

Immigration still a minefield

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Body

Illegal immigration again emerges as a major issue now that Barack Obama is president. The new administration is veering toward a more-open borders policy as underscored by Obama's choices of Janet Napolitano as Department of Homeland Security chief and Hilda Solis as U.S. Labor secretary.

Napolitano seeks amnesty for the 15 million illegal aliens here, and opposes the almost-completed 650-mile U.S.-Mexico border fence. As Arizona governor, she slashed funding to Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio's task force fighting drug, weapons and human smuggling from Mexico. Her positions did little to make the homeland more secure --- especially since Mexico is engulfed in a civil war where well-organized gangs are killing police, judges and soldiers. This growing Mexican warfare is spilling over into the U.S. Southwest --- and poses a mounting problem for Obama.

As a California congresswoman, Solis opposed workplace raids to deport illegal workers and prosecute greedy employers. She also sought to force all federally funded entities to provide "meaningful access" to their services for non-English-speaking immigrants. The huge cost of providing such translation services for the 320-plus languages spoken in the United States would have been paid by the taxpayers as well as by health care consumers in the form of bigger bills.

A major battle will emerge in March over the E-verify homeland security program, which comes up for re-authorization in Congress. It is an effective system that helps demagnetize the magnet that draws illegal aliens. An employer can log on to the Homeland Security Web site and enter an applicant's Social Security number into its database to ascertain if a worker is legal. A new E-verify feature is a photo of the job applicant that pops up on the employer's computer screen. (Many illegal immigrants, of course, steal the Social Security numbers and identities of real citizens.)

Voluntary use of E-verify by employers has risen dramatically in all 50 states, and the Bush administration issued an executive order requiring that federal contractors and subcontractors use the system. Yet the multicultural left and, incredibly, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce want Obama to reverse the order. Of course, as former Homeland Security spokeswoman Laura Keehner emphasized, there is very little reason to avoid using the system "unless you are for some reason in favor of hiring illegal immigrants."

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There are more than 10 million unemployed Americans. They will have little chance of finding a job if U.S.-Mexico border control is undermined, a million more illegal aliens sneak in again this year to take now-precious jobs, and the E-verify system (which Obama once claimed he supported) is gutted. Such actions could trigger a noisy public reaction similar to one that derailed the 2007 U.S. Senate amnesty proposal for illegal immigrants.

In a broader context, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said in a Jan. 4 interview that Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) told him "he's going to work real, real hard on immigration reform. And I'll work with him." Reid said this includes "a pathway to legalization" for illegal immigrants already here, as well as the addition of untold numbers of cheap-wage foreign job competitors under a "guest worker program."

But whether Obama wants to risk a huge public backlash over such a comprehensive effort early in his first term --- knowing that polls indicate Middle America strongly opposes illegal immigration --- is a big question mark.

* Phil Kent of Atlanta is national spokesman for Americans for Immigration Control.

Graphic

Photo: LENNY IGNELZI / Associated PressThe new Homeland Security chief opposes the border fence./ImageData* ImageData*

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