

The Storm Over Immigration; For too many, compromise is a dirty word.

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Body

THE VIRULENCE and breadth of opposition to the Senate immigration bill has kicked up a dust storm of dogma that has obscured the real stakes and potential of the legislation.

Critics on the right howl that the bill offers "amnesty" to 12 million illegal immigrants who in fact would face a long, onerous path to earned citizenship. But those critics are loath to acknowledge that deporting 12 million people, including droves of workers on whom the American economy relies, is economically suicidal, pragmatically unfeasible and morally repellent. Critics on the left decry the bill's convoluted system for dealing with future guest workers, without recognizing that it would leave them no worse off than they would be under the admittedly dysfunctional status quo. What critics on all sides overlook, in shrilly focusing on the bill's deficiencies, is that its defeat would leave this country with an immigration dilemma that is growing rapidly and is poisoning political discourse in states and localities from coast to coast.

A clunky compromise, the Senate immigration bill weighs in at well over 300 pages and is more easily dealt with by sound bites ("Amnesty!") than by analysis. There is no denying that it is full of flaws and that it would establish some rules and procedures that may not work (measures such as kicking out guest workers for a year between three two-year stints of employment and expecting them to stay out), and others that are simply mean-spirited (such as requiring illegal immigrants already here to leave the country and reenter in order to "reboot" and legalize their status). Many of the bill's segments and provisions could benefit from debate, scrutiny and revision.

But those who cite the offending sections and insist on the bill's defeat must explain how that would leave the country in a better posture. The practical effect of a defeat would be to leave the country without any resolution to the current non-system of immigration for at least two more years, and possibly for much longer -- an outcome the American public clearly doesn't want.

For years there has been hand-wringing over the death of bipartisanship in Washington politics and over the rise of the politics of uncompromising ideology. In the Senate immigration bill, there is a glimpse of what bipartisanship looks like in the real world -- an ungainly, imperfect hybrid that goes some distance toward tightening border security, clearing the backlog of visa applications, and providing a future for 12 million immigrants already in this country, including many who have been here since childhood. The wiser course is to work for improvements, not to sound the death knell for legislation that holds the promise of a better future.

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