constitution.

I am more concerned about that than I am about whether a new railroad shall be built or whether there shall be diversified farming next year or whether a certain coal mine shall be mined. I would rather see American citizenship refined to the last degree in all that makes America what we hope it will be than to develop the resources of America at the expense of the citizenship of our country. The time has come when we should shut the door and keep what we have for what we hope our own people to be.

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5. something that is needed or wanted

6. a length of thread or yarn

*'Shut the Door' Speech by Senator Ellison DuRant Smith is in the public domain.*

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes a central idea of the text?
  - A. America has not always been accepting of immigrants, due to fear of invasion.
  - B. Technically, all Americans except the indigenous Native Americans are immigrants.
  - C. Senator Ellison DuRant Smith, among others, believed that the one of the ways to improve American prosperity was to strictly regulate and decrease immigration.
  - D. Immigration is as much an issue in the early 1900s as it is today.
  
2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "We had an experience just a few years ago, during the great World War, when it looked as though we had allowed influences to enter our borders that were about to melt the pot in place of us being the melting pot." (Paragraph 1)
  - B. "Those who come from the nations which from time immemorial have been under the dictation of a master fall more easily by the law of inheritance and the inertia of habit into a condition of political servitude than the descendants of those who cleared the forests, conquered the savage, stood at arms and won their liberty from their mother country, England." (Paragraph 3)
  - C. "The great desideratum of modern times has been education not alone book knowledge, but that education which enables men to think right, to think logically, to think truthfully...." (Paragraph 6)
  - D. "I would rather see American citizenship refined to the last degree in all that makes America what we hope it will be than to develop the resources of America at the expense of the citizenship of our country. The time has come when we should shut the door and keep what we have for what we hope our own people to be." (Paragraph 11)
  
3. In paragraph 2, how does the senator justify his position that undeveloped land should not be used to sustain the life of immigrants?
  - A. He proposes that the undeveloped land be set aside and used by current Americans and their future generations.
  - B. He proposes that this undeveloped land be set aside for Native American reservations.
  - C. He proposes that this undeveloped land be set aside as reserved as it is for the betterment of the environment.
  - D. He proposes that this undeveloped land be used only by the new, current immigrants.

4. PART A: Consider the senator's word choice in reference to non-white people. What is the effect of this word choice?
- A. The senator compares non-white people to different breeds of dogs, thus degrading them to animals and the idea of breeding.
  - B. The senator describes non-white people as hoards and their large populations as a threat to the economic stability of the country.
  - C. The senator describes non-white people as easy to assimilate, or conform, into the larger American culture.
  - D. The senator describes non-white in a few derogatory ways, notably comparing them to animals and slaves.
5. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "We have been called the melting pot of the world." (Paragraph 1)
  - B. "We want men not like dumb, driven cattle from those nations where the progressive thought of the times has scarcely made a beginning and where they see men as mere machines..." (Paragraph 6)
  - C. "We have population enough to-day without throwing wide our doors and jeopardizing the interests of this country by pouring into it men..." (Paragraph 7)
  - D. "We do not want to tangle the skein of America's progress by those who imperfectly understand the genius of our Government and the opportunities that lie about us" (Paragraph 10)

## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. This bill passed with only six dissenting votes. What does this say about American prewar mentality?
2. How do you think this speech was received in the senate? Explain your answer.
3. Do you think that the passing of this bill perpetuated prejudice? Explain your answer.
4. What are the effects of prejudice? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art, literature, or history in your answer.