

Immigration Policy

David Center

This country without doubt has a problem with illegal residents. Why? First and foremost is that there are many places in the world that are so politically oppressive and economically impoverished that there is no shortage of people who want to get out and find a more favorable circumstance. Second, we have a problem because the U.S. has an immigration policy that is so restrictive that many people despair of ever being able to legally immigrate and decide to take matters into their own hands and ignore the law. Finally, we have a problem because the federal government has shown itself either unwilling or unable to maintain the integrity of the territory comprising the U.S. The latter is a problem that goes well beyond illegal residents and includes problems related to smuggling and security to name two major concerns.

I favor immigration reform and reform that would significantly increase the number of immigrants. Why do I favor immigration reform? The answer is out of self-interest. First, immigrants supply a pool of individuals with little or no stake in the status quo. A regularly renewing pool of such individuals provide the fresh perspective and talent needed to keep the country moving forward. Second, without immigrants the U.S. population is approaching zero growth due to a falling birth rate. Without immigrants the U.S. population will very likely begin contracting within a few decades. Population growth rates below replacement levels are already a problem for many countries such as Italy, Japan and Russia. Further, it is a problem faced in the near future by a number of countries such as the U.S. and China. Thus, many of the countries in the world will soon be in competition for a diminishing pool of working-age adults who want to immigrate. The U.S. has a huge debt, an even larger pool of underfunded obligations and unfunded guarantees that need to be met. These cannot be satisfied with a flat or declining working-age population. In short, we must grow economically or face an economic collapse such as that recently endured by Russia.

I think the current geographic quota based policy is unacceptable. Application for immigration status should be open to anyone who meets a couple of simple tests. First, the person should be capable of supporting him or herself as evidenced by sufficient assets to do so or by having secured a contract for suitable employment within the U.S. Second, the person should pose no clear threat to civil order or national security. I think immigration status once granted should extend to an applicant's immediate family, which includes spouse and dependent children but reaches no further. I would place no limits on the number of immigration applications approved each year and would not have any restrictions related to country of origin. I would offer work visas under the same guidelines as immigration (excepting the asset criterion) to anyone wishing to legally work here on a temporary basis.

We have restrictive policies that generally limits immigration and virtually prohibits immigration from some parts of the world. We also have a less than flexible policy about temporary work visas. Given these conditions it is not surprising that we have a large population of illegal immigrants who have made their way here from around the world. Migrants from Mexico, Central and South America probably comprise the majority due to geography but certainly points of origin extend beyond this hemisphere. I do not think it wise to allow this de facto immigration policy to continue to operate. I also do not have much sympathy for people who are willing to

flaunt U.S. immigration law, even though it is flawed. I personally know people who would like to immigrate to the U.S. but who are not eligible to apply and who have enough respect for the rule of law not to take the matter into their own hands. If I had to choose between these two types of people, I will favor the latter group hands down every time. However, we do have around 15 million illegal residents in the country so one issue is what to do about them.

It is unlikely that we are capable of deporting 15 million people not to mention the problems this would cause in many cases. For example, in families where the adults are illegal and the children are citizens what is the proper course of action? Personally, I think citizenship by birth granted to children of non-citizen parents in the U.S. is something that needs to change. However, it is the law and those children are not only legal residents but citizens. Therefore, I favor amnesty for illegal residents whose only legal violations have been of immigration law. Convicted felons should not receive amnesty for violations of immigration or criminal law.

By amnesty I mean forgiveness not legalization. Legalization of past law violations is logically equivalent to making something illegal retroactively. Amnesty should be limited to forgiveness of violations of immigration law. In short, if you are granted amnesty you will not be subject to prosecution for violation of immigration law. Amnesty does not mean being rewarded with a fast track to citizenship and jumping ahead of everyone else in the world who wants to immigrate to the U.S. For example, when Vietnam era draft dodgers were granted amnesty, they were relieved of any risk of being prosecuted. They were not, however, rewarded with veterans' benefits along with amnesty. So, where does that leave formerly illegal residents who have been granted amnesty?

I think any such resident who is employed should be able to apply for and be granted a work visa good for a fixed period such as three years. This visa should cover the applicant and any dependents in his or her immediate family. Renewal of the visa should be available as a matter of course at the end of the visa period. If such a person wishes to apply for immigrant status and be on track to citizenship, he or she should follow the same application procedures as anyone else in the world who wants to immigrate and become a citizen. If the immigration reform that I favor and discussed above were to be adopted, persons already in the country and holding a work visa would have an advantage in the immigration process. I see no easy way to avoid visiting this **injustice** upon persons outside of the U.S. who want to immigrate. In an imperfect world, we may just have live with it.

The proper venue for getting changes in immigration law is the U.S. Congress. If you want changes in the ground rules for immigration, you should be advocating and lobbying with your congressional representatives. No one else has the authority or power to change the laws in the U.S. All other actions are a waste of time and largely amount to political grandstanding.

I do have a major concern related to Mexican immigration into the U.S., especially in border states. Niall Ferguson, a Harvard professor of economic history, has put forth an historical hypothesis about the causes of the conflicts in the twentieth century. He discussed his hypothesis and the evidence supporting it in his book War of the World. What he argued was that the recipe for conflict has three ingredients. These ingredients include overlapping ethnicities populating a geographic area, economic stress and either an inability or unwillingness by authorities to

maintain order. Today one can see these ingredients coming together in several locations including the area where Iraq, Iran and Turkey come together (the Kurd "problem"); the area including the northwestern part of China (Xinjiang) and the territories in northeastern Pakistan (the Uyгур "problem"); and the southwestern U.S. and Mexico (the Mexican "problem"). All of these areas, among others, have the potential to become violent. There exists a real possibility that an increase in Mexican immigration into border states could fuel the fires of ethnic conflict. I don't argue that immigration should be restricted because of this concern but one should recognize the potential and attempt mitigate the factors that could cause conflict to erupt.

I also think that there is a downside to increasing immigration that is often overlooked. While immigration reform would increase the population and expand the tax base, which has some clear economic benefits, it also means growth. For those who are concerned with energy independence, conservation of resources, pollution, protection of the environment and similar endeavors, growth is a significant threat to all of those goals. If one advocates for expanding the population it follows that the economy must be expanded to accommodate the new citizens and the increased birth rate that will follow them. An expanding economy will put additional strains on meeting the goals mentioned. There is an inherent contradiction between increases in population, economic expansion and concern for the quality of life. We may have to choose between economic stagnation and financial chaos or environmental degradation and diminished quality of living conditions. Carefully consider what you ask for because you may get it.