

Get Real on Illegal Immigration

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Body

Mae M. Ngai [op-ed, June 14] proposes that we should give up pursuit of *illegal* immigrants who manage to elude detection after their initial entry. Ngai, a history professor, contends that "in the first decades of the 20th century, it was considered unconscionable to expel such people. Judge Learned Hand of New York said that deportation, especially when it tore people from their homes and families, was 'barbarous and cruel.' "

The Post's readers would benefit from knowing what Judge Hand actually said. The case in question, *United States ex rel. Klonis v. Davis* (1926), involved an immigrant from Poland who had twice been convicted and sentenced to prison for burglary. The United States sought to deport him.

Judge Hand upheld the government's right to do so, and referred to "our reasonable efforts to rid ourselves of unassimilable immigrants." Judge Hand then expressed hope that the immigrant would be able to secure a pardon, because he had lived most of his life in the United States, and in particular because his criminal history showed that he was "already proved to be incapable of honest living." The immigrant's criminal history, according to the judge, illustrated that it would be "cruel and barbarous" to deport him to Poland, where he would become "a helpless waif in a strange land."

This rather unusual view -- that the less likely an immigrant is to contribute to society, the more deserving he is of avoiding deportation -- is not evidence that deportation was "considered unconscionable" by many Americans in the first part of the 20th century. Contrary to Ngai's claim, it would appear that deportation of convicted felons enjoyed the support of the federal government and the citizens who elected that government.

-- Phillip C. Hughey

Washington

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So Mae Ngai thinks that a "statute of limitations" for *illegal* immigrants is a good idea. She agrees that over time, these people, like naturalized and native-born Americans, *get* jobs, buy homes and have children. Because of this, she says, deportation is cruel and unfair. If they can elude the authorities for long enough, perhaps they should be able to stay, she opines. I disagree.

It isn't merely that they are trespassing. These *illegal* immigrants break multiple laws every day. Every time they arrive at the job they *got* using their counterfeit Social Security card, they break the law. Every time they sign a

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contract swearing that their identification information is correct, they break a law. Every time they drive, unlicensed and uninsured, they are breaking laws. Every time they agree to work in unsafe environments for unreasonably low wages, they undermine our work safety and labor laws. After which infractions should the "statute of limitations" clock should start ticking?

In 1986 Ronald Reagan gave amnesty to about 3 million undocumented immigrants. In return, the American people were promised severe penalties for those who hired illegal immigrants. We were promised strict border controls. Instead, the illegal immigrant population has exploded to an estimated 11 million. Where are those promises now?

-- Merry Bierd-Dobbins

Dallas, Ga.

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