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Senator's experience reflected in new bill; Domenici makes decision on immigration reform keeping in mind his past and the nation's current state.

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WASHINGTON - As Sen. Pete Domenici prepared for the approaching Senate showdown over immigration reform, the Albuquerque Republican kept balancing two thoughts.

One was the image of federal immigration officials arresting his Italian-American mother after the start of World War II.

The other was that the American people will not tolerate a situation where millions of people are illegally crossing a porous border.

The result was Domenici's own immigration reform bill, introduced Friday, that promises tougher enforcement on the border and on employers and demands cooperation from Mexico, but which also gives up to nine years of U.S. residency and options for longer time to the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrant men, women and children already in the United States.

"We're not going to kick all these people out of here," Domenici said. "I'm going to take this one right down the middle in terms of what I think is right."

His bill makes at least half-a dozen different proposals that the Senate could consider in March.

Last year, the House passed an enforcement-only bill that makes it a criminal violation, not just a civil offense, for undocumented immigrants to be in the United States and a crime to aid them.

But Domenici, 73, does not want to see families go through what he did as a boy of 9 or 10 because of an immigration snafu.

The senator's father, Cherubino Domenici, became a citizen after he was drafted into the Army during World War I.

A lawyer told Cherubino Domenici that Alda Domenici, who came to the United States as a baby, became a citizen when they were married.

Four children later, during one of the post-Pearl Harbor checkups on Italian-Americans, they found out the attorney was wrong.

"Federal officials came to our house to arrest my mother while my father was at work," said Domenici. "It was a frightening situation for my entire family that occurred through no fault of my mother, who had lived in America for more than 30 years as an exemplary citizen."

Domenici said she was released and came home that night.

"I believe that we can, and must, do our best to prevent situations like this from occurring in the future," Domenici said in a floor statement.

Domenici said he understands concerns of his border state constituents "who see the problems caused by illegal entries into our country every day. I also understand the need to welcome immigrants to our country, so that America remains a country where hardworking, entrepreneurial, and intelligent immigrants can prosper."

Domenici doesn't sit on the Judiciary Committee, which will draft the immigration reform bill that goes to the floor.

He thinks the Senate is going to "have a terrible time" passing a bill, much less one the House would agree to.

But he told The Tribune he felt obligated as a border-state senator to put forth his views in a bill.

"Some of us have to let the people know what we think the facts are. I'm not looking at the existing group of illegal aliens that have been here for long periods of time as some bunch of troublemakers," said Domenici, noting that most are working.

Domenici's bill is called WISH, for Welcoming Immigrants to a Secure Homeland. WISH would give undocumented immigrants three years to report to authorities, pay a fine, and obtain a visa that with renewals would permit them to remain in the United States for another six years.

At the end of the nine-year period, they would either have to obtain a different work visa or leave the United States for at least three years.

President Bush has made a similar proposal, but his guest-worker visas would cover only six years.

Other bills would require undocumented immigrants to leave the country before they could get a guest-worker visa. More liberal proposals would afford them a path to citizenship.

WISH also allows foreign students to remain in the United States if they graduate with honors and obtain a job.

One new wrinkle in Domenici's bill is that it would force the president to certify that Mexico is cooperating in efforts to control human smuggling and drug trafficking across the border before any Mexican nationals could benefit from the bill.