



GOP Border Two-Step

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April 28, 2006

DOES the Republican right hand know what the Republican left hand is doing? It's been easy to wonder over the last week or so, as both the White House and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist moved first to crack down on illegal immigration and then announced that they were backing efforts to make the nation more open and welcoming to foreign workers.

Some read the two-step as sign of uncertainty and confusion. Others saw deliberately mixed signals – a politically driven effort to curry public favor with a little something for everyone, whether pro- or anti-immigration.

Both interpretations miss the mark. In fact, the "two step" is a preview of the era that President Bush and Frist hope to usher in by overhauling the immigration system – an era in which it will be much easier for foreign workers to enter the United States but, at the same time, the law will be enforced far more vigorously.

First came the fist.

Department of Homeland Security agents fanned out through 26 states to arrest some 1,200 illegal employees and seven managers of IFCO Systems North America, a Houston-based firm that sells packing materials. The largest such sting in U.S. history, the action sent shudders through the underground world of illegal immigrants and the companies they work for.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff drove home the point the next day, announcing that this was only the start – that from now on the government was going to treat hiring illegal immigrants the same way it treats organized crime. What's more, he's bringing on a raft of new federal agents to do the job, including hunting down and deporting some of the million-plus foreigners who've been arrested or have ignored orders to leave the country.

Then, over the weekend, Frist jumped into the fray, declaring that the Senate would act immediately to authorize \$2 billion more for border enforcement. The measure, passed Wednesday, will provide for new aircraft, new training and new border fencing in California and Arizona.

It looked as if Bush and Frist were changing course – abandoning efforts to revamp the immigration system and ceding victory to harder-line Republicans, mostly in the House, who feel that the best way to deal with the illegal influx is to crack down harder, enforcing the laws on the books.

But then the president and majority leader followed the fist with an open hand – as each made his most far-reaching pronouncement yet in favor of sweeping immigration reform.

Speaking in Orange Country, Calif. (arguably the cradle of anti-immigrant Republican activism), Bush signaled clearly that he preferred the Senate's approach to that of the House. What's needed, he argued, is not just a guest-worker program but also a transitional measure that allows illegal immigrants already here to "pay a penalty" and "get in line" – albeit at "the back of the line" – for citizenship.

While Frist has yet to commit to a workable solution for those already here, he has promised that "in the very near future we will pass a bill that will be comprehensive."

So what gives? In fact, the seeming contradiction is the essence of the immigration reform the Senate is considering. The measure, if it passes this year, would tighten the border, punish more unscrupulous employers and let more immigrant workers enter the country legally each year.

The rationale? We need foreign workers to keep the economy growing by doing jobs that more and more Americans are too qualified to do. But our existing immigration quotas are too low to accommodate our needs. The result is a nightmare of our own making: widespread illegal immigration, and all the headaches that come with it.

The antidote is not simply to crack down harder – it's difficult to enforce unrealistic law. The answer – the only answer that can work – is to change the law to make it more in line with our labor needs and then enforce that new law to the letter.

What exactly will that combination look like? A world very much like the world previewed this week: an America much more welcoming to immigrants but also much tougher in the rules it lays down for them.

This doesn't mean any combination of enforcement and reform will do the trick. Other proposals put forward recently by senators as different as Hillary Rodham Clinton and Johnny Isakson (a Georgia conservative) would delay implementation of a guest-worker program until we could prove we had secured the border. This just doesn't make sense: It's the modern equivalent of insisting we enforce Prohibition to the letter – and only then reform our liquor laws to make them more realistic.

That approach doesn't end abuse – it drives it underground.

The answer is to do both at once – reform the law and enforce it more effectively. Bush and Frist understand this. Now if only they can persuade Congress to make it happen.

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