

Conference on Border Relations  
February 28, 1980  
La Paz, Mexico

Migration as a Socio-Political Phenomenon

Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.  
Cornell University

I. Introduction

One of the most perplexing policy dilemmas confronting the communities along the Mexico - United States border has always been the migration of people. The archipelago of geographically isolated communities that are scattered along both sides of the international border have long had to bear the brunt of the historic unwillingness of their respective governments to address the migration issue. Many of the communities along the United States side have long been among the most impoverished of the nation. Low levels of income, high levels of unemployment, low labor force participation rates (especially among women), high dropout rates from schools, and a pervasive pattern of low wages across a wide range of diverse occupations are all the obvious signs of extreme labor surplus. On the Mexican side, the populations of their border communities have dramatically increased in size since the end of World War II. These population increases have far outstripped the capacity of their local communities to provide the necessary social services and housing for their citizens. The Mexican border communities have the identical labor market characteristics as the American border communities except that their magnitude is far worse. They too bear the burden of having extremely surplus labor markets.

Undoubtedly, the prospect of finding employment in the United States--either legally or illegally--is part of the explanation for the dramatic

population increases of the Mexican communities. These communities have become staging areas for hundreds of thousands of persons each year who seek the opportunity to cross the border. They are also places where families can be left until the breadwinner for the family can find a job and arrange for them to join him or where they often await his return. There is, however, an important difference between the Mexican border communities and those of the United States. Whereas the communities along the United States side of the border collectively represent one of the most economically depressed regions of the nation, the reverse is true of the status of the Mexican border communities. For aside from the Federal District of Mexico City, the northern border states of Mexico have the highest income levels to be found in Mexico. Thus, given far more chronic needs elsewhere, the border communities and their massive problems have seldom been a high priority concern of the Mexican government.

The usual analysis of the migration of people from one country to another is based largely upon an elaboration of the relevant economic forces.<sup>1</sup> The mass migration of people from Mexico to the United States began during the second decade of the Twentieth Century. Since then, with the exception of the period from 1930 to the mid-1940s, the migration has continued almost unabated. Masses of people leave the familiarity of their homeland and go to an unknown land only if both "push" and "pull" pressures are simultaneously operative. In most instances, the "push" factors from Mexico derive momentum from the interrelated economic issues of over-population, massive poverty, and high unemployment. Of increasing significance are the pervasive structural changes that are

occurring within the economy of Mexico. These changes stem from the introduction of capital intensive technology as well as continuation of rural to urban migration. Likewise, there are the strong economic "pull" factors that emanate from the United States. The relatively higher wages and broader array of available job opportunities of the American economy function as a powerful human magnet.

But in addition to these familiar economic issues, there are also key socio-political factors that are involved. These considerations are more subtle and, to date, they have generally been ignored in most discussions of Mexican immigration. Yet, in many ways they have been more important than the economic factors in the formulation of the coalitions in the United States both for and against reform of the nation's immigration system. They are also, in all probability, a major explanation as to why the government of Mexico is totally unwilling to do anything about the outflow of its people.

## II. The Broad Context of the Migration Issue

There are few factors that have been more important to the development of the population and the labor force of the United States than immigration. The descriptive phrase "a nation of immigrants" is no mere cliché. It correctly portrays both the magnitude of the sheer numbers of people who have come and are still coming to the United States as well as the vital qualitative characteristics of their skill contributions toward the building of the nation.

Indeed, no subject more fundamentally touches the essence of the American experience than immigration. A heterogeneous people in quest of a homogeneous national identity has been the history of the United States.

In its evolving and often controversial role immigration policy has served as a foundation stone for numerous components of public policy. As a socio-political phenomenon, it has been instrumentally involved in such diverse areas of public concern as human resource policy, foreign policy, labor policy, agricultural policy, and race policy. Due to its multiple purposes and complex nature, immigration has been and, perhaps, always will be a subject of much controversy.

Although the concern of this paper pertains largely to immigration issues between Mexico and the United States, the broader dimension of the topic of immigration cannot be forgotten. In 1979, approximately 600,000 persons were legally admitted to the United States as immigrants and refugees. They came from virtually every nation in the world. During the same year, the number of people who illegally immigrated into the United States was, in all probability, far in excess of the number of the legally admitted. No one, of course, knows the precise number of illegal immigrants in either the annual flow or the accumulated stock of those who currently reside in the United States. The fact that the number of apprehended illegal immigrants has escalated from 70,684 in 1960 to 1,047,687 in 1978 with virtually no increase in deterrant or apprehension capability over the same time interval does strongly suggest that illegal immigration is no myth. Of course, the apprehension figures contain an extensive amount of multiple counting (i.e., the same people apprehended more than once). Most illegal immigrants who are apprehended (about 90 percent) are persons from Mexico. Typically, they enter the United States without documentation.

