

High Fence And Big Gate

The New York Times

April 5, 2006 Wednesday, Late Edition - Final

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Section: Section A; Column 6; Editorial Desk; Pg. 23

Length: 767 words

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Body

America today is struggling to find the right balance of policies on immigration. Personally, I favor a very high fence, with a very big gate.

So far, neither President Bush's proposal to allow the nation's millions of illegal immigrants to stay temporarily on work visas, nor the most hard-line G.O.P. counterproposal, which focuses only on border security, leaves me satisfied. We need a better blend of the two -- a blend that will keep America the world's greatest magnet for immigrants. Why?

First, the world is flattening, and as a result more and more people around the globe have access to the same technological tools for innovation and entrepreneurship. In such a world, where innovation is concentrated really matters -- because that is where the best management, research and sales jobs will be located for any company.

Because of its deeply rooted culture of immigration, the U.S. has a huge advantage in such a world. If we are smart, we can still cream off the most first-round intellectual draft choices from around the world -- more than any other country -- and bring that talent to our shores to start companies and work in others.

We have gone from the Iron Age to the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the Talent Age, and countries that make it easy to draw in human talent will have a distinct advantage today.

Anybody out there try to become a Swiss citizen lately? It's not so easy -- and it's also not an accident that Switzerland's most famous product is the cuckoo clock.

Second, a steady flow of immigrants keeps a society flexible and competitive. In this flat world, more people than ever can leverage technology. So whatever can be done -- whatever today's technologies enable and empower -- will be done by someone, somewhere. The only question is whether it will be done by you or to you. The more open your society is to new people and ideas, the more things will be done by you, not to you.

We shouldn't just welcome educated immigrants, but laborers as well -- not only because we need manual laborers, but also because they bring an important energy. As the Indian-American entrepreneur Vivek Paul likes to say: "The very act of leaving behind your own society is an intense motivator. Whether you are a doctor or a gardener, you are intensely motivated to succeed."

We need that steady energy flow, especially with India and China exploding onto the world stage with huge pent-up aspirations. If you want to know what China and India feel like today, just take out a Champagne bottle, shake it for 10 minutes and then take off the cork. Don't get in the way of that cork. Immigrants keep that kind of energy flowing in America's veins.

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An amnesty for the 11 million to 12 million illegal immigrants already here is hardly ideal. It would reward illegal behavior. But since we are not going to deport them all, some version of the Arlen Specter bill seems like the right way to go: Illegal immigrants who were in the U.S. before Jan. 7, 2004, could apply for three-year guest-worker visas, each renewable one time if the applicant paid a \$1,000 fine and passed a background check. After six years, if the immigrant learned sufficient English and paid another \$1,000 fine and back taxes, he or she could start to apply for citizenship.

But because I strongly favor immigration, I also favor a ***high fence*** -- if not a physical one, then at least a tamperproof national ID card for every American, without which you could not get a legal job or access to government services. We will not sustain a majority in favor of flexible immigration if we can't control our borders.

Good fences make good immigration policy. Fences make people more secure and able to think through this issue more calmly. Porous borders empower only anti-immigrant demagogues, like the shameful CNN, which dumbs down the whole debate.

We also need to control the influx of immigrants because one byproduct of the flattening of the world is that many decent low-end factory jobs previously open to someone with only a high school degree or less are now disappearing. As Dan Pink notes in his book, "A Whole New Mind," many of those jobs can now be done faster by a computer or cheaper by a Chinese worker. Therefore, we can't just endlessly expand our pool of manual labor without condemning people at that low end, particularly black men, to a future of declining wages or unemployment. That will have terrible social consequences.

For all these reasons, I weigh each immigration proposal with two questions: "Does it offer a real fence? Does it offer a real gate?"

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: Op-Ed

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (78%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (78%); IMMIGRATION REGULATION & POLICY (78%); EMPLOYMENT VISAS (78%); NATURALIZATION (78%); ENTREPRENEURSHIP (74%); PRODUCT INNOVATION (74%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (73%); BORDER CONTROL (73%); NATIONAL SECURITY (72%)

Person: Thomas L Friedman

Geographic: INDIA (92%); CHINA (92%); SWITZERLAND (73%); United States

Load-Date: April 5, 2006

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