High School Lesson
Changing Faces, Structural Realities—The 1965 Act and Georgia's Modern Population
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GA Standards

SSUSH21 Analyze U.S. international and domestic policies including their influences on technological advancements and social changes during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations

SSCG8 Demonstrate knowledge of the legislative branch of government.

Background Information

The Pre-1965 Baseline

Prior to 1965, U.S. immigration was governed by the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which institutionalized a strict national origins quota system. This system was explicitly designed to preserve the nation's white, Anglo-Saxon demographic profile. Countries like Great Britain received overwhelmingly high annual caps (exceeding 65,000), while the entire continent of Asia was restricted by a flat, highly restrictive quota of just 100 individuals per country.

Furthermore, this system strictly policed race over geography: an individual of Chinese descent migrating from Great Britain did not count toward the British quota; they counted against China's tiny pool of 100. This legal framework codified the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype, signaling that people of Asian descent were biologically and culturally incompatible with U.S. society, and ineligible for citizenship.

It is important to note that even during the height of the exclusion era (including the original Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882), the U.S. government carved out statutory exemptions for wealthy merchants, businessmen, and students. This loophole established a decades-long precedent: the U.S. government would selectively bypass its own racial blockades to welcome elite wealth and intellectual capital.

The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations: Cold War and Civil Rights (SSUSH21)

By the early 1960s, the national origins quota system became an acute geopolitical liability for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

- **International/Cold War Policy:** The United States was locked in an existential ideological struggle against the Soviet Union for the allegiance of newly decolonized, independent nations in Asia and Africa. Soviet propaganda masterfully weaponized America's overtly racist immigration laws to argue that the United States' talk of



"freedom and democracy" was hypocritical. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy bluntly targeted this hypocrisy, stating that existing policies falsely sent the message that people born in Southern or Eastern Europe were "not as good" as those born in Western Europe: a sentiment that applied tenfold to Asia and Africa.

- **Domestic/Social Changes:** Propelled by the momentum of the domestic Civil Rights Movement, the Johnson administration sought to align immigration reform with the moral imperatives of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

However, neither the Executive branch nor Congress expected the 1965 Immigration Act to radically alter the nation's demographics. To placate conservative lawmakers and a skeptical public, President Lyndon B. Johnson downplayed the bill at its signing on Liberty Island, famously stating: *"This bill... is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions. It will not reshape the structure of our daily lives."* Lawmakers fully expected that by allocating 75% of visas to family reunification, the law would naturally favor Southern and Eastern European immigrants who already had established ethnic enclaves in the U.S. to sponsor them.

Legislative Mechanics and Statutory Execution (SSCG8)

The passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act provides a clear case study of the legislative branch's constitutional powers. While the executive branch (Kennedy and Johnson) set the policy agenda and applied public pressure, the actual structural architecture of the law was hammered out within congressional committees.

To pass the bill through a hesitant Congress, compromises were struck within the House and Senate Judiciary Committees. Conservative lawmakers agreed to abolish the racist national quotas *only* if strict statutory filters were installed. The resulting legislation established a rigid, seven-category preference system. While family reunification dominated the percentages, 20% of all visas were explicitly reserved for individuals with highly specialized professional skills, advanced degrees, or exceptional economic utility. Furthermore, for the first time in history, Congress imposed a numerical cap on immigration from the Western Hemisphere (Latin America), instantly criminalizing long-standing fluid labor migrations across the Southern border and politically manufacturing a tier of "undocumented" threats.

Influences on Technological Advancements: The "Brain Drain" (SSUSH21)

The 20% economic and professional preference filter intersected perfectly with the Cold War's technical demands. Locked in a scientific and space race with the USSR, the U.S. government used these statutory preferences to catalyze a strategic, global "brain drain". The law acted as a selective filter, aggressively recruiting highly educated "knowledge workers" such as scientists, medical professionals, engineers, and tech experts primarily from Asian countries.

This trend was structurally institutionalized for decades to come, laying the groundwork for the creation of the H1-B visa in 1990, which legally required corporate sponsorship and specialized skills, directly benefiting corporate workforces and solidifying a highly specific demographic stream into the United States.

Engineering the "Model Minority" Myth and Erasing Disparity



The visible success of these highly selected professionals gave rise to the "model minority" myth: a harmful stereotype characterizing Asian Americans as a universally wealthy, self-sufficient, and high-achieving monolith. High school students must understand that this demographic profile was completely manufactured by U.S. policy, not natural cultural superiority.

Mainstream media solidified this myth, famously exemplified by *Time Magazine's* 1987 cover story on "Those Asian-American Whiz Kids," which praised Asian youth as universal academic prodigies.

The political consequences of this myth are deeply damaging:

- **Weaponizing Success Against Other Minorities:** White political and social structures weaponized the engineered achievements of Asian Americans as a racial shield. The narrative claimed: *"If Asian Americans can achieve the American Dream, the system is fair. Therefore, the continued marginalization of Black and Brown communities must be due to cultural or internal faults rather than systemic white supremacy."* This directly undermined interracial solidarity.

- **Erasing Severe Intragroup Disparities:** Lumping all Asian Americans together masks severe socioeconomic divides. When modern demographic data is disaggregated by ethnicity, a vast economic divide appears. While those entering through tech and medical visa preferences thrive, Asian refugees fleeing war and geopolitical destabilization entered via the highly restricted, underfunded 5% refugee allocation. These refugees arrived without generational wealth, elite credentials, or corporate safety nets, yet the model minority myth completely erases their structural struggles and denies them targeted institutional support.

Suggested Teaching Activity

1. **Build Background Knowledge:**
   Begin by having students watch a short PBS video clip on the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act to provide an overview of the legislation and its historical significance.

2. **Analyze Primary Sources:**
   Next, ask students to read and analyze excerpts from President Johnson's 1965 signing speech. Encourage students to consider Johnson's statement that the law was not

intended to be "a revolutionary bill." Then facilitate a discussion around the question: *Why did the U.S. government feel compelled to reform immigration policy during the Cold War? How might international politics have shaped domestic policy decisions?*

3. **Examine Demographic Change:**
   Have students analyze the graphs in *How 1965 Changed Asian America* to examine how the Immigration and Nationality Act transformed Asian American demographics.

4. **Connect History to Contemporary Stereotypes:**
   Present students with the 1987 *Time* magazine "Whiz Kids" cover alongside contemporary data on H-1B visa approvals by country, education level, and industry. Ask students to identify patterns and discuss the following question:
   How are Cold War-era efforts to recruit highly skilled immigrants connected to contemporary stereotypes about Asian Americans, such as the model minority myth?

5. **Investigate Diversity Within Asian America:**
   Provide students with disaggregated data showing median household income, poverty rates, and bachelor's degree attainment across different Asian American ethnic groups. Have students work in small groups to analyze the data and evaluate the following question:
   To what extent did the domestic and international policies of the Johnson administration shape social and economic inequalities among Asian American communities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries?

Images Used:

1. Yoichi Okamoto, Lyndon B. Johnson signs the 1965 Immigration And Nationality Act on Liberty Island, NY. Public Domain via LBJ Presidential Library
2. “Those Asian-American Whiz Kids,” in Time Magazine 130, no. 9 (August 31, 1987).