But in addition to these persons, there are also those persons who

enter the United States with proper documents (e.g., students, crewmen, businessmen, tourists, and visitors) who simply do not leave when their expiration dates occur. Most of these "visa abusers" are believed to be non-Mexican. At least 60 nations are believed to be regular sources of significant numbers of illegal immigrants to the United States.<sup>2</sup> But no matter whether they had documents or not, most of those who enter or who overstay their visits to the United States illegally are not apprehended. Undoubtedly, some of these persons enter or overstay for only short periods of time. This is especially the case with some of those who come from Mexico. The vast remainder survive and assimilate as best they can given their perilous status.

It is logical to assume that, if the flow is large and if it is increasing, the stock must also be annually increasing in aggregate size even if not proportionately to the growth in the size of the flow. Estimates of the stock of illegal immigrants from academic studies and government reports range anywhere from 3 to 12 million persons. The general consensus places the figure between 6 to 8 million persons with the majority being from Mexico. But it is not necessary to know the exact number or to even try to estimate its size if it is conceded that the stock is substantial in size and that the direction of the annual change is toward increasing numbers.

Illegal immigration is a real issue for the United States and it is likely that it will only increase in its severity as a problem in the 1980's. The issue for the United States is far greater than simply the illegal immigrants from Mexico. Because of the long common border, any efforts to find a solution to the problem will undoubtedly cause extreme

stress in international relations between Mexico and the United States. But the most ironic twist of all is that whether the United States does or does not reform its immigration policies, the border communities of both nations will continue to be adversely affected by immigration problems. This is a harsh reality.

### III. Socio Political Forces Pressing for Immigration Reform in the United States

Although illegal immigration to the United States has existed as an issue since entry restrictions were first imposed in the 1920s, it has become politically important only since the 1960s. It is critical to understand the series of separate socio-political events that were seemingly unrelated to immigration but which, collectively, occurred in the 1960s. For they have provided the basis for its formulation of the coalitions whose efforts resulted in the comprehensive immigration reform proposals put forth by the Carter Administration in 1977.

#### A. The Anti-Discrimination Movement

The first factor was the civil rights movement. Beginning in earnest in the late 1950s, the nations black population began its drive to end the legacy of denial of equal opportunity in the United States. The thrust of this phase of the civil rights movement was centered in the southeastern states and it was primarily directed at social (e.g., equal access to public facilities) and political (e.g., barriers to registering and exercising the right to vote) forms of overt discrimination. The drive culminated in the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. By the end of the 1960s, the Act had been extremely successful in its efforts to overcome

these social and political barriers. Overt discrimination rapidly disappeared as a significant issue. But, at the same time, it was soon apparent that equal opportunity was far from a reality. By the late 1960s and throughout the entire decade, the attention of the civil rights movement shifted to the vital area of economics (i.e., jobs and income). As the Rev. Jesse Jackson has said, the "civil rights movement" has become the "silver rights" movement. Likewise, the scope of attention shifted from the overt practices of the South to the covert practices that existed in every regional sector of the nation against blacks.<sup>3</sup> Covert practices mean the restrictive practices that are built into the nations institutions (i.e., government agencies, unions, schools, and business firms) that cause essentially the same denial of opportunity to occur as if overt practices continued to prevail.

For present purposes, the relationship of the civil rights movement to the topic of immigration evolved from the fact that it was not long before other minority groups in the United States also sought to achieve equal opportunity to American life. For present purposes, reference must be made to Americans of Mexican origin. Mexican Americans, who are increasingly referred to as Chicanos, also had a history of discriminatory treatment.<sup>4</sup> Although not as pervasive as the historical discrimination against blacks, the impact upon Chicanos has been equally as insidious in its effective results. The denial of equal economic opportunity to Chicanos was especially the result of forms of institutional racism.

The best nationally known leader to emerge from the Chicano movement is Cesar Chavez. Chavez began his epic struggle to organize farmworkers in the mid-1960s. But his organization, the United Farm Workers (U.F.W.)

was more than simply a typical bread-and-butter oriented American trade union. It has always had the character of a broad social movement as well. Chavez came to the farm worker movement from a background as a community organizer. His organizing efforts in California were, in many ways, far more encompassing than merely establishing a union. He sought to awaken the collective consciousness of local Chicanos. In fact, it is likely that the major reason why many California growers were willing to sign labor contracts with the powerful Teamsters Union but not with the weak United Farm Workers was precisely because the growers feared that Chavez and his followers had local goals that were more ambitious than simply gaining representation rights.

