

IN THE IMMIGRATION MUD;
UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS DO THE JOBS THAT NO ONE WANTS,
BOOSTING OUR ECONOMY

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Body

As the candidates for president argue about a war today and another war that ended three decades ago, they say next to nothing about illegal **immigration** and other non-war issues the winner will have to deal with. But hey, who needs them?

Some of us are doing just fine throwing **mud**.

The latest muck comes from the arch-conservative Center for **Immigration** Studies. It said the other day that illegal immigrants cost the federal government about \$10 billion a year, and that legalizing them would triple the cost.

The only reasonable response to the new study is, so what?

Of course illegal immigrants cost the feds something. Let's take any group of working-poor Americans. Say, minimum-wage restaurant **workers** without health insurance. Measure how much they soak up in federally supported hospitals, school meals, subsidized housing and other programs. We're talking billions of dollars.

But that wouldn't be fair to them, right? Even though the taxes they pay individually may not cover what they use in public services, the industries they keep alive pay into the federal treasury. Their work has a profound **economic** value that's hard to measure. Educating their children costs us now, but these kids will be paying for our retirement down the road.

The Center for **Immigration** Studies might as well have dredged up a similar study from 10 years ago in California. Back then, voters passed a mean-spirited, round-them-up ballot measure that a federal court tossed out **one** year later. Then as now, simplistic cost studies only serve to feed unrealistic demands for herding farmworkers into Border Patrol vans, militarizing the border and other extreme solutions.

The fact is that illegal immigrants are here and do **jobs** most Americans don't really **want**. Another reality is that some cynical, greedy and politically powerful industries who exploit the **undocumented** don't **want** to see anything change. **One** man who knew this was Ronald Reagan, the last president to actually advance policy by granting amnesty to illegal immigrants who'd make good residents or citizens. President George W. Bush recently had a chance to push a limited amnesty for farmworkers but caved under pressure from his right wing.

For better or worse, amnesty has become the policy on illegal **immigration**. So the real question isn't how much illegal **immigration** costs. It's what do presidential candidates George W. Bush or John Kerry think about another amnesty for the 8 million or so illegal immigrants in this country?

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If they agree to another sweeping amnesty, then how about increasing federal aid to local hospitals and schools that would serve large numbers of newly documented immigrants and their children? And, Mr. President and Mr. Senator, where would you get the money? From increased taxes and **immigration** fees? Or would you take it from other social programs?

These are the kinds of policy questions the candidates should be facing and answering on the campaign trail. Just once, I'd like to see Bush and Kerry stump in the Arizona desert, where more than 115 Mexicans have died crossingsince last October.

Illegal **immigration** is a terribly emotional and complex issue that often brings out our worst instincts and requires a bitter pill. It's also a federal responsibility that presidents can actually do something about, war or **no** war.

Notes

JOE RODRIGUEZ 's columns appear Tuesday and Friday.

Graphic

Photo;

PHOTO: RON T. ENNIS -- FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

A U.S. Border Patrol officer watches from a hilltop in Nogales, Ariz., earlier this month. These days, the Border Patrol is being assisted by the Army Joint Task Force in its hunt for illegal immigrants.

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