

## ***Symbols send vital message on immigration***

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### **Body**

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On **immigration**, **symbols** matter. They convey **messages**. **Messages** that are **vital**. Come, our laws be damned. Or come, but legally.

The **immigration** law Georgia legislators passed this year is described with New York Times news objectivity as "the blunderbuss approach."

It is nationally significant, though, because it shares one important element of President Bush's **immigration** reform: Symbolism. Both Georgia's law and the president's recommendation that National Guardsmen be deployed in support of Border Patrol agents are visible statements that our economy is not an invitation to ignore law.

Elements of the national dialogue on **immigration** have been surreal. Advocates for illegal immigrants and Mexican politicians up to President Vicente Fox comment as though U.S. sovereignty is a mere technicality.

Borders do matter. Globalization is, yes, an inevitability to be welcomed. Chinese ownership of American oil companies is no more threatening than the identities of national airlines worldwide are threatened by having American pilots take the cockpits. Capital and talent are not confined by borders.

They are, however, confined by the self-interest of sovereign states. And while the importance of national borders seems diminished when ex-presidents and the Dixie Chicks casually criticize from foreign soil, most Americans are unwilling to concede that they are.

This nation is decades into an internal struggle to define our values, a debate more sharply focused after Sept. 11. The long and arduous campaign against terrorism requires a nation that is cohesive and certain. The foundation of certainty is the U.S. Constitution and the rule of law.

**Immigration** is an issue where, to employers, illegal immigrants, advocates and many commentators, the law is relative, negotiable to individual circumstance. Most Americans vehemently reject that notion. At the core, it's less about immigrants than national identity and the rule of law.

Immigrants indeed renourish our economy and our democracy. Few ceremonies are more stirring than to experience a class of new citizens renouncing allegiance to the land of their birth and casting their lot fully and faithfully with ours.

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Borders mark the beginning of a contract. The contract obligates those who enter to respect the people, their values, customs language and laws. Deceitful entry is a declaration of disrespect --- a declaration boldly affirmed by mass demonstrations.

When elected officials whose public lives reflect moderation take strong positions on securing the borders, as U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga. ) and Rep. Tom Price (R-Ga.) and others have done, there's more going on here than a few jingoists threatened by "diversity." It's common political practice to attempt to win arguments by tainting those who hold contrary positions with something abhorrent, such as hate or bigotry, or debilitating, such as anger or fear. The device asserts moral superiority: my motives are noble; yours are base or political pandering.

When conservatives whose public lives reflect moderation demand that borders be sealed, rest assured the public is demanding secure borders.

The president's speech last week, and subsequent border security actions in the Senate, are important acknowledgments that the public demands a serious response to illegal entry --- an area where the feds have no credibility.

That's the problem, actually, with establishing an easy route to citizenship before securing borders. While I'd welcome all who genuinely aspire to become citizens, there are conditions --- accepting the language, renouncing allegiance to another country and disavowing any entitlement that flows from illegal entry.

The president had the framework right. The concern, though, is government credibility. Borders are not secured. A reasonable path to citizenship becomes amnesty. And 12 million become 20 million.

Nobody will or should try to round up 12 million illegal immigrants. But we need real action on enforcement to convince Americans --- like the symbolism behind Georgia's law and the National Guard deployment --- that we are serious, and to convince would-be illegal immigrants that the old game is over.

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