From the outset of their efforts to organize farm workers, the U.F.W. encountered the fact that growers had access to illegal immigrants from Mexico as a constant source of strikebreakers. As one descriptive article noted:

The U.F.W. was also made vulnerable by the Mexican border which provides a natural cornucopia of docile, cheap laborers who unknowingly become strikebreakers eagerly hired by American growers and accepted by labor contractors and the Teamsters. Few Americans call them 'wetbacks' now. They are simply the 'illegals'.... Any effective strike, then, is virtually prohibited by what one U.F.W. official calls that huge, phantom 'flow' of illegals into American farm fields.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the 1970s Chavez made constant note of the difficulties that illegal immigrants caused his struggle for a farmworker's union and for social justice for the people of their communities.<sup>6</sup>

The adverse impact of uncontrolled illegal immigration upon the job and income opportunities of Chicanos was not restricted to simply the U.F.W. The institutional practices of the immigration system--its lack



sanctions against employers; its reliance upon voluntary departures for almost everyone who is apprehended; and the chronically underfunded and understaffed Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) who have enforcement responsibilities for the nation's immigration system -- guarantee that the occupations and industries in the geographic areas where Chicanos are most numerous are also those where most illegal immigrants from Mexico are to be found.<sup>7</sup>

#### B. The Anti-Poverty Movement

Paralleling the evolution of the civil rights movement was the beginning of the "war on poverty in 1964." Aside from the specific programs of the Johnson Administration and of subsequent administrations, the importance of these efforts were that they focused attention on the causes of poverty not its mere existence per se. Historically, anti-poverty programs in the United States had been based on the principle of subsidizing the poor. The Johnson programs in particular sought to accomplish the more difficult task of trying to prevent poverty rather than merely reacting to its consequences.

In this regard, the border policies of the United States -- not just the toleration of massive numbers of illegal immigrants but also policies with respect to commuting workers (i.e., "green carders") and "tourist" workers (i.e., "white carders" who are not supposed to work but often do) were found to be a classic example of institutionalized poverty. In the Southwest, these governmental policies collectively enabled poor Mexicans to make and to keep Chicanos poor.<sup>8</sup> They have historically been used to keep the labor market all along the border in a constant state of surplus. As such, it can be argued that there has been a conscientious effort to

keep wages low, to keep incomes depressed, and to keep unions out. These efforts have been extremely successful.

The three poorest metropolitan areas in the nation (Brownsville, McAllen, and El Paso) are located along the Rio Grande in Texas. Among the poorest rural counties in the United States are many in the Southwest. Unionism in the Southwest is hardly known outside of California, and even there it has had its organizational problems due to the availability of hordes of willing strikebreakers. The effect of past border policies in the Southwest has been to create a labor surplus throughout the region but especially along the border.

It should be understood that the contention is not that immigration policy is the cause of widespread Chicano impoverishment but, rather, that it is a cause. Thus, for those persons seriously concerned about the causes of poverty in general and about Chicano economic welfare in particular, reform of the nation's immigration policy became a prime concern.

In addition to Chicanos, the same argument can be made with respect to other groups who are struggling to improve their economic position. In many local labor markets both inside and outside the Southwest, illegal immigrants from Mexico and other nations compete for the same jobs as do individuals from other groups in the United States. There is not a single occupation in the low wage labor market (sometimes called the secondary labor market by contemporary labor economists) in which the majority of workers currently working are not U.S. citizens. But these low wage occupations are where many blacks, youths, women, and Hispanic workers (i.e., Chicanos and Puerto Ricans especially but also some Cubans) are disproportionately concentrated. The "crowding-in" effect of illegal

immigrants into these same occupations can only be detrimental to the emerging public concern in the United States to assist these specific target groups. Obviously, the presence of illegal immigrants in these same labor markets works counter to the entire thrust of national policy measures to improve the employment and income opportunities of these sub groups of the population. Black civil rights groups as well as organizations of other ethnic groups have long been privately critical of prevailing immigration policies. They know that blacks are severely affected by illegal immigration in the competition for entry level jobs. The April, 1979 issue of the popular black magazine Ebony, with its article entitled "Illegal Aliens: Big Threat to Black Workers," is clearly a sign of their growing awareness of the nature of the issue. Immigration reform is not merely a Chicano issue or a Mexican issue or a border issue or a regional issue. It is increasingly a national and international issue both in scope and impact.

