

Securing the border is a fundamental test of a nation

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Body

Rep. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., the House majority whip, is charged with rounding up votes for Republicans. He talked about immigration and other issues in an interview May 22 at the Post-Dispatch Washington bureau.

How do you see attempts to reconcile two dramatically different immigration bills in the House and the Senate?

Doing these in one step makes that conference (between House and Senate) harder to accomplish than if you were sequentially doing these. There's a majority in the House for strong **border** security. There's a majority in the House for a guest worker program. There may even be a majority in the House for some path to citizenship. But those three majorities are made up of different people. The president's idea that these things all have to happen at once, I don't agree with that idea. You have to **secure** the **border**. It is one of the **fundamental tests** of the **nation**.

Could you see yourself voting for any immigration bill that has a guest worker provision and a path to citizenship?

I could see a guest worker program as clearly something that needs to happen. I'm not sure I'm ever for a path to citizenship without return to country. I don't know if I'd ever be for path to citizenship, but we'll see.

Some say illegal immigrants wouldn't come here if they couldn't get a job. And they couldn't get a job if we had strict enforcement of sanctions against employers.

I agree. I believe you'd solve most of the problems if people couldn't get jobs when they came here, which means you have to have a better system for the worker and the employer and real penalties if the employer tries to evade the system.

Then why isn't that driving the debate instead of **border** security?

I probably should have said that would be best over the long term. You can't do that in six months. You should be able to **secure** the **borders** in a relatively short period of time. It's dangerous not to. I think you can deal with that quicker than you can do some of these other things.

If we don't have an immigration bill by the end of the year, what will be left on the table will be what many consider the rather Draconian approach by the House. Do you risk alienating the Hispanic voters that Republicans have worked so hard in recent elections to attract?

If we do this in the right way, I think at the end of the day everybody involved will believe the right things were done. I don't get a sense from people who are here legally that they are very offended by this discussion. What you don't want to do is allow this discussion develop racial overtones where everybody in a group begins to feel somehow this is about who they are rather than how they got here.

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Polls have shown that President George W. Bush's ratings have decreased dramatically in recent weeks. Why have the American people lost confidence in the president?

I do think Iraq has an impact on the president's numbers. How can the Iraq policy be popular? You've got young men and women willing to wear the uniform of the country dying. The president's Iraq policy is always going to look worse when you have no alternative to compare it with. If you contrast it with what if we don't follow the president's policy, what policy do we pursue, the president and his policy both become more popular.

Isn't a Republican-controlled Congress partially responsible for what's happening in Iraq because of its failure to provide adequate oversight?

I think on this issue we've been better on oversight than we have on a lot of other issues. Members are engaged in this. They have constant briefings.

What about oversight in general?

In general, we're not very good. We hadn't had any experience with it under (President Bill) Clinton. In the first six years (of the Bush administration), institutionally there was no real sense of how this oversight works.

Notes

A CONVERSATION WITH REP. ROY BLUNT

Graphic

PHOTO

PHOTO - (Roy Blunt)

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