

VOTERS PUNISH IMMIGRANT CHILDREN

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Body

The victory in California of the movement to deny schooling and medical services to illegal immigrants who are not actually bleeding to death is the first skirmish in the war on unwed welfare mothers.

That's because both Proposition 187 (punishing some 300,000 alien schoolchildren for the sins of their fathers) and the Gingrich approach to welfare reform (withholding support when unemployed single mothers have additional children) are based on this philosophy: The most cost-effective way to change behavior is to make life unbearable under present behavior.

During the recent resurgence of righteousness, Gov. Pete Wilson of California was described in this space as "the best candidate with the worst issue" and Proposition 187, which he strongly supported, was denounced as a "nativist abomination."

I came to admire him when, as a senator, he exposed the abuse of the franking privilege by incumbents. Early this year I reported Richard Nixon's prediction that a California comeback victory would make Wilson the front-runner for the '96 Republican nomination - and if running-mated with Gov. Christy Whitman of New Jersey, the ticket would win. Visiting Washington last week, Wilson invited me over to screw my head back on properly.

About the nativism charge: He is eager it be understood that he is not anti-immigrant, only anti-illegal immigrant. "One in four Californians are legal immigrants," he says, "and don't need lectures on the contributions of legal immigrants. In fact, they are the most vociferous critics of illegal immigration. . . . The issue is the rule of law."

OK, with a sizable portion of voting Latinos in favor of curbing their illegal competitors, let's grant that most of the proposition's supporters are neither nativist nor racist. Support from those who resent all immigrants, legal and not, surely came Wilson's way, but it does not mean he shares their prejudices.

About the privacy-intrusion charge, turning teachers into immigration agents: "Teachers don't enroll students," Wilson says, implying it is only the administrators' job and not the teachers' job. He says that school districts everywhere ask for proof of residence, and adds that all applicants to federal jobs must produce verifiable citizenship documents. (He's against national ID cards.)

Maybe he can bolster that defense of 187 in court with regulations against discrimination or intrusion in its enforcement. But no administrative amelioration is likely to alter the requirement that schools have reverse truant officers assigned to root out those sneaky little offspring of illegals trying to cop a freebie education (to which the Supreme Court has ruled they are entitled, and with conservative justices, stare decisis ain't dead yet.)

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What's Wilson's purpose in all this? To get budget-cutting Washington to reimburse California \$ 2.5 billion a year for state services to the illegals? To get the feds to stem the tide of invaders, many of whom sashay in as tourists?

Yes to both, but more: "If it's clear to you that you cannot be employed, and that you and your family are ineligible for services, you will self-deport."

I take the import of that to be: Make 'em so miserable that they leave the country. To which many law-abiding Americans, especially tax-burdened Californians, would say: Hooray!

Ebenezer Scrooge is my hero, too, but that neatly theoretical "economic disincentive" won't disincen - because being miserable here doesn't compare with the misery they ran away from.

Do we really want to drive most illegal families deeper underground, many to lives of crime? Would we rather have 300,000 children on the streets, learning costly delinquency - or safely in school, becoming potential citizens and taxpayers?

Wilson wants an immigration plank in the Republican platform. Fine; it should include federal reimbursement, amnesty, border control - but none of this creation of an uneducated, unmedicated underground.

After our talk, I am prepared to withdraw the charge that Proposition 187 is driven primarily by nativism. But in terms of practicality and of the American spirit, a government policy of making any child's life miserable is still an abomination.

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