#### C. The Termination of the Bracero Program

Coming into the 1960's, there existed a program in the Southwest that was a perfect example of exactly how foreign workers could be used to manipulate a labor market to the detriment of the economic interests of citizen workers. It had been introduced during World War II when growers in the Southwest contended that there was a shortage of agricultural workers. They were successful in their lobbying efforts to convince policymakers in Washington that the problem was real. Following direct negotiations between the governments of both Mexico and the United States, the Mexican Labor Program was launched in 1942. It was more commonly known as the "bracero" program. Under its auspices,

Mexican workers were afforded numerous safeguards with respect to housing, transportation, food, medical needs, and wage rates. Initiated through the appropriations bill for Public Law 45, the program was extended by subsequent enactment until 1947. For the growers the bracero program proved to be a bonanza.<sup>9</sup> Braceros were limited exclusively to agricultural work. Any bracero who was found holding a job in any other industry was subject to immediate deportation. When the agreement ended on December 31, 1947, the program was continued informally and unregulated until 1951. In that year, under the guise of another war-related labor shortage, it was revived by Public Law 78.

Parelleling the bracero years and following its termination in 1964 has been the accelerated growth in the number of illegal Mexicans. Many of these illegal aliens were former braceros. They had been attracted to the Mexican border towns from the rural interior of central and northern Mexico by the existence of the contract labor program. To this degree, there is some truth to the proposition that the United States itself has created the illegal alien problem. By the same token, however, it is simplistic to conclude that the problem would not eventually have surfaced in the absence of the bracero program due to the existence of the vast economic differences between the two national economies.

The bracero program demonstrated precisely how border policies can adversely affect citizen workers in the United States -- especially, in this case, the Chicanos who composed the bulk of the southwestern agricultural labor force. At its peak, almost one-half million braceros were working in the agricultural labor market of the Southwest. The availability of Mexican workers significantly depressed existing wage

levels; modulated wage increases that would have occurred in its absence; and compressed the duration of time in which many rural citizen workers could be employed. Citizen farmworkers simply could not compete with braceros.<sup>10</sup> The bracero program was a significant factor in the rapid exodus of rural Chicanos to urban labor markets between 1950 and 1970. There they were poorly prepared to find employment and housing.<sup>11</sup> The fact that braceros were captive workers who were totally subject to the unilateral demands of employers made them especially appealing to many employers. It is this same element -- of total dependence -- in the post-bracero era that has also made illegal immigrants so attractive to employers. But now without even the minimal protections that were once required for braceros, illegal immigrants are potentially subject to greater exploitation and abuse. The illegal character of their presence means that this is virtually no realistic way in which the federal government of the United States can either protect or defend them.

As a result of widespread dissatisfaction by policymakers during the civil rights and anti-poverty era of the mid-1960's, the bracero program was unilaterally terminated by the United States on December 31, 1964.

#### D. The Immigration Act of 1965

Although unrecognized at the time, one of the most significant legislative accomplishments of the administration of President Lyndon Johnson was the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. Passed at the height of the civil rights movement, its most important feature was that it abolished the racial quotas that were the essential characteristic of the immigration system up until that time. In addition, the Act of 1965 also significantly increased the total number of immigrants annually

admitted to the United States. From the time that the Immigration Act of 1924 first imposed aggregate numerical restrictions until the reform of 1965, legal immigration to the United States averaged about 190,000 persons a year. After its enactment, the annual average doubled to about 400,000 a year through 1976. Since then, the annual average has been steadily increasing to a level of about 600,000 immigrants in 1979. From 1966 until 1976, legal immigrants from Mexico soared--exceeding 70,000 persons a year in the early 1970s. Unfortunately, amendments to the Act in 1976 put Mexico under the identical 20,000 persons ceiling that applies to all other nations. Although the amendment appears fair on its surface, it has undoubtedly increased the pressures for illegal immigration. It was a counterproductive step that should be repealed with a figure in the range of the early 1970 immigration levels (i.e., 50,000 to 70,000 persons) set in its place.

The fact that the number of legal immigrants has increased dramatically since 1965 has drawn attention to the whole issue of immigration. This is because legal immigrants have tended to concentrate in several states--California, New York, Texas, and Florida in particular.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, legal immigrants have also concentrated themselves in the urban areas of these states. Because they have been concentrated rather than dispersed, the accommodation process has often been difficult. Ironically, it is exactly these same states and urban labor markets that have also been the destination of the majority of the illegal immigrants. Thus, the sheer number of immigrants--both legal and illegal--has been partly responsible for the increased public attention given to the topic. Immigration is now a major component of the annual growth of the labor force. A

conservative estimate would say that about 25 percent of the annual growth in the labor force is now coming from both types of immigrants. In specific localities, of course, this figure could be much higher. With the birth rate of the population declining, it is certain that immigration will become an even larger component of the annual labor force increase in the future.

