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Villains of Judea: Emanuel Celler

The man who turned America into a real-life Mos Eisley Cantina.

JOSE ALBERTO NINO • AUGUST 7, 2026 • 1,900 WORDS • 21 COMMENTS



On October 3, 1965, Lyndon Johnson sat at a table at the base of the Statue of Liberty and [signed the Hart-Celler Act](#), formally known as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, erasing the national origins quota system from American law. Standing near him was a 77-year-old Brooklyn Democrat watching the end of a fight he had started as a freshman congressman when Calvin Coolidge occupied the White House.

Emanuel Celler had lost that fight the first time. He would spend the next four decades refusing to accept the verdict.

The [Immigration Act of 1924](#), known as Johnson-Reed, set quotas at 2 percent of each nationality's presence in the United States as counted by the 1890 census—a formula specifically designed to throttle migration from southern and eastern Europe. Celler, who had entered Congress in 1923 and made his first major House floor speech opposing the bill, lost badly. The measure sailed through Congress with a Senate vote of 62 to 6. In defeat, Celler had [found](#) his cause, and for the next four decades he spoke out relentlessly against national origin quotas.

He came to that cause by inheritance. [Born in Brooklyn on May 6, 1888](#) to Jewish immigrants from Germany, Celler graduated from Boys High School and went on to earn both his undergraduate degree and his law degree from Columbia University. During World War I, he served on a draft board, where he watched immigrant men report for duty.

In 1922, a political acquaintance convinced Celler to run as a [Tammany Hall Democrat](#) in a district that had never once sent a Democrat to Washington. He ran against Republican incumbent Lester D. Volk, campaigning against Prohibition and for American entry into the League of Nations, and won by just over 3,111 votes—becoming the first Democrat the district had ever elected. When both his parents died during his college years, he had kept the

household afloat by working in the family wine and whiskey business while finishing his degree. During the First World War he served as a government appeal agent on a [draft board](#). He took his House seat on March 4, 1923.

The 1930s brought the fight Celler would be remembered for by those who study Jewish power closely. After the National Socialists took power in Germany, the Jewish congressman [pushed](#) for an American boycott of the 1936 Berlin Olympics and introduced legislation to restrict German goods in the American market.

The pre-war boycotts Celler enthusiastically pushed for gave way to a wartime fury aimed squarely at Franklin Delano Roosevelt's State Department. Addressing the New York County Council of the Jewish War Veterans of America on April 5, 1943, he [flayed the administration](#) in language no loyal Democrat used about FDR. "The State Department must revise its modus operandi with reference to passing upon admission of refugees," he said. "The present method is both cold and cruel. It lacks color and humanity. Even though reputable agencies endorse an applicant, it still carries no weight. I intend to fight this until I break it wide open." He demanded an end to what he called the "glacier-like attitude of the State Department" and insisted the Americas establish temporary havens for individuals fleeing from parts of Europe under German control.

The administration answered that winning the war was the only rescue available. Celler [took exception](#), proclaiming: "Victory, the spokesmen say, is the only solution...After victory, the disembodied spirits will not present so difficult a problem; the dead no longer need food, drink and asylum." Colleagues told him he was too harsh. His reply ended the conversation: "I do not measure my words because the hangmen do not tarry."

He went further than rhetoric. In December 1943, Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long testified against a Bergson Group-initiated refugee rescue resolution. Celler led the charge to expose Long's false statements about the number of refugees actually admitted, leaking incriminating sections of the testimony to reporters and denouncing Long publicly in speeches and interviews. He dismissed Long's professed sympathy as "crocodile tears" and warned that "If men of the temperament and philosophy of Long continue in control of immigration admission, we might as well take down that plaque from the Statue of Liberty..."

The pressure worked. In January 1944, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau [brought the case](#) to Roosevelt, who signed an executive order establishing the War Refugee Board. In the war's final 15 months the Board assisted roughly 200,000 Jews and 20,000 non-Jews, financing among other operations Raoul Wallenberg's rescue work in Budapest.

Celler spent the post-war years dismantling the European roots of U.S. political culture one statute at a time. His most underappreciated immigration expansion victory arrived in 1946 alongside an unlikely partner, Republican Clare Boothe Luce of Connecticut.

Asian immigrants had been barred almost entirely since the 1917 Immigration Act established the Asiatic Barred Zone, and the Supreme Court had ruled in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* in 1923 that Indians could not naturalize. The [Luce-Celler Act](#), signed by Harry

Truman on July 2, 1946, [admitted](#) 100 Indians and 100 Filipinos annually and, far more consequentially, allowed both groups to become citizens. New citizens could then own property in their own names and petition for immediate family. Although a small opening of the United States' immigration system, Celler used this victory to build momentum toward his greater ambition of radically transforming the country's immigration policy.

In 1949 Celler took the gavel of the House Judiciary Committee, holding it for 11 terms—the longest chairmanship in that committee's history—surrendering it only during the brief Republican majority of 1953 to 1955. From that chair he moved the legislation that radically transformed American law. He drove the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 through the House. In 1964 he introduced [H.R. 7152](#) and steered it past Southern resistance in partnership with Ohio Republican William McCulloch, a working alliance across party lines that made the Civil Rights Act possible.

