

Fox sets immigration reform deadline

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Body

President Vicente **Fox** of Mexico, the guest of honor Wednesday at President Bush's first state dinner, sparked controversy by challenging his host to strike an agreement on **immigration reform** by the end of the year.

Fox, flanked by Bush, made his remarks during a welcoming ceremony with a military honor guard on the South Lawn of the White House Wednesday morning.

While aware of his thinking on the issue, administration officials said **Fox** did not clear his remarks with the White House, or with his inner circle of advisers.

Bush hailed bilateral relations as a "relationship of unprecedented closeness and cooperation," but he did not embrace **Fox's** lofty **deadline**.

FOX-BUSH

The White House had scripted the day with pomp and circumstance to showcase glowing U.S.-Mexico relations under the Bush administration, and, in the process, to boost the president's standing among Latino voters.

By the end of the day, however, administration officials were scrambling to contain the political fallout. For weeks they had worked to lower expectations for a deal on the politically volatile issue of **immigration**.

Only a day earlier, Bush had said he needed time to work with Congress to build political support for **immigration reform**.

White House proposals to grant legal status to millions of illegal Mexican immigrants living in the United States have met with fierce opposition.

Mexican government officials say the anti-immigrant backlash in the United States is what prompted **Fox** to take such a bold position Wednesday.

They say it was a deliberate attempt by **Fox** to put pressure on the administration to reach an agreement on Mexican migration quickly, instead of years down the road.

In his speech at the White House, **Fox** said Mexican immigrants should be recognized for the cultural and economic contributions they have made to the United States.

"For this reason, we must, and we can, reach an agreement on migration before the end of this very year," **Fox** said, adding that before his and Bush's terms are over, it should be easier for Mexicans to migrate to the United States legally.

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For **Fox**, challenging Bush in his own back yard - literally - is bound to play well in Mexico. Last July, he made history by kicking Mexico's notoriously corrupt ruling party out of office after 70 years in power.

During his campaign, the former Coca-Cola executive pledged to fight for an open border with the United States and for better treatment of illegal Mexican immigrants. A series of roadblocks, however, including an intransigent Congress and a hobbled economy, have left his promises largely unfulfilled.

And his popularity is sinking.

For those who know **Fox**, his stance at the White House wasn't surprising.

Known for his straight talk, he often got a good laugh on the campaign trail by telling opponents to "tell it to your grandma."

On Wednesday, the White House wasn't laughing.

Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser, was bombarded with questions about **Fox**'s remarks at an afternoon news briefing.

Is **setting** a **deadline** counterproductive?

She didn't answer.

"Look," Rice said, visibly agitated, "everybody would be delighted if we could get this done by the end of the year."

Earlier at the White House, Attorney General John Ashcroft also was asked for his reaction to **Fox**'s remarks. Ashcroft and Secretary of State Colin Powell are working on the migration issue with their Mexican counterparts.

Ashcroft refused to say whether he knew in advance of the **Fox** challenge. He said both sides were working to reach an agreement "as soon as possible."

"I cannot forecast an exact time," Ashcroft said. "I can tell you it's a matter of priority."

Privately, administration officials said they would have preferred to avoid the pressure of a public **deadline**.

Before **Fox** took the podium, Bush, who has been courting the Latino vote with an eye toward his re-election in 2004, showered him with pageantry.

Pennsylvania Avenue was decked out in American and Mexican flags.

A military band played.

And making the morning just about perfect were a cool breeze, delicious skies and the smell of something good cooking in the basement of the West Wing - perhaps the pumpkin seed-crusting bison on the state dinner menu.

Bush was effusive in his praise.

And he peppered his speech with Spanish.

"A Mexican proverb tells us that que tiene un buen vecino tiene un buen amigo. He who has a good neighbor has a good friend.

"Today, both our countries are committed to being good neighbors and good friends. Friends deal in good faith, and disagree with respect. Friends stick together, in good times and in bad."

Graphic

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PHOTO, Associated Press, (2); Laura Bush wears a 'lollypop red' gown and President George W. Bush cowboy boots to welcome Vicente **Fox** and Martha Sahagun de **Fox** to the state dinner. ; **Fox**, with U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.

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