

June 26, 2007

Security First

How to protect the borders while welcoming the immigrants America needs.

By Pete du Pont

The immigration bill may be back on the Senate floor this week, and the policies that are adopted will have a significant impact on the sovereignty, security, economic growth and opportunity of America in the coming decades.

America's modern immigration trend began in 1986 when President Reagan's bill granted amnesty to some three million illegal immigrants yet failed to improve border security. That amnesty sent a message to people across the border: If you slip into America you will be able to work and live here, and nothing negative will happen to you. Almost 20 years went by before any serious effort was undertaken to secure our borders, so that three million 1986 illegal immigrants have turned into 12 million today. About eight million people have entered the U.S. during the current Bush administration, half or more illegally, and according to the Washington Post, undocumented workers now make up "about 5 percent of all employees nationally."

The Secure Fence Act of 2006 authorized 750 miles of fence to be built along our border with Mexico, where almost all of our illegal immigrants enter--over 80% of them come from Mexico and Latin American countries--but only about 150 miles of that border fence will have been built by the end of this year.

With this growing influx of illegal entrants into America, there are five essential actions the Senate should take next week:

First, secure the Mexican border so that America is closed to illegal immigration. Controlling our borders is essential to our national security. The additional 600 miles of border fencing authorized by the 2006 law must immediately be built; and we must add surveillance technology and more border security agents to our entire southern border. President Bush has agreed to add an upfront \$4.4 billion to the bill to

strengthen border security, enforce our immigration law, and prosecute employers who hire illegal workers--a good first step to solve our illegal immigration problems.

Second, make sure the bill contains the provisions of the Isakson Rule (proposed by Sen. Johnny Isakson, R., Ga.) that no other immigration reform programs can be implemented until the border is secure.

Third, once the border has been secured, require tamper-proof ID cards of all immigrants. Today there are no such cards, and verifiable identification is essential to both immigration policy and national security. We must know who is entering our country and what their background is.

Fourth, identify the skills required for the jobs immigrants need to fill, so that immigration policy will reflect America's economic needs. The Senate bill contains a merit-based system for evaluating immigration applicants. It encourages higher education,

those skilled in specialist occupations (including scientists, engineers and technicians) and people who have previously worked in America and speak English. Working skills should be the focus of our immigration policy, so we must move from the current "chain migration" policy which gives preference to extended families of current immigrants--like sisters, cousins, uncles, and grandparents, to one that admits the skilled working people we need. Sen. Barack Obama tried to sunset this merit program after five years, and fortunately his attempt was defeated.

Fifth, get rid of the existing "visa lottery" that randomly selects 50,000 immigrants from the application list each year. An effective immigration policy isn't based on gambling.

These are the essential elements of any immigration policy, and all must be enacted to have both a secure America and enough guest workers for a prosperous society. Passage of them would greatly improve our immigration system, our economy, and the quality of our workforce.

Then comes the difficult question of what to do about the

aforementioned 12 million undocumented aliens who are in the country already. Sen. Ted Kennedy proposes allowing them to stay indefinitely and pursue citizenship. They would have to apply for a Z visa (temporary legal status) by admitting they have broken the law, pay an initial \$1,000 fine, and submit to a background check. They would still not then be eligible for welfare benefits or food stamps, and if they wanted a green card and permanent legal status, they would have to pay an additional \$4,000 fine, learn English, and then return to their home countries to file for it. The Department of Homeland Security has estimated that some 15% to 20% of the 12 million illegal immigrants in America have criminal records and would be ineligible for Z visas or green cards.

Granting blanket amnesty to the 12 million illegal immigrants would be abandoning the rule of law, and deporting them would be difficult and chaotic. So a serious, enforceable visa plan makes sense.

America's illegal immigrant admission has accelerated over time. Congress and President Reagan granted amnesty to three million illegal aliens in

1986; and the current President Bush wants to legalize another 12 million now, which sends an arithmetic signal to other immigrants who want to slip into America that 20 years from now whoever is president will perhaps grant amnesty to 48 million illegal immigrants.

We do need to secure our borders, issue legal ID cards to immigrants, and admit people skilled in the jobs we need to fill. But experience shows that our government lacks the political will to enforce such an immigration policy. Georgia state employee Reagan W. Dean was recently quoted in the *New York Times*: "Maybe it is possible to secure the border. Maybe it is possible to establish an employee identification system. But I don't have any confidence it will be done."

Many Americans agree with him, so a serious and substantive bill that would restore the people's confidence is the Senate's task this week.

Mr. du Pont, a former governor of Delaware, is chairman of the Dallas-based National Center for Policy Analysis. His column appears once a month.