

Doublespeak in Congress and Soldiers on the Border

By Laura Carlsen | June 15, 2006



This week's newspapers featured variations of the stern-visaged soldier standing guard on the U.S.-Mexico border. The decision to begin deployment of thousands of National Guard members on the border sparked protests in both countries. It also belied the benevolence of immigration reform that some had heralded as progress.

As security measures move full steam ahead, House leaders recently announced that they must study the reform in detail before attempting to arrive at a joint House-Senate version. In the legislature, immigration reform seems to have fallen off the fast track and as November's mid-term elections complicate the political stage it may be relegated to the back burner.

Given the current context, that might be just as well. There is no doubt that immigration reform is an urgent national priority. Twelve million people living and working without citizenship, legal security, or labor rights, not only hurts them but erodes the democratic base of society, divides communities, and foments racism and discrimination. A labor market that encourages cheap immigrant labor while failing to offer legal status sends mixed messages to society about the role of its workers.

These profound contradictions must be resolved. But the proposals on the board do little to really resolve them. The House law myopically interprets immigration as a problem of crime and punishment. The Senate version, closely following the proposals laid out by President Bush, attempts to reconcile labor needs with calls for "border security."

But there is no logical or practical way to reconcile the portrayal of immigrants as security threats with their real role in the labor market. Although both are based on valid concerns, they reflect such contradictory versions of reality and different readings of the problem that they must be separated and policies formulated

according to the distinct logic of each national challenge.

Compromise on Comprehensive Immigration Reform

In his policy address on May 16, President Bush attempted to offer a little something to each side. The Senate did the same when it passed the Hagel-Martinez bill on May 25.

The Bush and Senate proposals sought to mollify the anti-immigration rightwing, which focuses exclusively on border security, while reassuring corporate interests seeking access to labor. But in attempting to bridge the divide between two contradictory versions of the modern immigration saga, the policies announced will end up pleasing no one. What's more, they won't work.

The compromise version hammered out in the Senate presents a mixed bag of reforms in immigration law. It begins by tossing a bone to the hardliners by asserting the need to secure the nation's borders on the premise that the United States has lost control of its southern border due to the massive influx of illegal immigrants. Militarization of the border has already begun and 6,000 National Guard troops are slated by August. The Border Patrol will also be increased.

The plan presents serious problems, both practically and in theory. The first practical obstacle was alluded to in Bush's speech but without details—the National



Guard is currently deployed in Iraq and reaching a crisis of over-extension.

Secondly, a militarized border—and there is no doubt that sending troops in, whether permanent or temporary, is militarization—leads invariably to conflicts and rising human rights violations. Not only would increases in National Guard and Border Patrol likely double the current number of law enforcement agents on the border, but Bush also announced plans to train state and local officials to take on the task.

Asking local law enforcement officials to track undocumented workers would drive a wedge into communities. Moreover, in recent interviews many local officials in border states have made it clear they do not *want* to be involved in this kind of work, stating that given their limited resources, seeking out illegal immigrants is not a law-enforcement priority. Many state and local governments foresee enormous bureaucratic, budgetary, and political fallout if they move into the area of immigration enforcement.

Other proposals are equally infeasible. The plan to expand detention centers and create express deportation procedures is extremely expensive and likely to lead to violations of human and civil rights. Tightened employer sanctions have proven to be unenforceable and end up being used arbitrarily to deny basic labor rights.

Even the measures considered advances present enormous difficulties and drawbacks. The legalization



Maria Antonietta Gonzalez and Jose Angel Martinez Gonzalez, two immigrants from Carranza, Chiapas, top and bag onions near Arvin, California. Photo: David Bacon

scheme devised by the Senate would legalize less than half of undocumented immigrants already in the United States and enforcement, implying the deportation of the rest, would be onerous to say the least.

The guest worker programs have a history of abuse. Moreover as immigration has shifted from the pattern of seasonal agricultural workers to work in permanent jobs in services and manufacturing, a guest worker program is little more than a guise to convert jobs with full rights and benefits into low-wage temporary contracts with little or no benefits, as the AFL-CIO has pointed out.

Immigration or Security?

Politics often fuses diverse issues in its wheeling and dealing. Politicians manipulate emotions, often disingenuously, to build their popularity and convince people of their views. Both these processes obscure rational debate and nowhere has that been more devastating to a real solution than in the immigration reform.

The most important critique of measures to “secure the border” is that border security has little or nothing to do with immigration. National security threats like drug trafficking and terrorism have not been linked to illegal immigration except in anecdotal cases.

