

PROP. 187'S MATH PROBLEM

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Byline: JOE RODRIGUEZ

Body

PROPOSITION 187 came up from the sewer last week and, to no one's surprise, it gagged on the fresh air.

State and federal judges in California temporarily restrained this nativist thing that would beat up on immigrant schoolkids, throw their hard-working parents in prison if they falsify work papers, and promote pain and suffering by cutting health care services to illegal immigrants. Other than that, it's a fine law.

But Gov. Pete Wilson, who married his re-election and his place in history to Proposition 187, keeps pushing it. He never quits, at least not when he's picking on Mexicans, Asians and people smaller and weaker than him. While 187 was getting thumped in court, he got Newt Gingrich, speaker-of-the-House-to-be, to agree to nationalize Proposition 187.

This deal belongs in the department of: Be careful what you wish for because you might get it.

Gingrich said he'd push the new Republican Congress to either pay for all state services to illegal immigrants or cut off those services entirely. Since the courts will have the final say on Proposition 187, Pete and Newt are really left with the option of reimbursing the states.

Let's pretend for a minute that Wilson's arithmetic is right and illegal immigrants do terrible things to California. In this fantasy, illegal immigrants don't pay state income taxes, gasoline taxes and sales taxes. The industries they keep alive don't pay state corporation taxes. They don't spin off business for citizen workers. In the state according to Pete, Californians don't benefit by the labor of illegal immigrants who do the menial work that citizens won't. In Wilson World, Gingrich and all those small-government Republicans are going to write a fat \$2.8 billion check to California.

And then they'll write another one for Texas. And Florida. And New York, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and . . . before you know it . . . every governor will be knocking on Gingrich's door saying, "Where's mine?"

Any governor facing the choice between higher taxes or statewide budget cuts will recognize the federal reimbursement as a bailout. To maximize their returns, they'll high-ball their number of illegal immigrants. They'll throw temper tantrums when the census undercounts illegal immigrants. Pretty soon, they'll quietly ask the feds to drop those lunatic plans for moats and steel walls along the border.

The raid on the federal treasury will get downright laughable.

Dinky New England states will want reimbursement for undocumented Irishmen tending bar at Cheers. Mountain states with more cattle than people will blame undocumented Mexican cowboys for the lingering energy industry recession and demand federal aid. Ghostly Mexican farmworkers will appear from Midwestern cornfields. If you fake it, the check will come.

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On second thought, I like this refund thing.

Gingrich will be in a real pickle. What's he going to do, clamp down on the Republican governors of California, Texas and New York?

But Proposition 187 is DOA in the courts. If not, there'll be massive civil disobedience by Latinos and Asians and continued assaults against it by true conservatives, like William Bennett and Jack Kemp, who recognize the measure's heavy-handed intrusiveness and cultural paranoia. Moderate Republicans will soon get it if they don't already.

Let's stop apologizing for illegal immigrants. The truth is that a porous border works to our advantage. It's our dirty little secret. When you add up the right numbers -- the taxes illegal immigrants pay and the value of their economic productivity -- they are a bargain. And they're decent, optimistic, hard-working family people. They're risk-takers. If anybody is keeping the California Dream alive, it's them.

Illegal immigrants aren't a **problem**. Cynical and hypocritical politicians are.

Notes

Commentary

Joe Rodriguez is a Mercury News editorial writer.

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