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Amnesty as an Economic Stimulus: Not the Answer to the Illegal Immigration Problem

Jena Baker McNeill

On April 30, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security, and Citizenship, held a hearing to examine the question: “Comprehensive Immigration Reform in 2009: Can We Do It and How?”

While the consensus of the panel was that comprehensive immigration reform should be part of Congress’s legislative agenda in the near future, one only need to look at previous failed attempts at a comprehensive solution to determine that this approach will not work. All too often, comprehensive reform has become a metaphor for amnesty and has done little except encourage more individuals to come to the U.S. illegally.

Effective change does not require Congress to pass a massive, comprehensive immigration bill. Rather, Congress needs to fix immigration in a more incremental manner that is designed to:

- Reduce the incentives for illegal immigration; and
- Strengthen employers’ ability to hire the employees they need to help the economy grow without jeopardizing the nation’s security, sovereignty, and social fabric.

This approach would include:

- Safeguarding the southern border,
- Promoting economic development and good governance in Latin America,
- Enhancing legal worker programs,
- Reforming U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and
- Enforcing immigration and workplace laws.

Legalization Not the Answer. The idea that legalization is the best solution to America’s immigration problem is being suggested with increasing frequency. In fact, the Senate hearing’s witnesses, including Alan Greenspan, seemed suggest the idea that legalization would somehow be an economic stimulus. But this policy of amnesty first and security and enforcement later is a recipe for disaster that would only hurt the nation. Legalization is not the answer for the following reasons:

- *It Is Not an Economic Stimulus.* Despite the claims that legalization would be an economic stimulus, the reality is that such a decision would be very costly to the United States. While it is true that immigrants generally add to the economy, there has been a flood of low-skill, low-educated migrants, most of whom have come to the country illegally and many of whom bring with them similarly educated and skilled family members. These migrants use public services, health care facilities, and schools while paying few of the taxes that support these public sector activities—at a very high price tag.

Overall, households headed by immigrants without a high school diploma (or low-skill immigrant households) received an average of

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\$30,160 per household in direct benefits, means-tested benefits, education, and population-based services in FY 2004. This cost would far exceed the economic benefits of legalization.

- *It Erodes Rule of Law.* Rewarding those who came into the U.S. illegally would encourage others to engage in same behavior.
- *It Threatens Immigrant Safety.* Amnesty would encourage more people to cross the border illegally in hopes of staying in the United States without repercussion. Crossing the southern border, however, is highly dangerous—there are many hazards, including border smugglers who often rape and murder those they pretend to help. The U.S. should not provide an incentive for more people to take this dangerous journey.

An Alternative Approach to Enforcing Immigration Laws. Legalization of the individuals illegally in the United States is not the right approach to solving America's immigration problem. Those who support legalization have attempted to characterize dealing with illegal immigration as a choice between permanent legalization and the forced deportation of each and every illegal immigrant in the United States, but there are other options.

Congress needs to move beyond the idea of a comprehensive approach to immigration reform and instead adopt a segmented strategy that addresses each element of the problem individually. A new strategy should do the following:

- *Keep the Border Secure.* The Bush Administration started the process of deploying new agents and more technologies while erecting physical barriers. This was an important first step. Now the Obama Administration should continue these measures in a way that is in line with the operational needs of the Department of Homeland Security. Also, these efforts need to be integrated with state and local governments, as well as private citizens, by supporting Border Enforcement Security Taskforces and State Defense Forces.
- *Promote Economic Development and Good Governance in Latin America.* Tackling the illegal immigration problem starts with reducing the

pressure on citizens to come to the U.S. illegally. This pressure is primarily the result of a lack of employment opportunities in Latin America. Aiding Latin American countries in their economic development will greatly reduce the pressure on their citizens to come to the U.S. illegally. Furthermore, in Mexico it is vital that the U.S. help the Mexican government combat the drug cartels that are trying to destabilize that nation.

- *Enhance Legal Worker Programs.* The United States has always been a destination for immigrants and requires a robust and efficient visa system. Faulty visa programs have encouraged many employers and immigrants to resort to illegal immigration. The U.S. needs to provide legal avenues that meet the needs of employers and immigrants and provide a better alternative than illegal immigration.
- *Reform USCIS.* As of now, USCIS could not handle a surge of legal immigrants, in part because it has a faulty budget model based on application fees. For USCIS to be responsive to immigration reform, its revenue structure should be changed to give the USCIS more flexibility. This can be accomplished by investing in workplace enforcement and by establishing a national trust fund to pay for programs for which USCIS cannot charge fees—for example, amnesty applications and naturalization of military personnel.
- *Enforce Immigration and Workplace Laws.* Homeland Security Secretary Napolitano must ensure that internal enforcement efforts continue. This includes workplace raids that help to decrease incentives for both illegal immigrants and employers, as well as 287(g) programs, which help state and local law enforcement enforce immigration laws.

Time for a Different Approach. Repackaging amnesty as an economic stimulus does not dilute its terrible effects. And legalizing immigrants here illegally would not provide an economic boost. In fact, an amnesty would be costly and would encourage more individuals to cross over the border illegally—which is a threat to their safety—without solving the problem.

It is time for Congress to take a different approach to immigration reform, one that upholds the rule of law, respects the needs of the economy, and provides a legal means by which to come to the U.S.

—*Jena Baker McNeill is Policy Analyst for Homeland Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*