Who should stay? Who should go?; The best immigration reform would be one that divides and conquers the pool of illegals. The line would be drawn at those who play by the rules, assimilate and pay a fine and back taxes. To the others: Leave.

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Body

The ***divide***-and-***conquer*** strategy that works so well in warfare and politics also represents the ***best*** approach for confronting the problem of millions of illegal immigrants who live and work in the USA.

No ***one*** knows the actual number of undocumented, unauthorized residents, but the ***best*** estimates suggest that they comprise more than 11 million of our neighbors. This massive segment of our population hardly represents a monolithic, homogenous group -- for ***one*** thing, nearly half (44%) of ***illegals*** come from nations ***other*** than Mexico. Moreover, as many as 50% of them never ran across the border but entered the USA legally and then ***stayed*** longer than their formal authorization permitted.

This hugely diverse collection of humanity defies attempts by impassioned advocates on all sides to generalize about ***illegals***. Anti-immigrant activists distort reality when they suggest that the undocumented are predominantly gang members, welfare chiselers and uneducated burdens on the taxpayer. Most ***illegals*** actually work hard and ***pay*** billions in ***taxes***, while many own their own homes, go to church and give to charity.

At the same time, it's ridiculous to suggest that all ***illegals*** count as good neighbors, loving parents and inspiring examples of the work ethic. About 400,000 have run afoul of the law, with warrants out for their arrest as they defy governmental efforts at deportation.

A reflection of humanity

In short, like every ***other*** group, ***illegals*** include examples of both the worst and the ***best*** of humanity: Some of them damage our society through criminality, abuse of the social safety net and insistence on ethnic separatism, while many ***others*** toil tirelessly at their jobs while raising decent children and longing to take their place in the mainstream.

The only sensible approach is to recognize such divisions and to respond accordingly: making it difficult for the destructive immigrants to remain in the USA, while making it possible for the first time for the ***best***, most useful of the ***illegals*** to take the path to citizenship and ***assimilation***.

Rather than expecting governmental bureaucracies to determine who deserves to ***stay*** and who ought to ***leave***, it makes far more sense to force ***illegals*** to choose for themselves. That was the core idea behind the ***immigration reform*** bill passed by the Senate last year, and with suitable modifications it's the same approach that deserves revival by the new Congress and approval by the president.

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The choice presented to undocumented immigrants must be clear-cut: If they've avoided serious criminality, worked steadily at jobs and mastered English, they should get the chance to _**pay**_ stiff _**fines**_ (at least several thousand dollars) for initial unauthorized entry and to _**pay**_ all _**back**_ _**taxes**_ in order to qualify for legal residency and begin the path to citizenship. This approach would allow the immigrant to acknowledge his wrongdoing in violating the border, and to commit himself to making up for that wrongdoing by following _**rules**_ that allow him to enter the mainstream.

For those who don't choose to _**pay**_ the _**fines**_ and obey the new regulations, or whose past criminality or failure to learn English makes them ineligible for "earned legalization," there's only _**one**_ _**other**_ choice: Go home.

The vigorous enforcement of workplace sanctions against employers -- combined with a vastly improved, high-tech system of ID, and aggressive efforts to serve existing warrants and deport criminals -- should greatly reduce the number of illegal immigrants who neither want nor deserve to remain in the USA.

Anti-_**immigration**_ extremists will protest that no _**illegals**_ deserve this choice: They entered the nation without permission, and so the only response is to demand their departure. Many activists in this camp (including Pat Buchanan) acknowledge the impracticality of mass deportations but favor a policy of "attrition": making it impossible for _**illegals**_ to work by enforcing strictures against employers, thereby forcing them to _**leave**_ the country. The problem with this scheme is that even its most enthusiastic advocates acknowledge it won't work for most of the undocumented.

In his book State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America, Buchanan approvingly cites studies saying that with a policy of "attrition through enforcement," some "half the illegal aliens here could be persuaded to return home voluntarily within five years." But what of the _**other**_ half -- numbering more than 5 million? Pushed even further into the shadows, thrown out of work and continuing to defy all laws against them, they would become a far more dangerous, destructive population than they represent today.

In _**other**_ words, even the most militant foes of illegal _**immigration**_ recognize that they will manage to expel only half of the undocumented -- and the _**ones**_ they'd force out largely comprise the wrong half. People who want to work hard, get educations for their children and become Americans would, for the most part, be forced to depart. Meanwhile, those who _**stay**_ would disproportionately represent lawbreakers and _**others**_ who manage to operate "below the radar."

Provide motivation

Ultimately, even the most stringent effort to expel _**illegals**_ will _**leave**_ millions remaining in the USA, and the most important goal for this mass of humanity is _**assimilation**_ -- following the path of previous immigrants into the national mainstream.

At the moment, the biggest obstacle to such _**assimilation**_ involves the impossibility of ever achieving legal residency. When the law makes it impossible for an immigrant to correct his illegal status, he faces greatly reduced motivation to embrace a new American identity.

That's why the only realistic policy comes down to _**divide**_ and _**conquer**_: _**Divide**_ the immigrants who ought to _**leave**_ from those who deserve to _**stay**_, and then _**conquer**_ the families who pursue legal status with the overwhelming power of the American dream that they've chosen to embrace.

Nationally syndicated radio talk host Michael Medved, whose mother was an immigrant from Germany in the 1930s, is the author of Right Turns. He is also a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.

Graphic

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