

Bush scores with migrant plan;
President, Fox meet at summit today

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Body

Monterrey, Mexico --- **President Bush**'s push for a sweeping new guest-worker program is a high-stakes proposition for millions of illegal immigrants and employers in the United States.

But just talking about wanting migration reform --- no matter if it passes Congress this year --- is a political plus for **Bush** and **President** Vicente **Fox** of Mexico, who **meet** here **today** as the Special **Summit** of the Americas opens.

Their bilateral **meeting** gives **Bush** a chance to try to boost popularity among Hispanic voters at home as the 2000 election season heats up. The 34-nation **summit** also gives **Bush** a chance to polish his image in Latin America, where his administration is widely viewed as negligent or arrogant.

Cox International Correspondent

Some Latin American leaders were reportedly upset Sunday that the **Bush** administration wants to steer the two-day **summit** toward discussion of trade and corruption rather than poverty and development, as originally **planned**.

"The encounter in Monterrey could be an opportunity for both **Bush** and **Fox** to **score** points with their respective political constituencies," said Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, a Mexico expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

Fox's **meeting** with **Bush** offers him an opportunity to show that his campaign promise to help **migrant** workers obtain more U.S. visas might come true before his presidency ends in December 2006.

Last Wednesday, **Bush** proposed a program that would hand out temporary three-year work permits to millions of undocumented workers in the United States, most of them thought to be Mexican or Central American. The **plan** puts pressure on Congress, which has several guest-worker proposals pending, to debate reforms during a sensitive electoral season.

"**Bush** has already won on this one," said Mexican political analyst Rafael Fernandez de Castro, who has long worked with U.S. migration experts to shape potential guest-worker reforms.

He called the timing of **Bush's** announcement "clearly electoral."

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Now that **Bush** has endorsed a concept for migration reform, Fernandez de Castro said, the U.S. **president** can argue he's done his part to enact reforms before the presidential election. He can blame Democrats for foiling reforms if they fail to offer persuasive reasons for why they might oppose Republican legislation that resembles what **Bush** has suggested.

Some Democrats have said they do not support a guest-worker program without offering participants a chance to earn legal U.S. residency, a position **Bush** rejects.

Bush's proposal might not garner many additional Hispanic votes in his re-election bid, Fernandez de Castro said. "But what **Bush** doesn't want," he added, "is to lose any Hispanic votes" in case the presidential election is as tight as it was in 2000.

Bush's migration proposal doesn't play as well in South America as it does in Mexico or Central America, Fernandez de Castro acknowledged. But it is a positive gesture toward a Latin American neighbor that might dominate news at the **summit**.

With their cowboy boots, ranches and a shared self-styled "compassionate conservatism," **Fox** and **Bush** began their respective presidencies in early 2001 on unusually close terms. They both promised to work toward migration reform and matching U.S. employers with Mexican temporary workers.

Their relationship grew distant when **Bush**'s focus turned to counterterrorism after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and it chilled further when Mexico refused to endorse the invasion of Iraq when it was a member of the U.N. Security Council. **Fox** opposed the war without U.N. approval, a position that Mexicans overwhelmingly applauded.

The **Fox-Bush meeting** in Monterrey is "too early for a love fest" given the differences over the war, said Peschard-Sverdrup. But he expects the **meeting** to be upbeat.

"**Fox** is having trouble navigating a divided government at home," Peschard-Sverdrup said. "But he does have a certain amount of cachet and appeal among Hispanic voters [in the United States]. **Bush** may extend an invitation to the ranch in Texas, for example, and then they could have another photo opportunity before November."

Graphic

Photo: Members of the Workers Party carry a banner opposing free trade in the Americas in Monterrey, Mexico, a day before the Special **Summit** of the Americas opens. / GINETTE RIQUELME / Associated Press

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