

Latest immigration 'crisis' defies simplistic solutions

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Body

The USA, truly a nation of immigrants, is having another of its periodic bouts of anxiety about **immigration**.

Communities even in areas far from any foreign border are dealing with the burdens and social change caused by growing numbers of immigrants, both legal and illegal. Longtime residents and local officials complain of the costs of immigrant children in the schools, strains on health care systems for a population that often lacks insurance, and economic impact of people willing to work for low wages. Recent polls found that nine of every 10 Americans say **immigration** is a serious problem, and three-fourths want more done to keep illegal immigrants out.

Looking at these numbers, politicians are falling over each other with promises to round up millions for deportation, erect massive walls along the porous U.S.-Mexico border and crack down yet again on employers who hire those here illegally.

The House of Representatives, sensing a potential vote-getting issue, passed a draconian border control and **immigration**-enforcement bill in December. That **simplistic** legislation has triggered large demonstrations in support of immigrant rights, including one in Los Angeles on Saturday that drew more than 500,000 people. The Senate took up the issue Wednesday and will, we hope, bring a more balanced and practical approach.

The backlash against **immigration** is happening in a country where nearly everyone is either an immigrant or descended from immigrants, many of whom arrived without anything resembling what would now be considered proper papers.

Energetic strivers have always been attracted to America, starting in the 1600s with the likes of John Smith in Jamestown and William Bradford in Plymouth. And as far back as the 18th century, Benjamin Franklin was fretting publicly about a surge of German arrivals in Pennsylvania.

According to the Census Bureau, more than 35 million immigrants are in the USA, a record number but a smaller proportion of the population now (12.1%) than at the peak of European **immigration** early in the 20th century (14.7%).

Roughly two-thirds are here legally, but an estimated 11.5 million to 12 million are undocumented. The legislation passed by the House would declare all of them felons subject to expulsion, as if it were possible to round up a population the size of Ohio and dump them across the nearest border.

Moreover, the illegals are roughly 5% of the labor force, heavily concentrated in construction, low-wage service jobs and agriculture. Their abrupt departure, even if it were possible, would seriously disrupt those sectors of the economy. Their employers are violating the law, but successive administrations have essentially abandoned enforcement of employer sanctions.

Clearly the **immigration**-control system enacted in 1986 and revised in 1996 is broken. Pressures to revisit the issue run in cycles, usually paralleling anxiety about the economy, jobs and national security. When concern

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slackens, businesses become reliant on cheap labor, consumers welcome the lower prices for food and services, and enforcement is gradually neglected.

Certainly, part of the answer to the immigration problem has to include improved and serious border controls -- on both sides, as President Bush should make clear when he meets his Mexican counterpart, Vicente Fox, in Cancun starting today. Such controls are necessary not just to curb illegal immigration but also to protect the nation in an age of terrorism.

But another round of chest-thumping about sealing borders and deporting illegals is far from a solution. A balanced approach must also include some kind of guest-worker program, like the one Bush has proposed, that would bring immigrant laborers out of the shadows. And common sense suggests providing a route to eventual legalization for those who have been here for years, in many cases paying taxes and contributing to their communities. A Senate Judiciary Committee proposal hammered out Monday is a step in that direction. It would offer not amnesty but a chance to get in line for eventual citizenship to those who are willing to continue working for six years, pay their fines and any back taxes, and learn English.

Despite the frustrations and fears of the moment, and the obvious security reasons for better management of the borders, a nation of immigrants cannot turn its back on the new arrivals in its midst.

This is the first in an occasional series of editorials about immigration-related issues.

Graphic

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