

DRASTIC IMMIGRATION CURBS HURT NATION

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Body

The most extreme immigration legislation in the 200-year story of our republic is moving swiftly through Congress. HR 2202, approved by the House immigration subcommittee in July, is no less than a full-scale declaration of war against immigrants, their American family members and the American companies that employ them.

Unlike California Proposition 187, which at least confined itself to illegal immigration, HR 2202 would slash legal immigration as well - in cruel and foolish ways and by unprecedented amounts.

Public concern about large-scale illegal immigration is understandable. If sovereignty means anything at all, it surely means that a nation may decide whom to admit into its territory. Effective responses to illegal immigration are therefore essential; the status quo, most will agree, is not acceptable.

But legal immigration is another story. It has been not only the bedrock of our unique national identity but a key ingredient of our material success. Immigration is a core national value, ratified by two centuries of experience.

Unfortunately, the present political climate rewards elected officials for sounding "tough on immigration." Both major parties know that California, Texas and Florida will be critical in the 1996 presidential race.

In such a climate, fine distinctions between legal and illegal immigrants are easily lost. That is regrettable, because comprehensive new admission criteria for immigrants went into effect just four years ago. Refinements are always possible, but a complete makeover is unnecessary. For one thing, the new system has barely been tested. For another, all early indications are that this component of our immigration policy is working well. As the saying goes, if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Here is a small sampling of what HR 2202 would do:

Under current law, more than 60 percent of the available immigrant visas are set aside for uniting Americans with their loved ones. Most of these visas go to the husbands, wives and minor children of United States citizens and permanent residents. Some go to the parents, siblings and adult sons and daughters of U.S. citizens. Even with these priorities, however, numerical limits force hundreds of thousands of nuclear family members to wait up to several years for their numbers to come up. These long separation periods make a strong case for raising the numerical ceiling on family immigration.

HR 2202 would do just the opposite. It would cut the number of family unity visas by about one-third. It would prolong the separation of husbands and wives, and of parents and children, by unknowable numbers of years.

This bill would also hamper "employment-based" immigration. Current law enables employers to hire certain talented foreign professionals and skilled workers to fill special-needs jobs. Under HR 2202, the already limited

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programs for admitting "outstanding professors and researchers," certain multinational executives and managers and other highly skilled professionals would be either eliminated or further restricted.

American companies and universities that want to compete for the world's most prominent scientists, executives and medical researchers will lose out. Ultimately, so will the consumer. Why donate this talent to our global competitors when we can use it ourselves?

Sadly, HR 2202 would also slash the admission of refugees. Under current law, the president sets the annual limit. In recent years that limit has averaged about 125,000. HR 2202 would prohibit the president from selecting a figure above 50,000. That might still sound like a lot, but it represents only one refugee for every 5,000 Americans, and it accommodates only one out of every 400 of the world's refugees.

The stated justification for radically reducing our refugee admissions is the end of the Cold War. Tragically, however, there is still no end in sight for persecution and suffering. Ask any Bosnian or Rwandan. We cannot take everyone, but needless cuts of this magnitude will only intensify human suffering and send the wrong message to other refugee-receiving nations.

Moreover, in making these annual refugee determinations, presidents have had to consider a wide range of sensitive domestic and international issues. They have had to respond rapidly and flexibly to volatile changes in world refugee flows. Why tie the president's hands?

These are just a few provisions of HR 2202. The rest of its 300 pages similarly batter immigrants at every turn.

But put aside the personal hardships. The national interest alone is reason enough to oppose HR 2202. Legal immigrants pay income tax, sales tax, property tax, gasoline tax and Social Security tax. They buy goods and services, creating jobs in the process. They start businesses that revitalize our cities. Their talent and experience help American industries thrive in the global economy and enable the American consumer to enjoy what is still one of the world's highest standards of living.

Economics aside, immigrants contribute immeasurably to the sciences, to the arts, to our literary treasures, to our political dialogue, to sports and entertainment.

However one feels about illegal immigration, this is not the time to declare war on legal immigrants or on the American family members, companies and universities that need them. Let's take a collective deep breath and think hard before turning our backs on the institutions and the values that shaped America. There is still time for cool heads to prevail.

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