

Bush defends immigration bill, says critics preying on fears

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Body

GLYNCO, Ga. - Firing back at conservative **critics**, President **Bush** on Tuesday **defended** his plan to overhaul **immigration** laws and accused its opponents of "trying to rile up people's emotions" with misinformation.

In an interview, **Bush** expressed his determination to fight for changes that would let millions of illegal immigrants gain legal status. He cast the debate as a struggle over America's soul and its reputation as a welcoming nation.

"I'm deeply concerned about America losing its soul. **Immigration** has been the lifeblood of a lot of our country's history," the president **said**. "I am worried that a backlash to newcomers would cause our country to lose its great capacity to assimilate newcomers."

Bush underscored his commitment to the proposed overhaul - despite harsh criticism from some conservatives - as he traveled to Georgia for a speech that blasted the legislation's **critics**.

"I'm sure you've heard some of the talk out there about people defining the **bill**. It's clear they hadn't read the **bill**. They're speculating about what the **bill** **says**, and they're trying to rile up people's emotions," he told an audience at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center. "If you want to kill the **bill**, if you don't want to do what's right for America, you can pick one little aspect out of it, you can use it to frighten people. Or you can show leadership and solve this problem once and for all."

Bush acknowledged that the proposed overhaul faces a difficult time in Congress, where it is under attack from both ends of the political spectrum.

Conservative **critics** contend that it amounts to an amnesty program because illegal immigrants would be allowed to stay in the country after paying fines. Some liberals complain that plans for a new temporary-worker program are overly restrictive and would create a permanent underclass of foreign workers.

Some of the most vociferous criticism has come from conservative talk-show hosts who usually back the president. Commentator Rush Limbaugh has told his listeners that the legislation would doom the Republican Party and the nation.

The **bill** seeks to strike a balance between tougher border enforcement and a more welcoming policy toward the estimated 12 million immigrants who are in the country illegally.

Bush hopes to push it through Congress with help from a bipartisan group of lawmakers that includes Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., a liberal stalwart, and Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., a staunch conservative. The president **said** he had no hesitations about working with Kennedy despite their sharp differences over Iraq and other issues.

"The reason why is, he can get the job done," **Bush said** aboard Air Force One.

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Sitting in his spacious office on the presidential aircraft, **Bush** traced his commitment to **immigration** to his time in Texas.

"When you grow up in Texas like I did, you recognize the decency and humanity of Hispanics. And the truth of the matter is, a lot of this **immigration** debate is driven as a result of Latinos being in our country," he **said**. "I have seen firsthand the beautiful stories of people being able to take advantage of opportunity and make solid contributions to our society."

He **said** Americans had nothing to **fear** from large-scale **immigration** from Latin America.

"There is an element of our society that is worried about two Americas," he **said**. "Our ability to welcome newcomers and the system's capacity to assimilate them has been one of the great powerful traditions of America. It works, and it will work this time. People shouldn't **fear** our capacity to uphold our motto: E Pluribus Unum."

The Latin phrase means "Out of many, one."

Addressing one of the most sensitive issues in the measure, **Bush** expressed hope that the changes would reduce the need for a fence along the border with Mexico.

The **bill** requires the completion of at least 370 miles of fencing, along with other security measures, before any temporary-worker program can go into effect, but doesn't specify how much of the border ultimately will be fenced. Congress approved legislation last year calling for 700 miles of fence.

The proposed fence has drawn protests in Texas, where officials **fear** it will hinder commerce and cause environmental problems.

"The fence sends a clear signal that we're serious about enforcing the border," **Bush said**. "A lot of these ranchers down there are **saying**, 'Wait a minute. Bad idea.' I presume we're not going to build a fence on places where people don't want it."

In California, tech companies and other large employers are working to change a proposal in the **bill** that could make it harder to bring in or keep skilled employees.

The current system, based on family ties and employer sponsorship, would be replaced by a complicated point system that would give more weight to education and skills. Some business leaders **said** the change would remove their ability to sponsor individuals to fill specific jobs. Instead, they would have to look to a pool of workers, regulated by the Department of Homeland Security, instead of recruiting preferred job candidates.

Asian-American and other groups also are worried that downgrading family reunification as a factor will make it more difficult for relatives to enter the country.

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