

Let's not ignore a lesson from history

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

November 23, 2007 Friday, THIRD EDITION

Copyright 2007 St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Inc. All Rights Reserved

Section: METRO; Pg. C1

Length: 683 words

Byline: BILL McCLELLAN

Body

You might think that after our invasion of Iraq, we would know something about unintended consequences. We found no weapons of mass destruction, no connections to Osama bin Laden. What have we actually accomplished other than strengthening Iran by removing its traditional enemy? This is what happens when you blunder into things without thinking.

Now some politicians are talking about the national security implications of our porous border with Mexico. For reasons of national security, we must do something, they say.

There are problems with Mexicans illegally entering this country. One problem has to do with labor. Illegal workers depress wages. Another has to do with the costs of social services. But national security? There were as many Mexicans involved in the attacks of 9/11 as there were Iraqis. None. The illegal workers from Mexico do not want to blow up our buildings. They want to put new roofs on them. Perhaps that work should go to U.S. citizens, but that argument has nothing to do with national security.

But let's reflect for a moment about unintended consequences.

Ever since Pancho Villa raided New Mexico in 1916, we have been blessed with peace on our southern border. And what a blessing that is. Many countries have to be ever mindful of the enemy next door.

Bear in mind that our relationship with Mexico is not a relationship of equals. We're the Colossus. We're richer, more stable. We're the epitome of the First World. Mexico is emerging from the Third World. That fuels a certain resentment. What's more, a big chunk of our southwest used to be Mexico. Texas, for instance. A good part of California, as well.

That history and the natural resentment from an unequal relationship could be exploited by the wrong person. Who would that person be? Somebody from the left. Because of its history of oligarchy, there is a strong leftist tradition in Mexican politics, and the political center in Mexico is well to the left of ours. That seems to be true throughout Latin America. Hugo Chavez could not win an election in this country. Nor could Daniel Ortega. We're too prosperous to get excited about revolution.

So the stability of Mexico is important to us. We don't want any charismatic left-winger to grab the controls. That came close to happening in 2006 when Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Democratic Revolution Party narrowly lost the presidency. His supporters took to the streets. For a short while, it seemed touch and go. After all, democracy is fragile in Mexico. One party ruled the country for more than 70 years until Vicente Fox won the presidency in 2000.

Fox was a conservative. For Mexico, anyway. He was pro-business, a former executive with Coca-Cola. The voters expected change, and when there wasn't enough of it, they almost elected López Obrador.

Let's not ignore a lesson from history

What would happen if we closed the border?

There would be great hardship throughout Mexico. There are hundreds, thousands, of villages where there is no industry, and the economy is evolving away from subsistence farming. The small patches of land are not economically viable. If you were to visit these villages, you would see women, old men, children and dogs. The young men have left - some to the cities, most to the U.S. The ones in the U.S. send money back to the villages. These remesas keep the villages alive. If they were to stop, people would have no money and then the small shops would go out of business. The people would leave the villages to the dogs and head to the cities.

It is from the slums of the cities that the leftists draw their strength. If the border were closed, the slums would expand. Hopelessness and anger would grow. Someone would capitalize on this desperation.

We would be lucky if it were a Hugo Chavez, who seems like something of a clown. Or an Ortega, who seems at heart a pragmatic. But whoever it is, he or she would almost certainly use the natural resentment against us as a club, a weapon. We would be blamed for their problems, and in a real sense, it would be our fault. Once again, we would have blundered into something without first thinking it through.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: NATIONAL SECURITY (90%); FOREIGN LABOR (87%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (75%); IRAQ WAR (74%); SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACK (74%); BORDER CONTROL (72%); WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION (69%)

Company: COCA-COLA CO (50%)

Ticker: KO (NYSE) (50%)

Industry: WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION (69%)

Person: OSAMA BIN LADEN (53%); HUGO CHAVEZ (50%)

Geographic: CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); TEXAS, USA (79%); MEXICO (94%); IRAQ (92%); UNITED STATES (79%); IRAN, ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF (79%); LATIN AMERICA (79%)

Load-Date: November 24, 2007