#### IV. Socio-Political Factor Opposing Immigration Reform

Opposition to proposals to develop an enforceable immigration policy for the United States can only be explained in terms of socio-political terms. In this context, an unholy alliance has developed that requires careful analysis.

As would be expected, a substantial part of the opposition comes from employers in the Southwest. For many of them, Mexico has always been a source of cheap and docile labor. Whether it be illegal immigrants, commuters, "tourist" workers, or braceros, the immigration policies of the United States have seen to it that a supply of workers for unskilled and semi-skilled work has always been available. During the Nineteenth Century, it was China and Japan that were tapped to meet their labor needs. In the Twentieth Century it has been Mexico.

As every economist knows, it is impossible to separate the employment effects from the wage effects whenever there is a change in the supply of labor.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the presence of Mexican workers not only affects job opportunities but it also affects wage levels. It is the wage effects that are part of the attractiveness of Mexican workers to American employers. These employers are able to obtain workers at less cost than would be the case in their absence. This does not mean that most employers

exploit these workers by paying wages below the federal minimum wage. Obviously, some malevolent employers do pay lower than legal wages but this is clearly the exception in the present era. Available research shows that most illegal immigrants do receive at least the federal minimum wage and many receive much more.<sup>14</sup> Most of the exploitation that occurs is simply the fact workers are available at wage rates that are lower than would be the case if the same employers had to hire only citizen workers. But the real case for exploitation is derived from the fact that an illegal immigrant is likely to be a docile worker. Citizen workers know that they have job entitlements. These entitlements include minimum wage protection but extend into a number of other areas such as overtime pay provisions, safety requirements, equal employment opportunity protection, and collective bargaining rights. It is these additional employee entitlements that an employer can often escape if illegal immigrants are hired. Thus, even if the wage rates that an employer must pay are identical for illegal immigrants and for citizen workers, the illegal immigrant will be preferred. It is the knowledge that illegal immigrants are less likely to make demands for job rights or to join unions that makes them preferred workers. If, by chance, the illegal immigrants do not act in the expected way, they can immediately be gotten rid of by a mere call to the I.N.S. Thus, it is the non-economic factors that provide the crucial advantages for employers.

But in addition to employers, the next most important obstacle to immigration reform has come from some powerful local leaders in the Chicano movement. Frankly stated, the position of these Chicano leaders--who tend to be intellectuals and militant activists--is purely political.



It is also purely racist. Some of these leaders base their position on the fact that the Southwest once belonged to Mexico before being taken away by an imperialistic war in 1845 - 1848. They call the area "occupied America" and they espouse an intellectual kinship with Mexico that transcends any such ties to their fellow American citizens.<sup>15</sup> But aside from this element, there are a significant number of other Chicano leaders who fervently believe that in politics it is numbers of people who count. Illegal immigration is seen as a way of increasing the eventual size of the Chicano community in the long run and as a means of increasing their collective political strength in the short run. Hence, they simply dismiss the economic arguments. Illegal immigrants, of course, cannot vote. But these groups hope to use their numbers as a way to derive benefit from political reapportionments and as a way to receive increasing federal funds for social programs that are often allocated on the basis of the numbers of unemployed persons and the number of economically disadvantaged persons in a community.<sup>16</sup> Often when other Chicano leaders take note of the adverse economic impact, they are viciously attacked as "turncoats" from their ethnic brothers. The massive and unfair criticisms leveled at Leonel Castillo, the first Chicano to be appointed as Commissioner of I.N.S., for merely trying to do his required duties is a case in point. It eventually led to his resignation in mid-1979.

These Chicano leaders who oppose immigration reforms, however, are usually not interested in immigration in general. They are only concerned with immigration from Mexico. In a number of southwestern communities--such as Denver, Corpus Christi, and Brownsville--there has been open hostility to government efforts to settle Vietnamese refugees in

their communities. Why? Because the refugees take jobs and use community services. Some of these same Chicano leaders have candidly called for an "open border" with Mexico. They make no such request for an open Canadian border and they make it clear that they are only interested in extending this privilege to Mexicans and no one else. A recent proponent of this view is the highest ranking Chicano in the state government of California. He is Mario Obledo, Secretary of Health and Welfare. He argues that there should be unlimited immigration from Mexico but that the traditional border checks on entry would have to be retained to keep all others out since "we have every right to put restrictions on entry by people from other countries."<sup>17</sup>

There are, of course, other groups who have also found socio-political reasons to oppose immigration reforms. One of these has been the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) who oppose any effort to establish any form of identification which might be used to distinguish citizens from non-citizens. Without some clearly established identification procedure, no employer sanctions can ever be realistically imposed against hiring illegal aliens. The ACLU fears that any such identification could be misused as an instrument of citizen control as has happened in Nazi Germany and in South Africa. Many Chicanos legitimately fear that, without a universal identification requirement, an employers sanctions law could be used to discriminate against them. They argue that employers, fearing possible violation of the law, would simply refuse to hire anyone with Hispanic features.

