

Border crossings: A prudent and humane immigration policy

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What should U.S. immigration policy be, given that half a million immigrants enter the U.S. illegally each year and the total number of undocumented residents in the country is about 11 million (most of them Mexicans)? For the far right, the answer is obvious: close the borders. The U.S. cannot and should not absorb such numbers. This view is regularly touted on Fox News, whose commentators decry the porousness of U.S. borders, argue for stepped-up policing—perhaps even a fence along the entire U.S.-Mexico border—and for a crackdown on those who employ or aid undocumented migrants. They imply that illegal immigrants must be sent home. In these arguments, xenophobia is often close to the surface.

A quite different tack is taken by business leaders, who understand that the immigrants from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America are a vital source of cheap labor. Immigrants fill a host of unskilled jobs that would otherwise go begging. Business interests recognize that immigrants are a crucial part of the economy. (The fact that both of those viewpoints are represented in the Republican Party explains why President Bush devoted only a few vague sentences to immigration in his State of the Union speech and committed himself to doing nothing in particular.)

Meanwhile, on the liberal side, one finds many who are open in principle to the newcomers, but worried that the immigrants are bringing down the pay scale of U.S. workers. Some African Americans worry that the immigrants are taking jobs away from their ranks. Other citizens argue that the only real response to the immigration rate is to improve economic opportunity in Latin America—a globalized view which is true enough in the long run, but hardly an immediate response to the massive cross-border movement of labor.

So what is to be done? A practical response to the realities of immigration will entail, first, recognizing that law enforcement alone cannot stem the tide of immigration. Funding of border police has steadily increased over the years, but has made little

dent in the numbers coming across.

A second response is recognizing that most of the undocumented workers already here are here to stay, and that they are indeed a vital part of the U.S. economy. The alternative is to deport 11 million people—which is simply unrealistic. These residents should be offered relatively easy ways to become legal citizens—after paying a modest fine, for example, and regularizing their tax status.

A third step is increasing the number of visas available for unskilled workers so that it corresponds to the real needs of the U.S. economy—by some estimates 400,000 workers a year. This would enable the bulk of immigrants from the south to enter the country legally. This policy change would in turn enhance the work of border patrols, who would be free to focus on weeding out criminals and real threats to national security. Along with these steps, a universal and reliable identity-card system should be created so that employers can easily check worker credentials.

Everyday understandings of hospitality are challenged by the complexities of immigration, with its political, cultural and economic dimensions. But it is nevertheless possible to formulate policies that are both prudent and humane.