

STATE OF NEBRASKA

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Now is the time for debate on immigration reform

Note: The following was submitted on March 11, 2004, to Nebraska newspapers as an article for their editorial pages. As chief protocol officer of the state, John Gale is authorized to facilitate the interchange of ideas and contacts for the betterment of commerce, cultural exchange and educational studies between foreign nations and Nebraska.

By John Gale

From following news stories and letters to the editor, there appear to be many currents of strong opinion about what the United States should do regarding immigration reform. Before reform legislation can be accomplished, however, the country needs a thorough debate on the subject and then must reach a consensus on a number of difficult issues. Our goal in the process should be to recognize the rule of law and our long history as a nation of immigrants.

There are an estimated 8 million illegal immigrants in the United States, including 27,000 in Nebraska. With this influx, we have witnessed the following developments:

- Many of the undocumented immigrants have crossed the porous border between Mexico and the United States.
- A new breed of smugglers has emerged, charging large sums to bring poor people into the United States.
- Many immigrants have suffered harsh deaths when things have gone awry in their attempts to enter the country illegally.
- In a search for needed workers, U.S. businesses have made hires in ways that didn't expose the workers as illegal immigrants.
- There has been confusion at all levels of government as to how to handle undocumented immigrants who are seeking services, such as medical care, driver's licenses and education.

It is clear that solutions regarding illegal immigration are not going to be possible on the local and state level without leadership from the federal government. Recently, we have seen signs that immigration reform is getting serious attention in Washington.

President Bush has proposed a set of principles for immigration reform. Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., and Sen. Tom Daschle, D-S.D., introduced an immigration reform bill in the Senate as a bipartisan approach to the issues, incorporating most of the principles expressed by President Bush. These proposals from the White House and the Senate are very welcome and allow some focus on what we should do.

The United States faced a similar situation with regard to illegal immigration in the 1980s. In 1986 Congress adopted legislation that gave amnesty to an estimated 3 million undocumented residents and, for the first time, established sanctions for employers who knowingly hire illegal aliens.

At that time, it was assumed that such an unusual situation would not occur again. It was expected that borders would be better patrolled to curb illegal entry. It was expected that the normal process for legal entry would be managed better, so those seeking jobs wouldn't have to resort to illegal entry. It was expected that U.S. businesses would not be so open to employment of illegal immigrants.

None of these assumptions has proved to be quite accurate. In fact, it has been suggested that the amnesty program itself actually encouraged more illegal immigrants, since they had the expectation that they would someday get amnesty, too.

In discussions of this difficult problem, I always hear the question asked, "Why can't the illegal immigrants simply be shipped back to their home countries?" It is a fair question and would ordinarily have strong merit, especially if you were dealing with a few people here and there. However, when you have 8 million people from a number of countries, the issues of apprehension, identity, custody, transportation and deportation become overwhelming. We would be trying to move a population equal to North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado and Nebraska, and to do it humanely, fairly, quickly and to the right places.

If the estimated numbers are correct, Mexico alone has some 4 million citizens in the United States. That is in addition to those granted amnesty under the 1986 legislation. The influx of millions of Mexicans into the United States over the past 25 years represents a crisis for both countries.

The problem is bigger and more complicated than just more border guards, more fences, more prosecution of smugglers and more deportations of undocumented aliens. The U.S. and Mexican governments must work more closely together to bring about economic structural reforms to create more and better jobs in Mexico. It will take some time, but we as U.S. citizens should insist on these broader changes and not just band-aides.

In the meantime, what do we do about 8 million undocumented immigrants in the United States? Amnesty is not the answer in the minds of most Americans, nor is it part of President Bush's proposal or the Hagel-Daschle legislation. However, a guest-worker program makes good sense with some standards establishing an employer's need for workers and for lawful behavior of the guest worker. This would allow people to work available jobs in the United States, and then after a period of time to either return to their home countries or follow a well-defined path to permanent U.S. status.

The undocumented workers should be eligible for such a program without being deported first. However, most would agree that those here illegally should not be given any preference over those coming through the proper channels for resident-alien status. A concern is whether the American economy truly has a place for these immigrant workers without displacing our own citizens from jobs they would otherwise perform.

A key issue is whether we as American citizens can decide to be inclusive and open enough as a society to continue to take in new immigrants, temporary or permanent, who are seeking a better life and hope for the future.

As Sen. Hagel said: “This is a debate that we have deferred for too long. President Bush deserves credit for the leadership he has shown in putting this issue back on the agenda. Congress must now meet that leadership by having a courageous debate on the tough issues of immigration reform.”

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