

President Bush and immigration reform: The real problem

by [Rick Ufford-Chase](#) in the [August 10, 2004](#) issue

In January 2004 George Bush outlined a new approach to immigration. He would grant special visas to foreign workers which would be valid for three years and renewable. Undocumented immigrants now employed in the U.S. would be included in the program. Workers would be allowed to travel freely between the U.S. and their own countries. Once a visa became unrenovable, for whatever reason, the worker would have to return permanently to his or her own country. Families would be allowed to join the worker in the U.S. if the worker demonstrates the ability to support them. Temporary workers who desire citizenship would apply through procedures already in place.

There's a lot to commend in the president's approach. He's had the courage to say that the present system is broken. He sees the fundamental flaw in trying to create healthy communities and a healthy economy while 10 million undocumented workers and many of their relatives reside among us. He acknowledges the impossibility of having secure borders as long as people's quest for economic survival is regarded as criminal. Perhaps most important, he appears to have a genuine appreciation of Latino culture—although some critics view this as only a bid for Hispanic votes. (That conclusion is made increasingly credible by the absence of any effort by the White House since January to pursue the issue.)

Bush rightly says that we need a policy that matches willing workers with willing employers. But that will require legislation with built-in guarantees: freedom to move from job to job, for example, so as not to be tied to one employer who could control a worker's legal status; provision for families to stay together; and a reasonable path to full citizenship. If a person has a temporary work visa and concludes that renewal is uncertain for some reason, that person will be tempted to go underground.

Many who have spoken out against a proposed temporary work permit program argue that foreign workers are robbing Americans of jobs. The facts do not justify that fear. In the Southwest, most community leaders recognize that the local economies are built on the backs of immigrant labor. The same is true in many other

places around the country—in meat-packing and chicken-processing plants in the Midwest and South, textile companies in the Southeast, farming communities in the Midwest and construction trades in the West. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan has often insisted that migrant labor helps to keep inflation in check by providing a low-cost labor supply. So the border crisis is not about protecting jobs.

The most serious failure of the president's proposal is that it neither demilitarizes the border nor decriminalizes the process of entering the country. The U.S. should take the money spent on a failed border enforcement policy and invest it instead in developing immigration processes that would allow anyone who would like to come north to do so legally through a recognized port of entry. That would immediately put the people smugglers out of business. And it would remove the ugly stain on the soul of our nation caused by the deaths of more than 2,500 people since the militarized enforcement strategy began in the early '90s.

It might seem that such an open-door policy would make it easier for criminals, drug smugglers and terrorists to enter the country. I think that just the opposite may be true. There are legitimate security concerns regarding the border. But by criminalizing every undocumented person, the current policy makes the screening process harder. The Border Patrol agents with whom I've talked say that only a small percentage of the undocumented migrants come with criminal intent. Yet the thousands who get picked up every day (that estimate is not an exaggeration) and get shipped back across the border will try again until finally they make it. It's difficult to see how spending billions of dollars to implement such a policy makes any of us safer.

The president notes that the real cure for immigration problems is to improve the economic health of countries in this hemisphere. But U.S. economic policies undercut that goal. The various free-trade agreements—the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Central American Free Trade Agreement and the Free Trade Area of the Americas—are at the heart of the problem. They promise great steps forward for all parties concerned, but are not delivering on the promise. Instead of a global village, enhanced by technological advances and free back-and-forth movement of goods, capital and people, the result has been more like one giant corporation. The labor of the poor is exploited to benefit the wealthy. Decisions are made not democratically, but in closed tribunals.