

## **Trapped; Americans (a)Love (b)Hate Immigrants**

The New York Times

January 14, 2001 Sunday, Late Edition - Final

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**Section:** Section 4; Column 1; Week in Review Desk; Pg. 1

**Length:** 1195 words

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**Dateline:** WASHINGTON

### **Body**

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THE case of Linda Chavez illustrates the conflicting impulses, some say hypocrisy, many **Americans** face in dealing with illegal **immigrants** -- indeed with the whole subject of immigration -- today.

Ms. Chavez, who withdrew from consideration to be Secretary of Labor last week following reports that **an** illegal **immigrant** lived and did some chores in her home in the early 1990's, said she was just helping **a** frightened woman in need. But she has also called for tightening the nation's borders against illegal aliens.

Under the politicized klieg lights of **a** presidential transition, it seemed **a** jarring combination of attitudes. But it is **a** combination remarkably typical of the way many **Americans** feel -- or at least act. Whether out of kindness or economic necessity, they look the other way when it comes to checking the legal status of **immigrants** in their daily lives, even as they encourage in principle government efforts to crack down on **immigrants** who enter the country illegally.

Especially in today's tight labor market, America can't function without **immigrants** -- and there aren't enough legal ones -- from its agricultural fields to Silicon Valley to the apartments and houses where nannies care for their children and clean their homes.

"The conflict is between the traditions of America as **a** nation of laws and as **a** nation of **immigrants**," said Frank Sharry, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, **a** pro-immigration coalition. Put another way, Mr. Sharry said, "If illegal **immigrants** are so scary, why do America's mothers turn our children over to them every day?"

About 800,000 **immigrants** enter the country legally each year. **An** estimated 300,000 enter illegally or overstay their visas. For the first time since the 1930's, one of 10 **Americans** is foreign born.

**Immigrants** are increasingly coveted by corporate America; were the nation's estimated six million illegal **immigrants** expelled tomorrow, thousands of hotels, restaurants, meat-packing plants, landscaping companies and garment factories would likely close. At the other end of the salary spectrum, high-tech employers persuaded **a** Republican Congress last year to nearly double the quota for high-skilled **immigrants**, to 195,000.

And society grapples with conflicting impulses about **immigrants** every day. Illegal **immigrants'** children may attend public school, but even the brightest among them are ineligible for public loans for college. In Arizona, armed ranchers patrol the border to stop **immigrants** from crossing the desert and entering illegally, while other landowners leave food and water along the route for the weary heading north.

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Employers face penalties if they hire undocumented workers, but many do so anyway, knowing they will lose out to competitors if they can't fill the jobs that most legal residents won't take.

"We are encouraging a hypocrisy," said Senator Pete Domenici, a New Mexico Republican. "At the border we arrest, but once they get here everyone opens their arms and says we've got a job for you."

This political ambivalence is rooted in personal ambivalence. As Ms. Chavez wrote in 1994: "So long as they stay out of trouble once they're here, most Americans ignore illegal aliens. I've yet to see a customer walk out of a restaurant because his dishes were being washed by an illegal alien."

And unless you are nominated for a top Government job -- particularly enforcing the nation's labor laws, as Ms. Chavez was -- immigration experts say chances are good that hiring illegal immigrants will go unpunished. (That, of course, raises other concerns about employers exploiting undocumented workers.)

Not long ago immigrants faced a political firestorm. In 1994, Gov. Pete Wilson of California was re-elected on the back of Proposition 187, which barred illegal immigrants' children from public schools. In 1996, Congress approved harsh bills that barred hundreds of thousands of legal immigrants from receiving food stamps and federal disability assistance. Another required the deportation of legal aliens convicted of a variety of offenses, some of them minor, and made the statute retroactive.

Attitudes have softened since then. The big difference now, of course, is the strong economy. In California, for example, at least half the 40,000 workers who harvest the state's raisin crop are undocumented, said Senator Dianne Feinstein, a California Democrat.

"In a growing economy, people are looking for low-cost labor with no questions asked," said Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which opposes increased immigration.

IN a Gallup poll last September, 44 percent of the respondents said immigrants mostly help the economy, while 40 percent said they mostly hurt. Asked the same question in July 1993, 26 percent said immigrants helped and 64 percent said they hurt.

For years, American unions viewed immigrants with suspicion. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. saw them as a threat to jobs and wage levels. But last February, it called for a blanket amnesty for all illegal workers, arguing that in boom times, immigrants were potential members.

Both political parties have scrambled to woo foreign-born voters. The election of George W. Bush marked the ascension of the pro-immigrant wing of the Republican party, which still has powerful anti-immigrant critics. Mr. Bush speaks conversational Spanish, has a Mexican-born sister-in-law, and ran a parallel Spanish-language operation during his campaign. "New Americans are not to be feared as strangers; they are to be welcomed as neighbors," he told a Hispanic group last June.

After all that, Mr. Bush drew 31 percent of the Hispanic vote, compared to 21 percent for Mr. Dole in 1996. But he still fell a few points short of what Ronald Reagan drew among Hispanics in 1980 and 1984, and barely nosed out his father, President George Bush, who registered 30 percent in 1988.

The issue's political sensitivity surfaced in the debate over Ms. Chavez's selection. The situation echoed that of President Clinton's first nominee for attorney general, Zoe Baird, whose appointment was sidetracked following disclosures that she employed an illegal immigrant as a nanny and had failed to pay Social Security taxes. Democrats, who opposed Ms. Chavez's appointment because they strongly opposed her views on labor policies in general, dealt gingerly with her case, sticking to legal issues and shying away from criticisms that could appear anti-immigrant.

Even as many Americans accept illegal immigrants with a wink and a nod, Congress has taken only halting steps to loosen restrictions. Lawmakers and the Clinton administration struck a compromise last year to reunite 300,000 to 500,000 spouses and children with legal permanent residents. But Republicans rejected Mr. Clinton's broader

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proposals, including granting legal status to immigrants who fled wars and political chaos in Haiti, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

**IMMIGRANT** rights supporters vow to renew their fight in this closely divided Congress, but experts say adjusting the law to life's realities may have to wait. "It just hasn't been an item that's high on our priorities," Senator Feinstein said.

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## Graphic

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Photo: Along the border in Jacumba, Cal., a Border Patrol agent drives past a spot where a man waits for sunset to try to cross illegally from Jacume, Mexico. (Susan Sterner/Associated Press)

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (94%); ILLEGAL **IMMIGRANTS** (91%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (89%); CHILDREN (89%); IMMIGRATION OF MINORS (78%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (78%); BORDER CONTROL (78%); FOREIGN LABOR (78%); POLITICAL PARTIES (77%); GARMENT WORKERS (77%); LABOR SECTOR PERFORMANCE (77%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (75%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (73%); WAGES & SALARIES (72%); LABOR DEPARTMENTS (72%); MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (72%); RECRUITMENT & HIRING (67%); EXECUTIVES (64%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (60%)

**Industry:** GARMENT WORKERS (77%); FARMERS & RANCHERS (73%); MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (72%); TRANSPORTATION SUPPORT SERVICES (66%); LANDSCAPING SERVICES (65%); ANIMAL SLAUGHTERING & PROCESSING (61%); RESTAURANTS (61%); APPAREL MFG (60%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (60%); HOTELS & MOTELS (50%); MEAT PROCESSING & PRODUCTS (50%)

**Person:** PETE DOMENICI (52%)

**Geographic:** SILICON VALLEY, CA, USA (70%); ARIZONA, USA (79%); NEW MEXICO, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (96%)

**Load-Date:** January 14, 2001