

Official blame game equally popular on either side of U.S.-Mexico border

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Body

Americans and Mexicans have more in common than you might imagine, and that's not necessarily a positive thing. People in both countries respond to illegal immigration into the United States in ways that are dishonest, insulting and counterproductive, and they spend too much time **blaming** each other for situations they helped create.

Many Americans find it easier to **blame** Mexico for the problem of illegal immigration rather than own up to the fact there wouldn't be a problem if employers on this **side** of the **border** weren't gobbling up illegal workers. It's as if we're desperately pleading with our neighbor, "Stop us before we hire again."

Meanwhile, many Mexicans find it easier to worry about the welfare of the most desperate members of their society only after those poor souls have taken up residence in the United States. It's as if Mexicans are lecturing their neighbors about how to care for castaways that their own country has no idea how to care for.

For most of the 20th century, leaders from Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party simply ignored those citizens who went over to el otro lado (the other **side**). National pride dictated that those who jilted Mexico to pursue a life in the United States be treated as gone and forgotten.

In his 2000 campaign for the presidency, Vicente Fox changed that. As the conservative National Action Party candidate and later as president, he visited immigrant communities throughout the United States and repeatedly referred to Mexican expatriates as "heroes" because of their contributions to both countries.

That was admirable. In light of the more than \$20 billion that Mexicans living in the United States send home yearly, the expatriates deserve some respect. But Fox also took to meddling in U.S. immigration policy, which didn't sit well with Americans. And when the U.S. Congress failed to pass immigration reform, some analysts **blamed** Fox for putting in his two centavos.

When new Mexican President Felipe Calderón assumed office 10 months ago, he seemed committed to avoiding the trap that ensnared his predecessor: defining the entire **U.S.-Mexico** relationship in terms of the immigration issue. For a while, Calderón pulled it off. But, while he was holding his tongue, Congress was once again mishandling immigration reform.

Now, with comprehensive reform on ice, Calderón may have decided that there is no upside to staying out of the **game**. The problem is, the first thing he did after coming off the bench was fumble.

Last week, the Mexican president used his state of the union address to fire away at the Bush administration for its plans to build **border** fencing and "unilateral measures . . . that exacerbate the persecution and the humiliating treatment of undocumented Mexican workers." Calderón also lamented the "insensitivity" of the U.S. government toward foreign workers and pledged to protect the rights of Mexicans no matter where they live. In a sweeping

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statement that only fueled the paranoid fantasies of nativists and immigration restrictionists, Calderón even went so far as to declare that "wherever there is a Mexican, there is Mexico."

Despite the erroneous claims of CNN's Lou Dobbs that the Mexican president - who has a 65 percent approval rating - didn't bother to criticize his own country, Calderón did just that. He recovered his fumble when he scolded Mexico for not creating enough jobs, not doing enough to improve education, not cracking down enough on tax cheats and not finding enough fiscal alternatives to the country's oil reserves. If Mexico made those reforms and others - such as cracking down on corruption - it might create an environment where more Mexicans would want to stay rather than travel north and put themselves at the mercy of their American neighbors.

Bravo for Calderón. That self-help message should be plastered on billboards all over Mexico. Which makes all the more disappointing a meeting Calderón had with Elvira Arellano - the 32-year-old single mother who lived in Chicago as an illegal immigrant before being deported to Mexico and separated from her child. It has since been reported that her son has rejoined her in Mexico. Nonetheless, Calderon promised his help in getting Arellano a visa so she could return to the United States and perhaps serve as a goodwill ambassador.

That was a mistake. Here's what Calderón should have promised: "Elvira, Mexico is broken. And I promise to fix it - so that, in the future, other people won't have to go through what you've gone through."

Now, that would have built some good will with Americans.

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