Part 1: Immigration changes nation's face

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Body

President Bush on Thursday is expected to unveil plans to ***change*** the ***nation's*** ***immigration*** rules, in part a response to the astounding phenomenon that has seen millions of Mexicans come across the border, some legally -- the vast majority illegally -- to find work and lives in the United States.

The president said his initial steps will be modest, and he has ruled out a general amnesty, which would offer citizenship to millions of illegal aliens now living in the United States. Nevertheless, his action will thrust his administration into one of the most contentious issues of the past 35 years, perhaps nowhere more contentious than in California.

In the past decade, the United States has seen more ***immigration*** than any another time in its history, surpassing -- by several millions -- the outpouring from Europe between 1901 and 1910, which brought 8.1 million people to America.

Emerging by century's end as the most politically stable nation in the world, with the largest economy and the greatest guaranty of personal freedom, the United States is a magnet across the globe. And when Congress removed the quota system and other barriers to ***immigration*** in 1965, it opened the doors to an influx of foreigners that has accelerated almost every year since.

Refugees from war-torn Bosnia, weary victims of strife in Northern Ireland, brilliant computer experts from India, Hmong warriors who fought with the United States in Southeast Asia, Russian Jews from Odessa, Israeli teachers and Egyptian doctors all have transformed this nation in the past 35 years.

There is no sign that this will abate. When the U.S. government offered 50,000 visas recently under a lottery program, there were 11 million responses.

At the core of this in-migration have been people of the Western Hemisphere, primarily of Hispanic origin, primarily Mexican nationals, who came across one of the longest land borders in the world.

George J. Borjas, a Cuban-born professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, says the flow of humans is driven by the disparity between the countries.

"The income gap between Mexico and the United States is the largest income gap between any two contiguous countries in the world," Borjas notes.

The ***changing*** ***face*** of the United States was crystallized in the results of the 2000 Census. The latest figures show a nation of 30 million immigrants -- an estimated 9 million are here illegally -- that is growing six times faster than the native population.

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The numbers have galvanized debate over what to do about the dusty and dangerous 1,952-mile border with Mexico, punctuated at points with motion sensors, remote cameras and 15-foot walls, and guarded by more than 9,000 Border Patrol agents.

Although millions have been spent fortifying the border, hundreds of immigrants die each year trying to cross into what they hope will be a better life.

On this side of that border, the ***immigration*** explosion has jolted politicians looking over their shoulders at an exponentially growing Hispanic vote.

Now, Bush has opened a spirited discussion about whether to hand millions of illegal aliens temporary legal status in a "guest-worker" program, and has started a political battle in his own party over whether any of those workers should be allowed to stay permanently.

The issue is the main point of discussion for the scheduled state visit to Washington by Mexican President Vicente Fox, and has spun off a bizarre series of unconventional alliances in Washington.

Business leaders are bucking conservative Republicans and calling for legalizing millions of immigrants, and have joined forces with labor unions who now see those workers as a boost to declining enrollment.

The ***Immigration*** and Naturalization Service, meanwhile, has become administratively paralyzed, slogging along under a backlog of 4.5 million applications of various kinds and spurring Congress to threaten to rip the agency in two.

The immigrants who poured north from Mexico and settled in Los Angeles over the past decade have, for the most part, forged a new life. They proudly hold onto their Mexican heritage, work hard, pay taxes, raise their families and attend to the day-to-day duties of life in the United States.

In Los Angeles, Spanish-language radio stations draw consistently high ratings, while weekend picnics at the city's beaches and parks often feature the laughter of children, the spicy aroma of carne asada on the grill and ranchero music spilling from boom-boxes.

Fox and other Mexican candidates have brought their political campaigns to California crowds, while Studio City is spending nearly $7,000 to add the small squiggle known as a tilde above the letter "n" on street signs bearing Spanish names.

But more significant than the cosmetic ***changes*** to California's landscape, Latino immigrants are taking a more active role in U.S. institutions, said Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, an associate professor at the University of Southern California who specializes in ***immigration*** issues.

The Los Angeles janitor strike of 2000 probably won't be listed among the landmark events in the history of America's organized labor movement, but its relative peacefulness and short duration is proof what Hondagneu-Sotelo claims.

In early April of last year, about 3,000 janitors from Service Employees International Union, nearly all of them Spanish-speaking immigrants, spent some three weeks staging noisy demonstrations around the city's major office buildings, and a dangerous standoff with navy-blue-clad Los Angeles police officers threatened.

But instead of an unhappy repeat of the sometimes-violent lettuce strikes led by Cesar Chavez during the 1970s, the Los Angeles political and business establishment pushed for a fast settlement and expressed their sympathy for the SEIU strikers, treating them as a legitimate group seeking redress of a legitimate beef.

The strike was something of a turning point in the assimilation of the latest wave of Latino migration into California.

"That was something of a debut," says Hondagneu-Sotelo, "They were not met with a recalcitrant mayor and business community. What I can see is this new and incredible enfranchisement and civic participation on the part of the immigrant community."