Nor is immigration a major crime to be combated. Unlike murder or theft, immigration itself is not a universally condemned criminal act. The history of immigration law in this country proves that the law changes to conform to political and economic realities, and sometimes it lags significantly behind. Like now.

Whether or not immigrants are deemed legal depends on how their presence in the country is viewed by a very narrow political elite. You could be legal as number 500 to enter the country and illegal as number 501, or legal if you’re Cuban but illegal if you’re Haitian. As the president himself pointed out, there have been many moments in the country’s history when immigrants were welcomed. These “good” immigrants, not coincidentally European and white, were considered heroes and became essential nation-builders.

The conflation of immigration and security issues has painted an entire population—not just of undocumented workers but increasingly of Latinos in general—as criminals and threats to society. That kind of a broad brush is the perfect cover for extremist tendencies.

Fear and loathing on the border

If bringing immigration into the foreground of national debate is the positive outcome of the past two months, the downside is how polarized the debate has become. Although the deep divide in public sentiment does have to do with how open or closed the border is, the confusing part is that it centers not on immigration policy but on a volatile mix of fears and problems that have found in the immigration issue a place to fester.

Bundling immigration reform with national security issues has confounded the debate and unleashed deep insecurities in society. Despite massive immigrant rights rallies that expressed the desire to become part of U.S. society—not attack it—mainstream media, vigilante groups, politicians, and others continue to make the spurious link between immigrants, terrorists, and even a made-up attempt of Mexican nationalists to “re-conquer” the Southwest.

The new anti-immigrant movement is a genuine grassroots movement with a broad popular base. Although carefully orchestrated from above, it feeds on fear of “the other” and real insecurities related to crime, unemployment, and national security. It also has strong ties to some of the worst aspects of society: the primacy of property over humanity, the notion of U.S. exceptionalism, racism, and white supremacy.

The upshot of the mixed message coming out of government is predictable and tragic. A recent report by the Anti-Defamation League documents a sharp rise in anti-immigrant rallies and hate crimes indiscriminately committed against Latinos in the United States. “Spurred in recent weeks by the debate on Capitol Hill and the groundswell of grassroots activism in support of America’s immigrant community, extremists have become increasingly emboldened by, and fixated on, the controversy over immigration policy, encouraging

their supporters to capitalize on the issue by encouraging anti-immigrant activism, and even violence against all Hispanics.” It warns that these groups now view immigration as a “wedge issue” to promote white supremacist agendas, with particular success in southern communities.

The only real comprehensive immigration reform is one that accepts the right of immigrants who go to work every day, who form part of their communities, who educate their children, and who add immeasurably to the wealth and diversity of our society to obtain their rightful place as members of the nation.

Since September 11, many Americans have valid fears of outside attacks. Immigration, however, is not an attack. It is not a plot against the peace and security of the United States. It is a problem of labor flows. These stem from deep economic roots that include economic policies in the sending countries, in the United States, and especially in the forms of integration between them.

The Downside of Doublespeak

Doublespeak is not the same as compromise. Straddling irreconcilable positions is the opposite of taking a firm stand. The only real comprehensive immigration reform is one that accepts the right of immigrants who go to work every day, who form part of their communities, who educate their children, and who add immeasurably to the wealth and diversity of our society to obtain their rightful place as members of the nation.

While the “compromise” proposal offers troops to the restrictionists and cheap labor to business, the sector of U.S. society still left out of the equation are immigrants, their families, and supporters. Officially, almost nothing has been said or done about concerns for their human and labor rights.

Where does that leave us? One thing everyone agrees on is that immigration reform is an urgent issue that should be resolved sooner rather than later. Legislators have accepted the challenge and have been working hard to do that.

But as long as a punitive and military perspective persists as the dominant model for interpreting immigration reform, no progress can be made. In that case, it might be better for everyone, rights activists and legislators, to return to their communities and work to build a strong national consensus that would make peaceful co-existence, human and labor rights, and a rational immigration system the priorities. At the same time, we must work out border security policies that create legal channels for workers and strongly go after drug traffickers, terrorists, and criminals.

Politics is the art of negotiating solutions. But there are times when it is foolish to attempt to reconcile diametrically opposed viewpoints, constructed on conflicting versions of the nature of the problem. There are times when one of those sides fails to reflect reality or violates basic principles of society. In other words, is simply wrong. So wrong that the implications for society are potentially disastrous. This is one of those times.

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RESOURCES:

IRC Immigration Packet
“Reframing the Immigration Debate”
<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/2959>

Anti-Defamation League
<http://www.adl.org/>

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