

GOP hotheads wrong about immigration bill

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

May 23, 2007 Wednesday, Main Edition

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

Section: EDITORIAL; Pg. 19A

Length: 982 words

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For the Journal-Constitution

Body

As the old saying goes, "what have you done for me lately?"

Judging by the manner in which many of those in attendance at last Saturday's state **GOP** convention greeted the state's senior Republican senator, Saxby Chambliss, that adage could be the theme for Georgia's majority party.

Despite having defeated an incumbent Democratic senator less than five years ago to win his seat, and notwithstanding his unwavering support of Republican President Bush throughout his first term in the Senate, Chambliss was actually booed and hissed when he took the stage at the convention to speak to the faithful of his own party. What occasioned this distasteful lapse of protocol? Had the state's senior senator voted for a tax increase, decided to support a piece of pro-choice legislation or called for an immediate withdrawal from Iraq?

Actually, what caused the disfavor was the fact that he had expressed support earlier in the week for a compromise, bipartisan **immigration** reform **bill** that, among other things, would:

- * Add 18,000 full-time agents to the U.S. Border Patrol.
- * Dramatically increase the number of beds at detention centers, to reduce the likelihood that illegal aliens will continue to be released pending judicial review of their status.
- * Install more fences and detection devices along our southern border.
- * Deploy a squadron of unmanned drones to monitor key areas of the U.S.-Mexican border.
- * Establish a high-tech verification system by which employers would determine if applicants were in fact illegally in the country.
- * Enhance penalties for **immigration**-related offenses.

Every one of these border-strengthening measures normally would receive strong applause from Republicans. But the fact that they would be followed by a reformed **immigration** process that includes a mechanism whereby people now in the United States in violation of our **immigration** laws would be able eventually to secure a "green

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card" (Permanent Resident Alien or "PRA" card) and thereafter possibly citizenship, has rendered the compromise legislation anathema to many Republicans.

If, however, those who so discourteously booed a sitting senator of their own party on Saturday took the time to actually read and understand the legislation to which not only Chambliss, but also his colleague, Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.), have tentatively lent their support, they might discover the **bill** contains a number of other measures that used to enjoy **GOP** support.

For example, those currently in the country unlawfully would not be eligible to apply for a green card --- itself a prerequisite for any eventual citizenship application --- until the huge, current backlog of lawful immigrants with pending applications are taken care of. In other words, rather than "going to the head of the line" as some previous **immigration** plans proposed, under this latest version, candidates currently here without authorization would have to "go to the back of the line." This process alone might take up to eight years (followed by five additional years to complete the track).

Another important --- and for Republicans, one would have thought, positive --- aspect of the **bill** Chambliss and Isakson have tentatively agreed to support, is that applicants would be required to submit to a federal government background check, and any raising security concerns or possessing criminal records here or in their home country would not be eligible to proceed with the process. Moreover, all applicants would have to return to their home country --- for the vast majority, Mexico --- from where they would file their application. And, in a move that has upset many Democrat supporters, preference would be afforded those with higher education and job skills. Even sweetening the pot by providing a special category of temporary workers to assist employers with significant labor needs, including many Georgia farmers, was not enough to shield Chambliss from the wrath of his fellow Republicans.

Is this piece of legislation perfect? Hardly. For one thing, certain of its provisions --- including those referencing the REAL ID Act --- raise serious privacy concerns. Additionally, several provisions in the **bill** remain complex or vague, leaving far too much wriggle room for future administrations and congresses. A concern also is that the so-called security measure "triggers," which would have to be met before the process whereby illegal aliens could apply for lawful status, are not sufficiently cast in concrete, and could be evaded in the coming years. Finally, both Georgia senators have indicated that their support for the measure is not absolute, and could evaporate if additional changes occur that weaken the security measures or other provisions.

The bottom line, however, is this legislation includes important --- in reality, essential --- measures that would enhance physical and procedural mechanisms aimed at ensuring our borders, especially our southern one, do not remain the sieve they have been allowed to become. It also reflects the reality that simply trying to round up more than 12 million illegal aliens already in this country is not a realistic alternative.

Rather than booing Georgia's Republican senators for having the credibility to significantly and positively influence the drafting of this legislation in a Congress controlled by a party that favors essentially open borders, our state's Republicans ought to at least hear them out. Then, they all should roll up their sleeves to help ensure the measures championed by Chambliss and Isakson remain in the **bill** when and if it heads to the president's desk.

If Georgia Republicans continue to publicly undercut the party's own senators, they will help guarantee passage of a **bill** with far fewer important safeguards than the current version.

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Graphic

GOP hotheads wrong about immigration bill

Photo: GUILLERMO ARIAS / Associated PressA man works on the U.S.-Mexican border fence. The new **immigration bill** would toughen rules on border security and illegal immigrants. It isn't perfect, but Georgia Republicans who reject it out of hand and heckle senators for taking a serious look at it are paving the way for a more liberal policy./ImageData*

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: Column

Publication-Type: Newspapers

Subject: US REPUBLICAN PARTY (92%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); POLITICAL PARTY CONVENTIONS (90%); **IMMIGRATION** (89%); CITIZENSHIP (89%); POLITICAL PARTIES (89%); LEGISLATION (89%); **IMMIGRATION** LAW (89%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (87%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (77%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (73%); CITIZENSHIP LAW (73%); NATURALIZATION (73%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (72%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (72%); BORDER CONTROL (71%); TAXES & TAXATION (70%)

Organization: US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (55%)

Person: SAXBY CHAMBLISS (77%); JOHNNY ISAKSON (57%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (93%); MEXICO (79%); NORTH AMERICA (79%); IRAQ (77%)

Load-Date: May 23, 2007