Thus, a strange alliance of opposition to immigration reform has congealed. Powerful employer groups who have traditionally fought every

type of social legislation that would benefit the Chicano community now find their strongest support for doing nothing about immigration coming from many quarters of the Chicano community. In addition, this union is now blessed by the actions of the A.C.L.U.

With this type of opposition, it is not surprising that few politicians have been willing to touch the issue. As a result, President Carter's comprehensive reform package which was proposed in August 1977 has yet to be acted upon by either house of Congress.

#### V. Socio Political Factors in Mexico that Affect Migration

In 1975, President Luis Echeverria of Mexico in his Fifth State of the Nation Report emphatically stated the intention of Mexico to solve the problem of illegal migration. In his speech he said:

The painful problem of farm workers who cross the northern border in search of employment because of the lack of opportunities in the rural areas of Mexico persists.... Fundamentally, this phenomenon like many others faced by our country, is the result of the neglect of rural areas. As we have stated before, we are determined to correct this situation as an essential part of this Administration.

The solution to the migrant farm worker problem is dependent upon our own efforts. Farm workers must have access to a decent life in their own country. As we achieve this, the lure of immigration will diminish.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the noble intentions expressed in his address, it is unrealistic to expect Mexico to solve the migration process itself even if it were to try. Obviously, in the years that have followed, there has not been any sign that the migration from Mexico has abated or that Mexico has done anything to address the issue.

Conceptually, there is no doubt that Mexico would like to stop the outflow of its citizens to the United States. It is a national

embarrassment for any nation to have so many of its citizens constantly leave in pursuit of better economic opportunities in another nation. But, realistically, the outflow of migrants coupled with the return of a considerable amount of foreign exchange earned abroad is a great benefit to Mexico. It is especially beneficial to the political leaders of Mexico. For without the outflow of a considerable portion of its surplus labor and population, it would have the impossible task of trying to provide jobs and some measure of community services for these persons. In the absence of the "safety-valve" of the border, domestic pressures for drastic reforms could be more acute than they already are in Mexico. Given the grossly uneven income distribution in Mexico and the fact that the political system of Mexico is essentially a one party system, the powerful ruling elite have a strong stake in the perpetuation of the status quo.<sup>19</sup> Without the mass out-migration, there would undoubtedly be greater pressure for domestic economic reforms. Hence, it is likely that those few people in control of Mexico's political machinery will continue to talk about the issue but, in fact, they will do absolutely nothing to stop it.

The only thing that the government of Mexico can be expected to do is to become increasingly vocal on its insistence that the human rights of its citizens who live and work in the United States be protected. Mexico has had a long tradition of manifesting such concerns.<sup>20</sup> In President Echeverria's aforementioned speech, he reiterated this policy by saying:

We insist upon the defense of the human and labor rights of those who work in foreign countries.... Even though they carry on an illegal activity in

the territory of another state, they should nevertheless be protected by law as 'migratory workers without papers.'<sup>21</sup>

In subsequent years, his successor, President Lopez Portillo has been equally firm in his demands for their protection. But, as discussed earlier, the demand that the United States protect the rights of people who clandestinely enter it in violation of its laws and who, accordingly, are forced into a sub rosa life style of constant fear of detection, is a absurd on its face. There is very little that can be done in any realistic way to protect the rights of these helpless people. In fact, the government of Mexico cannot even protect the illegal immigrants from mistreatment by their fellow Mexican citizens. For they are often exploited by Mexican citizens who serve as "coyotes" (i.e., smugglers), or who sell counterfeit documents at exorbitant prices, and by the ever present "mordida" (i.e., bribes and extortion payments) demands by local Mexican border officials who sometimes arrange their exodus or prey upon them when they return. Once in the United States, they are vulnerable to other "coyotes", document counterfeiters, and "loan sharks" (i.e., people who make loans at exorbitant interest rates) as well as employers who wish to exploit the total dependence of the illegal immigrants for personal economic gain. Also, too often they fall victim to criminal and violent elements both in the border towns and inland areas who subject them to robbery, rape, torture, and even murder. Of course, United States officials should try to stop all of these abuses but, in reality, the very nature of the presence and the existence of illegal immigrants makes it virtually impossible to prevent these actions. At best, all the United States government can do is to react to the exploitation and the

abuses after they have occurred. It can and should seek punishment where civil and criminal acts can be documented. But even in these circumstances, it is difficult to take action if the illegal immigrants themselves do not report offences or are unwilling or unavailable to press charges. The fact is that illegal immigration is a process that brings to the surface the worst human elements in both Mexican and United States societies. There is only one human rights position. It is to find ways of stopping illegal entry before it takes place. Any other plea to human rights is either patently naive or purely political rhetoric.

