

To zap illegals, jail those who employ them

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Byline: CYNTHIA TUCKER

Body

On Monday, President Bush gave a speech designed to reassure his conservative base that he is serious about protecting the country from illegal immigrants.

Speaking before an invitation-only audience in Tucson, Ariz., the president didn't spend too much time talking about the valuable contributions that immigrants have made or about granting them the opportunity to become citizens. Instead, Bush focused on fences and raids and deportations. In so doing, he reached out to a disaffected Republican constituency that is increasingly hostile to immigrants --- especially to those Latinos who enter the country illegally.

Bush's tough talk will certainly have widespread appeal in Georgia, where many voters have become anxious --- even angry --- at what they perceive as the staggering burden of illegal immigration. There is a backlash brewing --- a rising tide of frustration born of resentment over schools forced to accommodate non-English speakers, hospital emergency rooms beset by uninsured patients and perceptions of higher crime rates.

Over the past decade, the immigrant population has grown faster in Georgia than in nearly all other states. Immigrants --- with and without documents --- find work in carpet mills in Dalton, poultry plants in Rome, farms in South Georgia and construction companies throughout metro Atlanta.

But Bush failed to call for the one policy change that would make the greatest difference in deterring illegal border crossings: harsh penalties for employers who hire undocumented workers. Most illegal immigrants, especially those who come in through the porous Mexican border, are drawn to this country by the promise of work. If jobs dried up, the torrent of illegal immigrants entering the United States would diminish to a trickle. And the best way to curb the hiring is to put employers in prison for hiring illegally.

But the president didn't say one word about harsh penalties for businesses. That's because business executives are a core GOP constituency, and Bush doesn't want to risk alienating them.

Oh, he gave the usual lip service to the idea of responsible hiring. He spoke of his plan for providing temporary permits for immigrants to work in those industries that need their labor, and he described IDs that would be tamper-proof, thwarting the common practice of using fake IDs. He announced the expansion of a program called "Basic Pilot," an automated system through which businesses may determine whether a prospective employee is authorized to work in this country. Basic Pilot is now available for use nationwide. But employers are not required to use it.

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Bush didn't say anything about business owners who knowingly hire illegal immigrants because their labor comes cheap: They will work for less than minimum wage; they don't seek health insurance; they don't complain about safety violations in the workplace.

It's not difficult for employers to check on the immigration status of prospective workers. The Social Security Administration maintains a database of all Social Security numbers. It's easy enough for employers to learn whether a worker's number is valid. But many employers don't do that.

While many industries claim they can't find willing American workers, the truth is that they could find more Americans willing to do tough, dirty jobs if they paid more for their labor. Is it true that poultry plants couldn't find enough Americans to fill job openings? Or is it more likely they couldn't find enough American laborers for the wages they were willing to pay?

Of course, the higher labor prices would be passed on to consumers if the Bush administration and Congress really cracked down on illegal hiring. Homebuilders, for example, get to squeeze out a bit more profit when they use illegal workers, but they also pass some of the savings on to consumers. Houses are cheaper --- and so is chicken, farm produce and lawn care, among other things --- because illegal immigrants do so much of the labor. Americans who denounce illegal immigrants may not have calculated the additional costs they'd incur once that labor disappears.

It's easy to bash illegal immigrants. They are desperate; they are vulnerable; they don't vote. But they are here only because we've developed a bipolar policy that devours their cheap labor while discouraging their assimilation. If we are serious about curbing illegal immigration, the place to start is with business owners who hire illegal workers.

* Cynthia Tucker is the editorial page editor. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays.

cynthia@ajc.com

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