

OUR OPINION: Students here illegally deserved chance at Dream

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Body

They killed the **Dream**.

Last week, the Senate --- pushed by a craven White House --- rejected the **Dream** Act, which would have put high-achieving young immigrants on the path to citizenship. The bill would have granted temporary legal status to illegal immigrants who have graduated from high school with good records and attend college or serve in the military.

Let's face it: That's a group of striving, straight-arrow immigrants that this country needs as citizens. But the Senate refused to even allow the measure, sponsored by U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.), to come to the floor for debate. After President Bush came out with a statement opposing the measure shortly before the vote, 36 Republicans and eight Democrats voted "no." That includes Georgia Republicans Johnny Isakson and Saxby Chambliss.

Every one of them should be ashamed. It was an ugly bit of nativism, a shortsighted and nonsensical decision made to appease the Know-Nothings, not to advance the national interest. And it exposed the raw prejudices fueling the controversy over immigration.

"This or any type of an amnesty bill would be a slap in the face of all of those who came in legally," grumped U.S. Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), a leader of the Know-Nothing contingent. (Inhofe doesn't know he's a Know-Nothing, but how could he?)

When they take care to be circumspect, the activists denouncing illegal immigration portray their cause as a legitimate concern about freeloaders who crowd public schools with their non-English-speaking children, burden public hospitals and destroy neighborhoods by turning single-family homes into boarding houses. They cite studies about undocumented workers who depress wages. They mention those who have committed crimes.

But the **Dream** Act would not have rewarded any of that. It focused on a small group --- around 500,000 young adults, out of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants (about 4 percent). They would have attended college, putting them outside the low-wage work force that digs ditches or washes laundry. They would obviously speak English. They would have paid taxes from higher-earning jobs.

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The narrowly tailored bill would only have applied to immigrants who had been younger than 16 when they entered the United States, had lived here at least five years and are currently younger than 30. They would have six years of conditional legal status, during which they would have to complete two years of college or military service. If they complied with those requirements, they would be eligible for permanent residency.

Bush backed essentially the same proposal when it was part of a comprehensive immigration reform plan. Indeed, when he was governor of Texas, he had a reputation as a progressive supporter of hardworking immigrants --- no matter how they crossed the border. But now, the president, too, has caved in to the GOP's small-minded, vitriolic Mexican-bashers.

They would dash the dreams of a young man such as Marco, a Georgia Tech engineering student who earned a perfect score on the math portion of his SAT. A graduate of Cross Keys High School in DeKalb County, Marco has been in this country since he was 4 --- he's practically American --- but his parents entered the country illegally. What sense does it make to deny him a path to citizenship?

Why deny citizenship to those who would serve in the military of their new country? The Army is desperate for recruits, so much so that it has relaxed its standards for the native-born, turning a blind eye to troubled pasts and failed drug tests. Doesn't it make more sense to take a high-achieving illegal immigrant who is likely to be a better soldier?

It is no great surprise that some Americans display a fear and suspicion of the Other, that they have allowed a primitive distrust of those who look or sound or worship differently to harden into resentment. But it is surprising --- and disappointing --- that so many of our elected leaders quake and cower before those impulses rather than standing up and opposing them.

So much for profiles in courage.

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