On the other hand, there are things the United States can do to assist Mexico to reduce the outflow of its citizens and to demonstrate both its sincerity and its understanding of Mexico's border problems. The most important of these actions would be a drastic reduction in trade barriers on Mexican exports. Mexico exports about 60 percent of its total exports to the United States. It also imports about 62 percent of its total imports from the United States. In addition, hundreds of millions of dollars are paid to U.S. business firms each year in payment for patent usages and profits on direct investments. The United States has for many years run a trade surplus with Mexico even when it has had large deficits on a worldwide basis. A decrease in trade barriers would enable the export industries in Mexico to expand and to absorb more workers who might otherwise be tempted to become illegal immigrants. Of course, there will be opposition by United States groups who will have to compete with the increases in Mexican exports. Agricultural interests as well as many light manufacturers will be especially vulnerable and they can be expected to raise forceful opposition. But if the free

enterprise philosophy of the United States is to be more than simply lip service, this enhanced competition should be encouraged.

Likewise, another step that will be equally controversial but which is also essential to a comprehensive attack on illegal immigration would be efforts made by the United States to stop the export of illegal contraband into Mexico in violation of Mexico's import laws. Each year, millions of dollars of goods are exported out of the United States to Mexico through smuggling networks that are even more formally established than those that smuggle illegal immigrants. The goods run the gamut from guns and cigarettes to TV sets and clothing. If appeals to Mexico to enlist its help to curtail the outflow of illegal immigrants are to be taken seriously, similar requests by Mexico to stop the illegal flow of United States goods into Mexico should be heeded.

#### VI. The Prospects for the Future

A realistic appraisal of the prospects for the 1980's is that neither the governments of Mexico or the United States are likely to take any meaningful steps to address the illegal immigration question. Illegal immigration from Mexico and from other nations (especially the Caribbean) to the United States will steadily increase in numbers throughout the decade. As they do, the related problems of jobs, housing, accommodation of dependents, eligibility for social services, relations with citizen workers, and human rights violations will mount.

The border communities of both nations can expect to bear the brunt of all of these problems even more than they do now. The needs and protections of their people will be ignored as in the past. But the increased scale of all of the existing problems can be expected to foster

even more hardship, violence, vice, and crime in the border communities of both nations than is even presently the case. All of this will attract much more publicity and lead to more academic studies and government inquiries. But as the old saying goes, "after all is said and done, more is said than done."

The reasons for the gloomy prospects are simple. The socio-political factors that are associated with migration issue are so complex that--when combined with the economic considerations--they dictate that only a comprehensive approach could possibly offer hope for a solution. But a comprehensive solution affects numerous groups. As such, it requires support from many diverse quarters which, presently, does not exist.

Mexico and its leaders do not recognize the important changes that the civil rights and the anti-poverty movements have had on political and social policies of the United States since the 1960s. Instead, Mexico looks backward to the historic relationships between the two nations. Mexico does not understand the emerging internal priorities within the United States that demand that economic opportunities must be provided for citizen groups who in the past were either ignored or denied such chances. These citizen workers are precisely the ones that shoulder the burden of competing with illegal immigrants.

Likewise, there are fears among some Americans that the illegal immigrants are themselves rapidly becoming a new group of economically and politically disadvantaged persons. It is precisely because of the need to learn from the past--not simply to replicate it into the future--that these people want to stop illegal immigration. Otherwise, they fear there will be the necessity of a new civil rights movement in the 1990s when the children of



illegal immigrants react to the lives of oppression and fear experienced by their parents and the denial of equal opportunity for themselves.

The United States, on the other hand, has always seen Mexico as a series of symptoms and problems. The leaders of the United States simply have never taken the time to understand Mexico or to attempt to develop the foundation for a relationship of trust and concern between the two nations. As the noted Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes, recently observed so clearly:

"What Lopez Portillo was trying to tell Carter during his visit was: Please understand us as a civilization and not as a series of agreements about tomatoes."<sup>22</sup>

Aside from the lack of perspective of American policy makers, there is the fact that comprehensive solutions run counter to the American political system. The fragmentation of congressional and executive branch decision-making units of the federal government inhibits the ability to address problems comprehensively. The only way to enact a comprehensive policy, given the diversity of committees and agencies involved, is if there is a strong coalition of supporters who are unified in their purpose. This is definitely not the present case in the United States. The migration issue has divided all established coalitions and it has thrown usually hostile groups into the same camps on both sides of the issue.<sup>23</sup> At this juncture, there is no indication that any of the new coalitions have been able to develop the base of support needed to address the issue in a comprehensive way.

