

Casual

MY FELLOW IMMIGRANTS

The mass marches, stay-away-from-work, boycotts, and other demonstrations by Hispanic immigrants, legal and illegal, have been extraordinarily effective. They have persuaded me to reexamine my steadfast support for immigration. Me, a guy whose father came over from Poland at the age of nine, with a tag tied to him to identify him to Ellis Island workers and a relative waiting at dockside.

Like many economists, I recognized that immigration probably—but not certainly—exerts some downward pressure on wages at the lower end of the wage scale. But the economy is providing jobs for all who want them, and the market is fixing things in its usual efficient manner by driving hundreds of thousands of the under-skilled to enroll in community colleges and training programs.

Besides, my personal experience with immigrants has been agreeable. My wife and I are careful to hire only legal immigrants, and we have watched them move up the ladder from gardener to nursery owner. Who can object to people who come here to work, and often at jobs that Americans don't seem to want at anything like the wages being offered?

The demonstrations of recent weeks produce second thoughts. For one thing, forget about my father, who worked by day and attended school by night to learn English. These immigrants are different. Encouraged by the madness known as multiculturalism, the demonstrators proudly displayed their adherence to the language of their mother country. Spanish *si*, English *no*. Not a good idea for those seeking to rally support for their cause, although not as bad as waving Mexican flags, a practice temporarily abandoned after the first round of demonstrations, but reinstated during the Day Without an Immigrant, the

May 1 strike and boycott sponsored by organizations such as Mexicans Without Borders and ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), the latter a group that opposes sanctions on Cuba and the war on terror.

More important, many Mexican immigrants do not see America as a new home, which they enter with obligations as well as rights. To them, America is their land, stolen by gringos. By that reasoning, there can be no illegal immigrants, only people



Damen Gye

reclaiming their rightful inheritance. Which the Mexican government feels justifies the efforts of its diplomats to teach its citizens how to enter our country illegally.

Throw in an altered, Spanish language "*Nuestro Himno*," written by a Brit to provide Hispanics with a substitute for "The Star Spangled Banner," and you have this economist wondering whether economics matters, and whether his support for immigration is misplaced.

Perhaps not—if . . . if we can only be clear about some basics. Any move to regularize illegals will produce a new flood of them, just as the last amnesty did. So it must be accompanied by the construction of a wall—concrete and electronic—to reduce the flood to a trickle. Second, let

immigrants learn English, as President Bush (perhaps less enthusiastic than in the past about campaigning in Spanish) insists "people who want to be a citizen of this country" ought to do. This means eliminating bilingual programs. Third, develop a path toward citizenship for those who learn English, pay back taxes and fines, and wait their turn.

Part of me realizes that this is a cop-out. We *won't* build a wall, and so many groups have an interest in keeping immigrants out of the mainstream that English-only is a nonstarter. My proposal may, then, in effect, be a no-immigrant policy. So be it. Preventing myself from becoming a stranger in my own land trumps my instinctive sympathy with Hispania's "tired" and "poor," its "wretched refuse," just as it trumps my recognition of the economic benefits of hard-working immigrants.

Guys like me have to realize that we aren't the ones adversely affected by immigration. We do not have children in schools whose limited resources are absorbed by kids who don't speak English. We do not use the overcrowded emergency rooms of hospitals as our major health-care providers. We do not make a living mowing lawns or digging trenches. We do not live on border-state ranches that are trashed and looted by passing illegals. But many Americans do.

And yet, and yet . . . America has to stand for something. I still get a warm glow when I see the Statue of Liberty, or listen to a New York cab driver complain of the high cost of his kids' college education. I still recoil when rereading the history of countries that returned Jewish refugees to the arms of Germany's Nazis, or the tale of the illegal immigrants who flooded into what has become Israel.

So let's make a realistic effort to solve this problem—imperfectly, of course, but sufficiently to allow us to keep lit the lamp that extends a "world-wide welcome" to those who want to become one of us, legally, in every sense of those words.

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