Immigrant parents who drop off their offspring every day at Rosa Parks Elementary School in San Diego have become increasingly involved in parent-teacher conferences and volunteer activities though they may not speak English and their ***immigration*** status is legally in doubt.

"It usually depends upon how many parents are working during school hours, but in general, parents of my recently arrived non-English speaking students try to participate whenever I ask," said Audrey Wolfe Taylor, a Spanish-speaker who teaches a classroom filled with the bubbly, well-scrubbed children of Latino and Asian immigrants. "They often chaperone field trips and work in the classroom with small groups of students supervising a board game. The beauty of it is that the students often end up teaching the adults conversational English as well as a bit of academic vocabulary."

Juan Zuniga, a Los Angeles native and Harvard-educated attorney in San Diego, said he believed that Bush, as a former border state governor, believes it necessary to bring more Latinos into the mainstream -- despite their ***immigration*** status. Zuniga says it would both keep the economy on steady footing and eliminate friction caused by large numbers of illegal aliens stuck in a permanent economic and political underclass.

"Polls show that people are against illegal ***immigration***, but also that the people who are already here should be entitled to benefits beyond simply not being harassed by the police," said Zuniga.

The settling-in process has also brought the Latino immigrant community to the brink of the next step -- gaining the higher level of education required to give immigrants and their children the skills and the college degrees needed to move up the economic ladder.

Taking those steps, however, hinges largely on immigrants becoming legal U.S. residents so they can qualify for in-state college tuition and the financial aid needed to bankroll an education.

"One of the problems we have in the Southwest is that we have a lot of families residing in the United States who left Mexico 15-20 years ago," said Israel Rodriguez, head of the Hispanic Student Affairs office at Pepperdine University. "Now, their kids are graduating from high school, but they aren't getting any financial aid for higher education."

Some parents have been reluctant to seek legal status due to their illegal entry years ago, or what Rodriguez called a "machismo" attitude toward their old homeland that is dear to their hearts.

"They say they don't want to lose their Mexican citizenship, even though they'll never go back," he said.

Los Angeles has become what Hondagneu-Sotelo called "more of a Mexican city than it has ever been historically," both in terms of sheer numbers and certain cultural trends. She says the new residents are more interested in settling into mainstream America than they are in recreating their homeland north of the border.

"For all intents and purposes, they already are citizens of the United States," Rodriguez said.

But it is the very dominance in some areas of immigrants, particularly immigrants of Hispanic origin, which feeds opposition to continued high levels of ***immigration***. Los Angeles, Miami, San Antonio and even northern areas like the Virginia counties around Washington have such an enormous influx of immigrants that it has ***changed*** the local culture and some say the American way of life.

Samuel P. Huntington, a professor at Harvard and one of the most prominent analysts of U.S. ***immigration*** says that the founding fathers approved of ***immigration***, but warned that the new residents should be "dispersed" around the country.

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Borjas, the Harvard professor, argues that times have ***changed*** since the "open-door" policy epitomized by the welcoming words on the Statue of Liberty ('Give me your tired, your poor")

"The economy is very different," Borjas said. "One hundred years ago, immigrants came and built up the manufacturing sector. Those manufacturing jobs are done.

"Believe it or not, three quarters of the workers at Ford Motor Company in 1920 were foreign born. Well, that is not going to happen today. So, the types of jobs the current economy is developing do not tend to be the types of jobs that low-skilled workers qualify for.

"We also have a whole bunch of … issues on top of all that. The whole ideology that dominated assimilation during much of the 20th century for immigrants is gone All of the historical, economic and social circumstances that allowed the group 100 years ago to thrive and assimilate are not present today."

The reason Bush ***faces*** a debate in his own party grows out of such opposition. In 1986 under President Reagan, Congress passed an ***immigration***-reform package that granted amnesty to some 3 million undocumented aliens who could show that they had come to the United States between 1982 and 1985.

The bill passed because of the notion that this would legitimatize the current illegal aliens and forestall further illegal ***immigration***, but the flood of illegal immigrants kept coming. In 1994, Republican Governor Pete Wilson of California and the Republicans in the legislature joined a grass-roots campaign asking California voters to pass Proposition 187, which barred undocumented aliens from public welfare and other social services.

The law was immediately challenged by ***immigration*** groups and others and by 1998 was ruled to be largely unconstitutional. But it touched a nerve of national opposition to high levels of ***immigration***.

Opponents of ***immigration*** argue that these vast new arrivals, particularly from Third World countries, erode America's economic advantage, weigh down its welfare and social service programs, and endanger its cultural institutions.

From the polemical "Alien Nation," by Forbes Editor Peter Brimelow, to the carefully researched papers of the Center for ***Immigration*** Studies, these opponents want an eradication of illegal ***immigration*** and a reduction of legal migration with greater selectivity about who the United States lets in. That will be the debate this fall.

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