A resolution of the illegal immigration issue must begin with the determination by the governments of both nations to force changes internally upon a multiple number of powerful groups who currently benefit from leaving

things exactly as they are. Also, it requires that both nations achieve a degree of understanding, respect, and cooperation that has never yet existed between them. But, as a recent New York Times article so poignantly observed:

Even the uncontrolled flow of unemployed Mexicans crossing the border in search of work has provoked little more than regional reactions. It took oil from Mexico to penetrate the consciousness of Washington.

For the United States, then, Mexico is a new issue. But for Mexico, the United States is an old problem. Washington is, therefore, looking to the future, while Mexico is remembering the past. And more even than language, race, religion, culture and politics, the two countries are separated by history. It is not that Mexico cannot 'forgive' the past; it is that for Mexicans, the past is still present.<sup>24</sup>

## Footnotes

1. See Robert Sayers and Thomas Weaver, "Explanations and Theories of Migration" in Mexican Migration ed. by Thomas Weaver and Theodora Downing (Tucson: Bureau of Ethnic Studies, 1976) pp 22-24.
2. Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Message of the President to the Congress of Illegal Immigration," Washington, D.C. August 4, 1977, p. 7 (mimeographed material).
3. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1968), p. 2.
4. Vernon M. Briggs Jr., Walter Fogel, and Fred H. Schmidt, The Chicano Worker (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), pp 97-100.
5. William Griffith, "Is Chavez Beaten?" New York Times Magazine (September 15, 1974), p.24.
6. E.g., see, "Chavez Hits Strike Role of Immigration Service" AFL-CIO News (April 21, 1979), p 2; and "Chavez Claims Carter Policy Breaking Farm Workers Strike" Dallas Times Herald (April 19, 1979), p. 1.
7. Briggs, Fogel, and Schmidt, op cit., pp 103-104.
8. Vernon M. Briggs, Jr. The Mexico-United States Border: Public Policy and Chicano Economic Welfare, Studies in Human Resource Development, Monograph No. 2, (Austin: Bureau of Business Research, 1974).
9. Carey McWilliams, North From Mexico (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968) p 267; see also Ernesto Galarza, Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story, Charlotte, McNally and Loftin, 1964).
10. H. N. Delton, "Foreign Agricultural Worker and the Prevention of Adverse Effect," Labor Law Journal (December, 1966) pp 739-748 and Donald Wise, "The Effect of the Bracero on Agricultural Production in California" Economic Inquiry, (December 1974), pp 547-555.
11. Vernon M. Briggs, Jr. Chicanos and Rural Poverty, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) p. 29.
12. David North and William Weissart, Immigrants and the American Labor Market, Monograph No. 31 (Washington: U.S. Department of Labor, 1974), pp 17-18 and Table 8 in Appendix.

13. Walter Fogel, Mexican Illegal Alien Workers in the United States, Monograph #20 (Los Angeles: Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California at Los Angeles, 1978), Chapter VI and VII.
14. David North and Marion Houstoun, The Characteristics and Role of Illegal Aliens in the U.S. Labor Market (Washington D.C.: Linton & Co., 1976), pp. 128-130. This does not mean that the problem of payment below the minimum wage is unimportant. It is a serious problem but only that this is not the general case.
15. Rodolfo Acuna, Occupied America The Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972).
16. E.g., see Robert Reinhold, "Census Questions on Race Assailed as Political by Population Experts," New York Times (May 14, 1978), p. A-1.
17. Evan Maxwell, " 'Open Border' Between U.S. and Mexico Proposed" Los Angeles Times (December 12, 1979) p. 1.
18. "Fifth State of the Nation Report by President Luis Echeverria," Mexican Newsletter (September 1, 1975) p. 35.
19. See Alan Riding, "Facing the Reality of Mexico," New York Times Magazine (September 16, 1979).
20. E.g., see E. Garza Perez, "Mexico Protests Mistreatment of Workers," in Mexican Workers in the United States ed. by George C. Kiser and Martha W. Kiser (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979) p. 15.
21. "Fifth State of the Nation Report ...," op cit., p. 14.
22. Richard Eder, "For the Writer Carlos Fuentes, Iran Crisis Brings Deja Vu," New York Times, (January 9, 1980), p. A-2.
23. Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., "La Confrontacion Del Chicano Con El Inmigrante Mexicano," Foro Internacional, vol. XVIII, no. 3, (1978) p. 514-521
24. Riding, op cit., p. 141