

OUR OPINION; Immigration --- and strange bedfellows

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
August 20, 2006 Sunday, Main Edition

Copyright 2006 The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

Section: EDITORIAL; Pg. 6C

Length: 670 words

Byline: CYNTHIA TUCKER

Staff

Body

In the last year or so, poor and marginalized black men have gained unlikely allies --- right-wing zealots taking a hard line against illegal immigration. Those hard-core ideologues have added to their complaints against illegal workers the claim that they are taking jobs from uneducated black men.

At a hearing on illegal immigration held last week in North Georgia, Phil Kent, spokesman for Americans for Immigration Control, complained that undocumented workers are "wage thieves," adding: "And they are taking jobs from unemployed Americans --- especially low-income whites, blacks and teenagers."

The Minuteman Project, a high-profile group of activists who want to seal the Southern border, has gone so far as to recruit a few black people to its cause. One of those --- Ted Hayes, a Los Angeles homeless advocate --- has denounced illegal immigration as "the greatest threat to U.S. black citizens since slavery."

"There was a time when black folks did a lot of the work that illegal immigrants are taking. They came in here and undercut our salaries in their desperation for survival. . . . They say to an employer, 'I can do that for half,' and the 'emplo[yer]-slavists' says, 'You're on.' Goodbye, black man," Hayes has said.

Introducing Hayes as a guest on his show last April, conservative talk show host Sean Hannity sounded like an unreconstructed 1960s liberal as he described Hayes' cause:

"I know you speak up for the downtrodden, the poor and those who come and take jobs that could go to Americans. Isn't the issue . . . let's go after the employers? Let's go after them, who are paying sub-minimum wage to people who are here undocumented and give those jobs to Americans and force the employers to pay what they should pay?"

Let's postpone, for a moment, an analysis of the logic of that argument and just consider how remarkable it is that Hannity and his ilk would suggest that they care about America's "downtrodden" and a fair wage for them. After all, they are not known for their support of affirmative action, increases in the minimum wage and other programs that might boost the prospects of black men. Indeed, Kent, a former newspaperman and political columnist, was once in a position to be a prominent advocate for just those causes, but he opposed them instead.

OUR OPINION; Immigration --- and strange bedfellows

Of course, it's easy to lampoon the hypocrisy of Kent and other latecomers to the cause of marginalized Americans, especially uneducated black men. And it's true that employers should not be allowed to exploit undocumented workers.

But the ultraconservatives' analysis --- that illegal immigrants are "wage thieves" --- is faulty. The most comprehensive studies show that, on balance, illegal **immigration** may depress wages on the low end of the spectrum a bit, but not much --- no more than 50 cents to 60 cents an hour, according to a recent New York Times analysis of the best studies. While illegal immigrants burden the social infrastructure --- schools, hospitals and housing --- in some neighborhoods, they also revitalize many neighborhoods as they open new businesses and buy additional goods and services.

There are still good reasons, of course, to worry about the prospects of less-educated black men, who are increasingly unemployed, imprisoned, marginalized. They continue to be both victims and perpetrators of homicide in disproportionate numbers. In the past decade, they have also fallen victim, increasingly, to HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Perhaps nothing has done more harm to uneducated black men over the past 10 years than the shift toward long prison sentences for nonviolent drug offenses. By some estimates, one-third of young black men are either in prison, on parole or on probation. Once a black man acquires a prison record, his prospects for legal employment dim dramatically --- at any wage.

If all 11 million illegal immigrants disappeared tomorrow, that would not change. So let's not kid ourselves by blaming Mexicans.

Alice Wertheim contributed to the news research in this column.

cynthia@ajc.com

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: Column

Publication-Type: Newspapers

Subject: ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (93%); **IMMIGRATION** (92%); FOREIGN LABOR (90%); WAGES & SALARIES (89%); CONSERVATISM (89%); MINIMUM WAGE (89%); MEN (89%); RACE & ETHNICITY (78%); CONSERVATIVE MEDIA (78%); UNEMPLOYED PERSONS (78%); LIBERALISM (77%); **IMMIGRATION** LAW (77%); HOMELESSNESS (75%); LOW INCOME PERSONS (73%); AFFIRMATIVE ACTION (50%)

Industry: CONSERVATIVE MEDIA (78%)

Person: SEAN HANNITY (69%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (94%)

OUR OPINION; Immigration --- and strange bedfellows

Load-Date: August 20, 2006

End of Document