

LET'S PUT ASIDE CHARGES OF BIGOTRY Can America talk candidly about immigration?

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Body

Washington - **America**, as Jim Sleeper of the New York Daily News once noted, is one of the few places on the globe where a **charge** of racial or ethnic **bigotry** is a serious indictment. Even when Americans are being unfair to one group or another, they are at pains to protest that their objective is inclusion, not exclusion - that they believe in **America** as a welcoming place for all who share her ideals.

This desire not to be seen as bigoted has helped to change perceptions, laws and attitudes. It has also kept at least one important issue virtually off the table: **immigration**.

We have been worried **about** the deleterious effects of uncontrolled **immigration** for a long time, yet we've been fearful of speaking plainly **about** it lest we be viewed as bigots. We have seen the social costs of **immigration** (overcrowding and depressed wages, to name two).

Why is straight **talk** on the subject so difficult? One explanation may lie in the reaction to California's recent passage of Proposition 187 - a decision by the voters there that they will no longer pay for the health, education and welfare of illegal aliens.

Many liberals have attacked the vote as "immigrant bashing," and at least two conservatives - Jack Kemp and Bill Bennett - called it "an ugly antipathy toward all immigrants."

As William B. Dickinson of the Biocentric Institute **put** it: "Those who favor open borders have long tried to blur the distinction between legal and illegal immigrants. **America's** tradition as an immigrant nation and its less-principled desire for an endless supply of cheap labor make it easy to excuse poor people who slip across our borders in the dead of night. Those of us who support an orderly **immigration** policy based on law find ourselves demonized as bigots, racists or nativists."

It's easy to see what drove the Californians. The presence of the illegals is the result of the failure of the federal government to keep them out. This same government has ruled that the state has the duty to provide services for people whose very presence here is a violation of the law. But the states get little help from Washington in paying for these services, and the feds seem unable to deport the illegals they arrest here.

But passing Proposition 187 isn't the end of the matter. In the first place, unless the Supreme Court overturns its earlier ruling, California state law will not relieve Californians of the burden of educating the children of illegals. More importantly, it's not clear, upon sober reflection, that California has an interest in keeping large numbers of its residents poor and hungry and ignorant.

A counterargument is used by anti-welfare advocates: Harsh treatment of present illegals will seem inhumane, but generosity will only increase their numbers.

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Dickinson, like Mortimer Zuckerman of U.S. News, argues that it's time to revamp immigration law across the board. Certainly it seems reasonable to rethink the 1990 liberalization of the rules that allow immigrants to send home for members of their families, and to reconsider the notion that anyone born here is automatically a citizen. But for now, I'd be happy to hear serious discussion of the one problem that everybody acknowledges is a problem: illegal immigration.

As Zuckerman noted, these are the people who "have, by definition, broken the law, and they are guilty of an ethical breach as well: They have jumped the line of people patiently waiting for years for their visas."

Does it really make sense for the federal government to reward these violators of law with mandated services for themselves and their children, paid for by states with no choice in the matter? Can't we put aside our charges of bigotry and at least talk about it?

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