

BUSH AIDES WEIGH LEGALIZING STATUS OF MEXICANS IN U.S.; THOUGH POLITICALLY RISKY, THE ISSUE IS KEY TO RESOLVING OTHERS BETWEEN THE COUNTRIES

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Byline: ERIC SCHMITT

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Body

WASHINGTON President **Bush's** top immigration advisers are **weighing** plans to grant legal residency to the more than 3 million **Mexicans** living illegally in the **United States**, say officials involved in the deliberations.

The proposal is the most politically charged part of a draft plan on border safety and immigration that a panel led by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Attorney General John Ashcroft is expected to submit to the White House in the next few days.

The **legalization** idea faces stiff opposition from anti-immigrant groups and influential Republicans in Congress.

The options under consideration involve different ways in which millions of **Mexicans** living in this country illegally could earn lawful **status** over the next several years, though not immediately, administration officials said.

The options would quite likely be based on the immigrants' employment records, family ties in this country and how long they have lived in the **United States**.

Any plan to **legalize** the residency of illegal immigrants would be part of a broader agreement to expand guest-worker programs in the **United States**, the officials said.

Many details of the proposal are still unresolved, and no final decisions have been made.

Any plan would be subject to approval by Congress.

But pressure is mounting on the administration to address the issue as groundbreaking negotiations on immigration that **Bush** and President Vicente Fox of Mexico started in February are about to accelerate.

Powell and Ashcroft are to meet with their Mexican counterparts in early August.

Bush and Fox want to announce a major migration initiative at their meeting in Washington starting Sept. 4, their **aides** say.

The review of policies toward Mexican immigrants is one of **Bush's** highest priorities, partly because as governor of Texas he gained more experience in dealing with Mexico than with any other foreign nation.

Bush considers Fox, perhaps more than any other foreign leader, to be a personal friend as well as a partner.

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Legalizing immigrants who are, in the words of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, undocumented, has major domestic political and foreign policy implications for the **Bush** administration.

And on a human level, such a plan would transform the lives of millions of **Mexicans** now toiling in the shadows, including hotel maids in New York, nannies in San Francisco, meatpackers in Nebraska and textile workers in Georgia.

Legalizing the **status** of undocumented **Mexicans** is a top objective of the Roman Catholic Church and immigrant advocacy groups, especially Latino organizations, whose constituencies **Bush** is courting in his strategy to expand his political base and win a second term in 2004.

In a ceremony for new citizens at Ellis Island last week, **Bush** extolled the virtues of immigrants.

"America, at its best, is a welcoming society," he said. "We welcome not only immigrants themselves but the many gifts they bring and the values they live by."

Bush won about one-third of the Latino vote in November, but his pollsters say he needs to increase that share to at least 40 percent to prevail in 2004.

Latino advocates for immigrants say a generous program for adjusting legal **status** would win the administration new supporters.

"This administration has a tremendous opportunity to reshape migration policy," said Cecilia Munoz, a vice president of the National Council of La Raza, a major Latino human rights organization.

"If this would happen, it would electrify the Latino community."

At the same time, Fox has made conferring legal **status** on his undocumented compatriots in the **United States** a top priority.

Fox is very likely to raise the issue when he makes a swing through mid-America Chicago, Detroit and Milwaukee in the next few days to meet Mexican-Americans and seek support for new American investment in Mexico.

"**Mexicans** who work in the **United States** should be considered legal," Fox told a group of Texas journalists in late June. "They shouldn't have to hide in the shadows."

Complicating the political equation for **Bush** is fierce opposition from groups that favor tighter limits on immigration and influential congressional Republicans who say that granting legal residency to illegal immigrants is tantamount to rewarding lawbreakers.

Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas, supports a new guest-worker program but has vowed that any program **legalizing** undocumented workers would have to pass "over my cold, dead political body."

A coalition that opposes increased immigration, led by the Federation for American Immigration Reform, ran more than \$500,000 in radio and print advertisements in 10 states in April and May condemning any new agreement with Mexico that would expand immigration.

Bush opposes a blanket amnesty comparable to the 1986 law that granted legal residency to several million immigrants who could show that they had been working in the **United States** for at least 90 days.

Within the State, Justice and Labor departments, **aides** say there are varying degrees of support for allowing immigrants to adjust their legal **status** over time.

Powell and Ashcroft have so far avoided taking any public position on the idea, but Mexican and congressional officials who have been briefed on the internal American discussions say they are heartened by senior officials' receptiveness to options.

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"There is a realization that this is one of the most important, if not the most important, issue for the Mexicans," said an administration official on the working group. "But it's also one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult issue for the U.S. Politically, it is extremely tough."

Despite the opposition, such a plan nearly succeeded in Congress last year as part of an expanded agricultural guest-worker program.

A bipartisan proposal, backed by farm worker unions and several state grower associations, would have increased the number of seasonal farm workers to as many as 250,000 a year, from about 40,000 now, and granted many foreign workers legal residency.

Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, who supported that failed proposal, resurrected the plan as legislation last week and included a provision that would allow farm workers to adjust their status over six years.

But Democrats, labor leaders and Latino rights advocates criticize the bill because it would lower the wages and raise the eligibility requirements for legal status that were contained in last year's proposal.

Supporters of Craig's bill argue that the legislation could be an important starting point in talks on Capitol Hill that would parallel the U.S.-Mexico negotiations, and perhaps could give Bush political cover to advance a legalization plan.

On both sides of the border, support is growing for an effective guest-worker program. American farmers and landscapers, as well as hotel and restaurant owners, want to stabilize their labor forces that are now highly dependent on illegal workers from Mexico.

Mexican officials say a guest-worker program would help reduce the number of workers who arrive in the country illegally more than 150,000 a year and would save the lives of migrants who die trying to cross the blistering deserts and harsh mountains of the Southwest.

Labor unions and immigrant advocates have long opposed temporary visa programs as creating a class of low-paid workers vulnerable to abuse.

But new proposals with labor and wage protections have brought labor and growers closer together.

Mexican officials, as well as American labor and religious leaders, say that any deal to increase the number of guest workers must first grant legal status to Mexicans already illegally in the country.

"You have to try to legalize people here first, before you bring more people in from abroad," said J. Kevin Appleby, director of migration and refugee policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

For their part, Mexico officials have stricken the politically charged word "amnesty" from their vocabulary and now talk about regularization, a concept that Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda says could allow Mexican immigrants to obtain driver's licenses, Social Security cards and resident tuition at colleges.

Castaneda seemed to up the ante in the negotiations when he told a group of Latino journalists in Phoenix last month that any comprehensive agreement on border safety and guest workers must include some form of adjustment of legal status for illegal workers.

"It's the whole enchilada, or nothing," Castaneda said.

Graphic

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