

# WebMemo



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## Five “Hard Truths” about Obama’s SOTU Immigration Remarks

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In his 2010 State of the Union address, President Obama emphasized the need to “tell hard truths” when it comes to the nation’s affairs. His own comments on immigration during yesterday’s 2011 State of the Union address, however, glossed over the realities of America’s growing immigration problem and failed to offer a solution that would protect the rule of law, strengthen the economy, and keep America secure.

Instead of using such an important speech to present talking points meant to placate the pro-amnesty lobby, he should have emphasized the need to avoid amnesty while securing the border and enforcing laws inside the United States. These actions—along with reforms in visa services, a pilot temporary worker program, and greater cooperation with Mexico on security concerns and free market reforms—can make real progress toward solving the problem.

**Immigration Politics.** President Obama in the immigration portion of his State of the Union address emphasized that “we should take on, once and for all, the issue of illegal immigration.” He then further suggested that the U.S. should “protect our borders, enforce our laws, and address the millions of undocumented workers who are living in the shadows.”

One of the President’s campaign promises was to push for amnesty for the 10.8 million illegal immigrants inside the United States. Faced with an unenthusiastic Congress with little appetite for taking on immigration, much less an amnesty, the President has taken actions that slowly erode immigration enforcement in the United States. The President’s remarks last

night are an indication that he will continue in these efforts and continue to press for amnesty.

What the President’s actions fail to recognize is the fiscal strain, security threats, and social effects of a weak immigration system. The following are five hard truths about the current immigration problem:

1. *Illegal immigration continues.* While there has been a decrease in the illegal immigrant population in the U.S. since the economic recession began, there are still an estimated 10.8 million illegal immigrants inside the United States. As soon as the economy improves, this number will undoubtedly grow again. Illegal immigration has cost state and local governments and the federal government billions of dollars in education, health care, and government services—fiscal burdens that fall on the American taxpayer.
2. *The border is not secure.* The border continues to be plagued by cartel violence, drugs, and other forms of illegal smuggling as well as illegal immigration. Some reforms over the past decade have helped the federal government increase its operational control over the border; however, the border is still lacking vital technologies that can help finish the job. Recently, the Administration canceled a

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key border technology program, SBInet, without announcing a replacement program. The Administration will need to articulate within its next budget a plan for moving forward with border security.

3. *Enforcement has decreased.* Since the Obama Administration began, it has constantly sought ways to evade or completely ignore immigration laws on the books. For example, it has made detrimental changes to the 287(g) program, which empowers state and local law enforcement to enforce federal immigration law; at the same time, it has altogether abandoned Social Security No-Match. Later, it was uncovered that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has begun to review and dismiss cases of non-criminal illegal immigrants, allowing them to remain in the United States.<sup>1</sup>
4. *The current system discourages legal immigration.* America's immigration system sends the message that legal workers are not welcome. Work visas are often underused because of cumbersome bureaucratic requirements or illogical caps on the number of applicants for specific types of visas. The U.S. Customs and Immigration Service (USCIS) remains incapable of handling its own workload because of a faulty budget model, and the country lacks a vibrant temporary worker program that would allow legal immigrants to come to the U.S. and work.
5. *Amnesty would make the problem worse.* In 1986, the United States offered amnesty to the illegal immigrants inside the country as a means of solving the illegal immigration problem. Yet decades later, the problem is even worse. The lesson is that another amnesty would encourage more illegal immigration and fail to solve the problem.

**A Real Immigration Solution.** President Obama is not alone in his effort to politicize immigration. Both political parties have used immigration as a means of getting votes. Instead of translating into real reforms, this has led to a stalemate in which the problem gets worse, but Washington does nothing to fix it. This needs to end. Congress and the Presi-

dent should work together to institute reforms aimed at the following:

- **Securing the border.** Finish the job of securing the southern border, including the deployment of technologies that can supplement the work of the U.S. Border Patrol.
- **Enforcing the law.** The Administration's direct refusal to enforce immigration laws on the books should not be tolerated. Laws should be enforced to encourage those who came here illegally to return to their home countries and instead apply for legal entry into the United States.
- **Reforming visa services.** Reforms are needed in several visa categories—including H-1Bs, H-2As, and H-2Bs—as well as in the USCIS budget model to ensure that employers can get the workers they need to do business.
- **Piloting a temporary worker program.** Starting with a piloted temporary worker program, the U.S. could design a system where employers and employees benefit without becoming another avenue for illegal immigration.
- **Working with Latin America.** The lack of job opportunities in Latin America drives many desperate for work to come to the U.S. illegally. Encouraging Latin American countries to implement free-market economic reforms would greatly reduce the incentives for their citizens to enter the United States illegally. It is also vital that the U.S. work with the Mexican government to combat the drug cartels that are trying to destabilize the country.

**Real Reform.** These actions can help the President achieve his goal of solving the problem of illegal immigration once and for all. Hijacking real reforms until the White House can push an amnesty through Congress only makes it more difficult for everyone seeking the American dream.

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1. Susan Carroll, "Feds Moving to Dismiss Some Deportation Cases," *Houston Chronicle*, August 24, 2010, at <http://www.chron.com/dispatch/story.mpl/metropolitan/7169978.html> (January 26, 2011).