

Immigration Policy Must Be Enforced

By Stuart H. Hurlbert

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[February 17, 2000 Update: Ten years later finds no improvement in the situation described below. The lack of civility described here intrudes on most attempts at rational discussion of immigration policy. Unscrupulous employers of illegal aliens go untouched. The Executive Branch has refused to enforce immigration law and encouraged illegal immigration by its frequent promises of amnesty. And yesterday the AFL-CIO began its campaign to obtain amnesty for all 6 million illegal aliens now in the United States.-S.Hurlbert, SDSU]

SAN DIEGO-Robert Martinez (Op-Ed Page, 9-19-90) muddied the waters on border issues. One can hardly disagree that a binational commission might find ways to mitigate violence at the border. But Martinez grossly misrepresents the cause of border problems and slanders those who favor greater controls on illegal immigration.

The root cause of these problems is the disparity between the economies of Mexico and the United States. On that, all agree. The United States has, of course, little influence on and no legitimate authority over the political, economic, resource-management and population-control policies of Mexico or any other country. Because they are out of our control, we cannot base our own policies on them.

Martinez suggests, however, that the United States should not opt for "increased enforcement" at the border. He blithely recommends that we tolerate its present sieve-like condition "until Mexico and other Latin American countries can create an economic base in their own countries that will create jobs and other economic opportunities." He does not attempt to predict the decade in which this will come about.

Present efforts at control, Martinez feels, are a main cause of human-rights abuses. He claims that individuals, groups and government entities favoring stronger controls are fostering an "extremist and alarmist movement," "anti-immigrant sentiment and hostility toward migrants," "racism and hatred," and "vigilantism."

It is pure demagoguery, however, to charge with racism the mass of citizenry in favor of stronger border controls. We are not racists. Racism as a motive in this issue, as in human affairs generally, is greatly over-rated. The casualness with which the charge is leveled these days often seems a bigger problem, a more socially divisive force, than racism itself. When the term "racist" is thrown at an individual or group, it is increasingly common that the sentiments and behavior of the accuser are more racist than are those of the accused.

Martinez reportedly has received some hate mail "full of racial epithets," apparently for his support of illegal immigrants. Such attacks are to be condemned. It is hardly surprising, however that someone who has leveled the "racist" charge so unjustly at so many others, ends up getting a dose of the same medicine.

Martinez also likes to speak of "anti-immigrant sentiments." That is an inaccurate way of referring to what for most of the citizenry is simply "anti-illegal immigration sentiment."

If the root cause of the problem is Mexico's economy, the more immediate cause of illegal immigration and associated border problems is that through lack of political wit and nerve, U.S. politicians have made illegal immigration seem not only an attractive option but an easy one.

Throughout Mexico, it is known that the border is a sieve and undermanned; that fraudulent documents can be obtained; that some categories of U.S. law-enforcement officers are not allowed to stop and ask an individual for documents even when they have a good cause to suspect the individual is an illegal alien; that many employers will hire them if they think they can get away with it; that if they are caught, the only penalty is a meal or two before they are dropped back on the other side of the fence. The *muchachos* have no respect for U.S. immigration laws, nor any for the U.S. government's ability to enforce them. Were I in their shoes, I, too, would come again and again and again.

The inadequacy of border controls has led to serious problems: increased crime both at the border and well beyond, increased inflow of drugs, increased malaria risk, squatters camps and overburdening of school and social service systems.

Less discussed but important in the long run are the consequences of the resultant accelerated population growth and its concomitants: greater population densities, increased traffic congestion, increased destruction of natural habitats and wildlife, disappearance of open space, increased production of solid wastes and toxic wastes, etc.

The relationship of environmental problems to the influx of illegal immigrants is obscured by a time lag. As a result of their poverty and low-consumption lifestyles, these immigrants initially contribute little to such problems. But as they and their children achieve better jobs and a higher standard of living, they become prolific resource-consumers and waste-generators just like the rest of us. It is at that time, perhaps years after their original entry, that the environmental consequences of illegal immigration will be greatest.

The remedy for border violence and other problems associated with illegal immigration is simple: Make illegal immigration difficult and unattractive.

Until the political courage can be found to put in place the necessary additional manpower, physical structures and penalties for illegal aliens, their smugglers and their U.S. employers, nothing will happen. Why should illegal aliens not be penalized with, say a few months in a work camp? Why are they the only group of felons allowed to go free? For one reason, any politician who takes a courageous stand on these issues is going to be called a "racist" and get lots of hate mail.

Mexico, of course, is happy to participate in a binational commission to aid its own citizens in distress. But Mexico has no incentive, and many disincentives, to help stem the flow of its poorest citizens into the United States.

The United States should establish its immigration policies on its own and in its own self-interest, then enforce them.

This does not rule out compassionate acts and attitudes toward Mexico and her people by ourselves. It does rule out Martinez's suggestion that we leave our doors wide open until Mexico and other source countries solve their economic problems.

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