Two days after Johnson's Selma address on March 15, 1965, Celler introduced the administration's voting rights bill as H.R. 6400. He [said](#) the men blocking African Americans from the ballot "must be smashed and banished" and called any obstruction "inexcusable." Rules Committee chairman Howard Smith of Virginia buried the bill; Celler moved to discharge it and forced it loose. The House passed it 333 to 85, then approved the conference report 328 to 74. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. Celler added the Civil Rights Act of 1968 three years later.

Another fateful piece of legislation bearing Celler's name was signed into law that same October. Celler introduced H.R. 2580 in January 1965 as the only member of that Congress who had sat in the chamber in 1924 and voted against Johnson-Reed. Senator Philip Hart of Michigan carried the companion bill in the Senate. As [early as 1963](#) he had introduced bipartisan immigration reform legislation with Prescott Bush, Jacob Javits, and other prominent Republicans as original co-sponsors, and he supplied the per-country cap mechanism that replaced the quota system. Their bill scrapped the national origins formula, allotted 170,000 visas to the Eastern Hemisphere with a ceiling of 20,000 per country, imposed the first numerical ceiling ever placed on the Western Hemisphere, and reserved most remaining slots for relatives of citizens. The House passed it 318 to 95. Johnson signed it at Liberty Island on October 3, 1965, [calling](#) it "not a revolutionary bill."

Celler had promised the same. Speaking on the floor before the vote, he [predicted](#) the law would barely register: "There will not be, comparatively, many Asians or Africans entering this country," he told the chamber, adding that immigrants from Asia and Africa "will have to compete and qualify in order to get in, quantitatively and qualitatively, which, itself will hold the numbers down." He was wrong. The House passed the bill 318 to 25. The foreign-born population climbed from 9.6 million to 45 million across the next half century, and [Pew Research Center counted](#) nearly 59 million arrivals between 1965 and 2015, with the white share of the population falling from 84 percent to 62 percent. The irony cuts deeper. Family preference, the engine of that growth, entered the bill at the insistence of restrictionists who assumed it would keep the country European and who dramatically underestimated how few people it took to create an extensive network of relatives eligible to follow.

Beyond his efforts to fundamentally alter America's demographic landscape, Celler aggressively targeted the very Second Amendment rights that had been safely and peacefully exercised by Americans for generations. That same year, Celler [steered](#) what became the Gun Control Act of 1968 through the House as H.R. 17735. The law was the most sweeping federal firearms legislation since the National Firearms Act of 1934, banning mail-order sales of rifles and shotguns, prohibiting interstate firearms transfers to private individuals, barring felons, fugitives, drug users, and requiring federal licensing for all firearms dealers. It passed as a standalone measure on October 22, 1968.

The same seniority that let Celler reshape the republic let him bottle up what he disliked. For more than 30 years he refused to allow the [Equal Rights Amendment](#) out of his committee, declining to hold a single hearing on it despite its introduction in every session of Congress since 1923. When Representative Martha Griffiths and Shirley Chisholm pressed to make it a legislative priority in 1970, Celler opposed their discharge petition from the floor, [declaring](#) that “ever since Adam gave up his rib to make a woman, throughout the ages we have learned that physical, emotional, psychological and social differences exist and dare not be disregarded,” and warning that the ERA was “a blunderbuss amendment” that “would erase existing protective female legislation with the most disastrous consequences.”

His resistance reflected his strong ties to organized labor, which opposed the ERA throughout this period on the grounds that it would invalidate state laws providing special workplace protections for women. The discharge petition passed anyway. He lost that battle when [Congress sent the ERA to the states in March 1972](#), and it cost him everything else.

That June, a 31-year-old attorney named [Elizabeth Holtzman challenged him in the Democratic primary](#) and beat him—ending 50 years of uninterrupted service and making him the most senior member ever to lose a primary. He had not campaigned seriously in decades and was traveling in Europe when Holtzman launched her effort. Months later the Judiciary Committee he had chaired for a generation opened the Watergate impeachment hearings under Peter Rodino. Celler watched from television studios, dispensing commentary on proceedings he would have run.

For the congressman who reshaped an entire nation's demographic destiny, watching from a television studio was a strange comedown.

Celler spent his long tenure systematically dismantling the traditional barriers of the gentile establishment, creating a political infrastructure designed to elevate Jewish influence. Paradoxically, this transformation proved so successful that it empowered a younger, more aggressive wing of the tribe to seize the levers of power for themselves. Ultimately, he was discarded by one of his own—a classic case of Jewish fratricide where the architect was consumed by the very dynamic he had spent his life engineering.

He died on January 15, 1981, at 92.

The legacy of Emanuel Celler is written in the landscape of a vanishing America. What he promised would be a minor adjustment was, in truth, an act of demographic warfare that has

turned our cities into a modern Tower of Babel. By stripping the founding stock of their legal, social, and cultural defenses, he ensured that future generations would be strangers in their own land, reduced to cattle within a system that prizes the interests of their Jewish exploiters over the survival of their own people.

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