

'No Amnesty' Is Cry at D.C. Immigration Protest

The Washington Post

April 23, 2007 Monday, Suburban Edition

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Distribution: Maryland

Section: METRO; Pg. B01

Length: 825 words

Byline: Pamela Constable

Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

The small but fervent crowd of protesters recited the Pledge of Allegiance and hummed along to "God Bless America." They hoisted neatly lettered placards that portrayed the United States as under siege. They cheered lustily as a parade of speakers, jabbing fingers toward the White House, demanded action to secure U.S. borders, enforce its laws and make English its official language.

Many in the group of about 400 people had flown in from California and Arizona to join the rally in Lafayette Square yesterday against illegal immigration and to energize themselves for a week of lobbying on Capitol Hill as Congress begins to grapple once more with the volatile theme of immigration reform.

"We are certainly a nation of immigrants, but much more important, we are a nation of laws," T.J. Bonner, a U.S. Border Patrol agent, told the assembly. "What is happening on the border is anarchy. Millions are crossing over, reaping our benefits, taking our jobs, and the government is not doing a damn thing about it."

An estimated 10 million to 12 million illegal immigrants are in the United States, and Congress has been attempting for several years to address the problem. There is little disagreement on the need to tighten border security but a wide array of opinions on what to do with illegal immigrants already living and working here, from offering them full amnesty to deporting as many as possible.

The two-hour afternoon rally, much smaller than organizers had anticipated, was peaceful, but a group of about two dozen local counter-demonstrators gathered across the park, tooting horns and blowing whistles to drown out the speakers. They denounced the rally participants as "fascists" and "racists" but did not venture past several U.S. Park Police officers on horseback who cordoned off the site.

The rally was sponsored by an organization in Georgia and coordinated with the national Federation for American Immigration Reform, a nonprofit advocacy group, and a number of radio talk show hosts who have championed the cause of stopping illegal immigration.

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The crowd included retired teachers and aerospace workers, ex-soldiers and business contractors. Many were from Western states and said they were affiliated with organized groups but had paid their own airfares. Most were white, but a few were Latinos who described themselves as especially victimized by the protracted influx of illegal Latino immigrants.

"I was born in Mexico, but I came here legally, and I was brought up with American values," said Anna Gaines, a retired high school teacher from Arizona. "I have had terrible experiences with illegal students. They don't care about school, only about parties and drugs. They don't come with respect for our laws and values."

A number of people in the crowd stressed that they were not against legal immigrants and did not consider themselves prejudiced. D.A. King, the rally coordinator, announced that "anyone with a different agenda against skin color or national origin, you are not welcome . . . and you will not be tolerated."

Instead, speakers and participants complained about other problems they said were caused by illegal immigrants, including gang violence, drunken driving, a decline in wages, hospital overcrowding and impoverishment of community life.

"We don't hate anyone, and we are not anti-Mexican, but things have reached such an intolerable point that someone has to stand up," said Robert Schussler, a retired Marine from San Diego. His wife, Sandy, noted that their daughter-in-law, a native of Vietnam, had waited years to enter the United States and become a legal resident.

Much of yesterday's rhetoric was about improving border security, and several speakers drew cheers when they praised the U.S. Border Patrol, including several agents who are in prison on charges of killing illegal immigrants.

The most popular rallying cry, though, was a call for "no amnesty," meaning no repeat of the 1986 law that allowed hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants to apply for residency under certain conditions. Many speakers and participants said any form of legalization for illegal residents, no matter how long they have lived in the United States, would amount to amnesty.

"No matter what they call it this week, amnesty will not secure our borders, stop illegal immigrants or stop illegal employers," King said. "We are in a struggle to save the sovereignty of our nation. We will not lose, compromise or bargain."

Many people who attended the rally said they expected to spend the next several days lobbying members of Congress.

All expressed strong opposition to the House legislation proposed by Reps. Luis V. Gutierrez (D-Ill.) and Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) that would allow illegal immigrants to become legal if they fulfill a series of requirements. The legislation would also beef up border security and crack down on companies that hire illegal immigrants.

No Senate immigration legislation has been introduced.

Graphic

IMAGE; By Melina Mara -- The Washington Post; Ted Hayes of Los Angeles waves a flag in front a group of counter-demonstrators, who tried to drown out speakers with horns and whistles.

IMAGE; Photos By Melina Mara -- The Washington Post; Above, Hugh Hollar of Herndon, left, and Wes Young of Bordentown, N.J., listen to speeches at the rally, which urged a crackdown on illegal immigration. At right, the rally drew fewer participants than organizers had expected. "We are certainly a nation of immigrants, but much more important, we are a nation of laws," one speaker told the crowd.

IMAGE

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: BORDER CONTROL (94%); **IMMIGRATION** (92%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (90%); **PROTESTS** & DEMONSTRATIONS (89%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (89%); **IMMIGRATION** LAW (89%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (88%); MIGRATION ISSUES (78%); US CONGRESS (78%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (76%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (75%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (75%); RACISM & XENOPHOBIA (74%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (72%); NATIONAL SECURITY (71%); **AMNESTY** (69%); PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS (65%); HIGH SCHOOLS (60%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (50%); AIR FARES (50%)

Organization: US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (56%)

Industry: AEROSPACE INDUSTRY (68%); HIGH SCHOOLS (60%); AIR FARES (50%)

Geographic: CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (96%); NORTH AMERICA (92%)

Load-Date: April 23, 2007