

## A slap in the face to immigration reform

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Speaking to a group of newly naturalized citizens last month, President Bush said it would be a "slap in the face" to lawful immigrants to grant amnesty to illegal immigrants. He defines "amnesty" as complete exemption from prosecution, plus quick legal residence and access to citizenship.

But who's slapping whom?

The president prefers a plan that would allow illegal immigrants with jobs to apply for a newly created guest worker program and then eventually to apply for permanent legal residence. The National Border Patrol Council, an association of 9,000 border patrol agents, has said that Bush's guest worker proposal is amnesty in disguise and a "slap in the face" to anyone who's tried to enforce U.S. immigration law.

Then there's the tough, xenophobic "Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act" that cleared the House of Representatives in December. An insult to Latin America, the House plan would create a 700-mile fence along the border with Mexico; classify illegal immigration a felony; and criminalize private acts of charity aimed at helping needy illegal immigrants.

Will nothing more humane and respectful work?

The possibility that the Senate Judiciary Committee might adopt the House's plan (it didn't) produced massive demonstrations across the country. These protests may have pushed senators and many Americans toward less-severe alternatives, but they did not prompt the general public to demand amnesty for undocumented immigrants.

Citing the results of numerous polls, the National Immigration Forum maintains that American opinion is better reflected in various Senate proposals than in the House bill. The pro-immigrant NIF says there is strong support for "a more intelligent and realistic approach to controlling immigration" that includes "earned legalization for undocumented immigrants with a path to citizenship, and expanded visas for future immigrant workers and families."

Indeed, a Time magazine poll indicates that about eight out of 10 Americans favor allowing illegal immigrants to register as "guest workers." The same number of Americans favor allowing illegal immigrants to obtain U.S. citizenship if they learn English, have a job and pay taxes.

If the policy goal were to avoid face-slapping, we would need a compromise on immigration policy that didn't insult legal immigrants, law enforcement officers or Mexico and the rest of Latin America.

But economic justice, not avoiding wounded feelings, should be the real goal. And it looks as though someone may have to feel a little pain so that the U.S. government can address bigger injustices.

Ineffective, episodically enforced laws have resulted in an estimated 9 million workers crossing the border illegally in the past 20 years to live and raise families on U.S. soil. Illegal immigrants are well-represented among our lowest-paid wage earners, including nannies, gardeners, strawberry harvesters and hotel workers.

The government has got to do something about this. Too many people live with fear and uncertainty. Too many work without bargaining power in jobs few citizens would accept.

It has been argued that the towns and regions in which there are high concentrations of illegal immigrants have not received a net benefit. Intercultural conflicts, bilingual education, social services and depressed wages are costly to some U.S. communities. But the question of what to do about illegal immigrants is not simply a matter of determining whether their presence has been a net benefit to a town in Texas or the state of California.

Plenty of people have been stopped near the border and sent back home, and plenty have been deported. But for years the government has sent ambiguous signals to the people who overstay their visas or successfully sneak across our borders with Canada and Mexico.

Sure, no one should profit from wrongdoing. That's a maxim of fairness. But for years the government has tolerated employers providing livelihoods to undocumented workers. For years, American society has offered jobs, homes and services to people unable to make ends meet in their home countries.

This has happened, and it's necessary to acknowledge that illegal immigrants are an integral part of the national community. Suddenly pulling the plug and treating them as social waste would be unfair, cruel and perhaps self-defeating.

After decades of sending a "come and stay if you dare" message to the poor of other nations, we should take responsibility. We should not turn our backs on those people who responded to the call, especially when they number in the millions, are settled and have children and kin, many of them U.S. citizens.

For these reasons, I am not moved by most of the "face-slapping rhetoric." It's just not that important, ultimately, that upstanding legal immigrants may be offended by the fact that their illegal counterparts aren't going to jail. Or that warm-in-their-beds law enforcers resent having to get with a new program.

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