

REFUGEES AT OUR DOORSTEP: A GROWING REALITY POLITICS Sun Belt politics clouded by flood of illegal aliens

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Body

It has become a set piece of American **politics**: **Sun Belt** governor, alarmed by the social and political costs of a tide of **illegal** immigration, lashes out at the federal government for not doing its part to contain the problem.

This week it was Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles who issued the challenge, declaring a state of emergency and calling on the United States to develop an emergency plan, including resettlement of the **refugees** in other states.

Chiles' appeal was prompted by the arrival of hundreds of Cubans, many in rafts made of tires and wood, following the recent riots in Cuba. Like the governors of California, Texas, Arizona and New Jersey, Chiles already has filed suit, demanding \$ 1.5 billion to cover the cost of caring for **illegal immigrants** the federal government failed to keep out of his state.

A look at the differing circumstances of the three biggest **Sun Belt** states illustrates the difficulties involved in hammering out a consistent policy, however. It also shows how much economics and geography affect the **politics** of immigration.

As it is in Florida, immigration is a hot-button political issue this year in California, where Gov. Pete Wilson's revived political fortunes have been linked to his tougher stance on immigration. But with a population that is 20 percent foreign-born and with an astonishing diversity of legal and **illegal immigrants** from Asia and Latin America, California is probably in a class by itself.

Historically, California has been more liberal in providing state assistance to **illegal immigrants**. But the declining economy there has led to calls for tighter measures, said Atlanta lawyer Dale Schwartz, a past president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Texas, which shares a thousand-mile border and an increasing economic interdependence with Mexico, presents an entirely different picture. Many Latin American illegals who end up in California or Florida cross the border at El Paso or other Texas points. But while Texas has been more conservative in how it has treated **illegal aliens**, the issue doesn't produce the same anxiety there that it does in the other large states.

Over the past few decades, a distinct border region - different from either country but with elements of both - has evolved within a band that stretches for 50 miles or so on either side of the Rio Grande. The effect of this can be seen in such statistics as the rate of intermarriage between U.S. citizens and **illegal aliens**, a rate that is far higher in Texas than in the other two states.

"It is probably the case that greater immigration from Mexico is inevitable. It's just a case of how to proceed," said Frank D. Bean, an immigration specialist at the University of Texas.

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What is and isn't inevitable may be most at issue in Florida, where the immigration question has been vastly complicated by the United States' often contradictory foreign policy on the Caribbean and Central America.

In recent days, Schwartz said, federal officials have been leafleting docks and marinas in South Florida, reminding boat owners they face a possible five-year sentence and \$ 250,000 fine for transporting illegal aliens.

This should decrease the chance of another tidal wave of refugees like that of the 1980 Mariel boatlift. But so long as Cuba and Haiti remain unstable, the political anxiety over immigration is likely to remain high in Florida.

"For the future, the big specter is what's going to happen to Cuba," said Bean. "What happens when Castro dies and Cuba goes into chaos?"

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