

High tide of immigration overwhelms USA // Lack of money and direction add to woes

USA TODAY

July 15, 1993, Thursday, FINAL EDITION

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Section: NEWS; Pg. 8A

Length: 689 words

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Body

Three rusting vessels, cramped with 659 undocumented Chinese, limped through the waters off San Diego for more than a week as scrambling U.S. officials tried to coax Mexico into taking the unwanted immigrants.

Mexico finally acquiesced Wednesday and will repatriate the refugees. But experts say the incident symbolizes U.S. immigration policy - chaotic and adrift - and its inability to stem a vast tide of illegal aliens.

An overwhelmed Immigration and Naturalization Service needs more money, more people and stronger laws to handle the record number of immigrants entering the country.

But what the nation most needs, experts say, is a long-term, strategic policy with the consistent backing of the president, Congress, and state and local governments.

"Unfortunately, there's a firehouse environment. The bell rings. You've got people hitting the coast, and you go after them without attending to a far broader problem," says James Blume, assistant director of the U.S. General Accounting Office.

Alan Nelson, who headed the INS from 1981 to 1989, accuses the Bush administration of failing to fight for a sensible and enforceable immigration policy. But the Clinton administration's failure to articulate an immigration policy of its own has others fretting.

"There's a lot of rhetoric coming out of the administration," says Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which advocates new limits. But at this point, he says, no real policy has emerged. "I think we're in limbo."

Clinton's nomination of immigration lawyer Doris Meissner to be INS commissioner has stirred some optimism that she may provide real leadership and a refreshingly professional - instead of political - perspective.

Still, his decision to reverse campaign pledges and continue Bush's policy of turning away boatloads of Haitians without asylum hearings, has suggested to some that politics will again master policy.

"I don't see it's necessary to pin him to the wall on this," says Demetrios Papademetriou, immigration policy director at the Labor Department during the Bush administration. But if Clinton's campaign statements favoring tolerance and diversity turn out to be no more than "rhetorical flourishes . . . then he ought to be held accountable."

A coherent national immigration policy doesn't have to be invented anew, says Lawrence Fuchs, acting chairman of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform. The select commission on immigration proposed one in 1981.

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"But Congress didn't carry it through all they way.,," he says.

Fuchs also says Congress' failure to establish a fraud-proof work identity card "undermined" the effectiveness of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.

Political asylum - though widely regarded as a small problem in comparison to the number of aliens overstaying visas - is the most often cited flaw in U.S. immigration policy. Congress is now considering a bill that will expedite asylum hearings, and allow one appeal.

Sending "those abusing the system back to China will send the message, you're wasting your \$ 30,000 if you don't have a legitimate claim," says Gene McNary, who resigned as head of INS in January.

But no policy will succeed, immigration experts say, until the nation streamlines deportation laws and court proceedings and significantly increases the number of trained asylum officers. There are only 150.

Immigrant rights advocates are troubled by the calls for tougher asylum rules and more money to bolster border security. They are particularly hesitant to throw funds at the INS, without a clear policy.

"We shouldn't be talking about more multiterrain vehicles and weapons without first talking about what creates the flow," says Margie McHugh, of the New York Immigration Coalition. "People are moving about the globe more freely than ever . . . Instead of welcoming the future, we're trying to turn the clock back."

But Rosemary Jenks of the Center for Immigration Studies says a much more restrictive response is needed: "We simply don't have the resources to resettle millions of people who wish to come here."

Notes

IMMIGRATION; IMMIGRATION BACKLASH IN THE LAND OF LIBERTY; An explosion in new immigration - both legal and illegal - is sparking a growing backlash. The opposition raises new questions about border policies, worrying those committed to retaining the USA's diversity.

Graphic

EAR GRAPHIC, color (Illustration); GRAPHIC, b/w, (Illustration)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (96%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (91%); IMMIGRATION REGULATION & POLICY (91%); IMMIGRATION LAW (91%); PUBLIC POLICY (90%); US PRESIDENTS (90%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (78%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (78%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (77%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (77%); LEGISLATION (75%); EXECUTIVES (74%); POLITICS (74%); PUBLIC FINANCE (73%); RESETTLEMENT & REPATRIATION (72%); REFUGEES (72%); LAWYERS (72%); INTERIM MANAGEMENT (69%); LABOR DEPARTMENTS (60%)

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Company: US GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (56%); US GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (56%); FEDERATION FOR AMERICAN **IMMIGRATION** REFORM (54%)

Organization: US GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (56%); US GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (56%); FEDERATION FOR AMERICAN **IMMIGRATION** REFORM (54%)

Industry: LAWYERS (72%); ACCOUNTING (67%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (95%)

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