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TALKING POINTS

The Terrible, Horrible, Urgent National Disaster That Immigration Isn't

By LAWRENCE DOWNES

Part 1: What's Wrong With 'Getting Tough on Immigration'

I. Immigration, Oversimplified

The arguments made by hard-line critics of immigration reform are depressingly simple, which makes them simply depressing.

They boil down to this: the immigration problems we have today, and a vast array of other problems, begin and end with immigrants themselves, the people who have committed the offense of being here illegally — or just being here, period, in undesirable numbers, with undesirable habits and undesirable effects on the health of the nation.

Their presence here is seen as overwhelmingly if not entirely bad, an unpardonable offense for which American citizens are made to suffer.

In this view, the problem is not going to be solved by repairing a complex system of immigration laws and regulations, by tinkering with the economic machinery to find a better fit between labor demand and supply, or by being more diligent about enforcing existing rules about workplaces and hiring. And it certainly won't be solved by being creative or more welcoming and humane toward immigrants in a way that rewards their hard work and desire to participate in the system more fully.

It will be solved by keeping people out, and kicking people out. Do that, the restrictionists insist, and you will help resolve a host of other problems — the invasion of neighborhoods and street corners by Latino men; the upsurge of gangs and drugs; urban congestion and suburban sprawl; human trafficking; the demise of white European culture and values; the strain on jails, hospitals and schools, and the threat to the very stability of the United States.

It's no wonder some people compare immigrant workers to locusts, bacteria or an occupying army. If you could find a 250-year-old American to discuss this, he or she would tell you how familiar this all sounds. Identical arguments were once made about Chinese laborers, Japanese-Americans, Roman Catholics, the Irish, Italians, and the original unloved — though fully documented — outsiders, African-Americans. Let's not even talk about American Indians.

II. The Disturbing Role Played by Fear

Many of those who favor a get-tough approach to immigration do not like having their arguments mocked

and their tolerance questioned. They hate being dumped into the loony bin with Colonel Custer, the the Know-Nothings and the [the Ku Klux Klan](#).

That is understandable. But xenophobia is not restricted to a fringe element within the anti-immigration movement. Panicky arguments about the dangers of immigration have been made by supposedly responsible people — including members of the [United States House](#) and [Senate](#), and state, county and local officials around the country. United States Representative [Tom Tancredo of Colorado](#) may be the best-known xenophobe in Congress. He created an [immigration caucus](#) to further his firebrand views. It now has about 100 members and a Web site that is a one-stop shop for fear-stricken anti-immigration arguments.

One member of Mr. Tancredo's caucus is [John Culberson of Houston](#), who issued a "[Border Security Alert](#)" last October warning that "Al Qaeda terrorists and Chinese nationals are infiltrating our country virtually anywhere they choose from Brownsville to San Diego." Besides that, he said, "a large number of Islamic individuals have moved into homes in Nuevo Laredo and are being taught Spanish to assimilate with the local culture."

Because of that, Mr. Culberson said, "Full scale war is underway on our southern border, and our entire way of life is at risk if we do not win the battle for Laredo."

The view of America as a nation under siege led the United States House last December to pass an immigration bill, sponsored by [James Sensenbrenner](#) of Wisconsin, that sees the problem as entirely an issue of enforcement. It would make it a federal crime to live in the United States illegally, which would turn millions of immigrants into felons, ineligible to win any legal status. It would also make it a crime for churches and social service agencies to shield or offer support to illegal immigrants. The debate in the Senate over immigration reform had its own low moments, including the successful passage of a [non-sequitur amendment](#) by [Senator James Inhofe](#) of Oklahoma to declare English the country's national language — an undisguised swipe at Latino immigrants and their supposed reluctance to assimilate. A guest-worker program in the Senate bill was sharply scaled back after the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, issued a [report](#) warning that if the bill as written passed, the country could end up swamped with up to 193 million new legal immigrants within 20 years. That number, greater than the populations of Mexico and Central America combined, was hysterically off the charts. The bill was hastily amended and the estimates revised downward to a still unrealistic 66 million, or 47 million if you count only net new arrivals, not people already here who would be legalized. (The Congressional Budget Office, by contrast, [projects 8 million net new migrants over the next 10 years](#) under the Senate bill. The National Foundation for American Policy, counting newcomers and immigrants already here, studied the Senate bill and came up with a figure of 28.48 million over 20 years, or 1.42 million a year. That's a lot, but far less than the anti-immigration number masseurs would have you believe.)

If you dig into the widely discussed arguments connecting immigrants to things like rampant overpopulation or the demise the English language, you will discern the influence of any number of hard-line restrictionist immigration organizations. Scratch those groups, and underneath you will usually find a kook. There are usually not many degrees of separation from ostensibly rational, often-quoted organizations like the [Federation for American Immigration Reform](#), which calls itself a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to research and policy study, and people like its co-founder [John Tanton](#). The [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), which tracks hate groups, says that Mr. Tanton, a retired

Michigan eye doctor, "is widely recognized as the leading figure in the anti-immigration and 'official English' movements in the United States."

A profile on the law center's Web site says: "In addition to FAIR, where he still is a board member, Tanton has been a central player in an array of anti-immigrant, nationalist groups and institutes, including [Pro English](#), U.S. Inc., [Center for Immigration Studies \(CIS\)](#), U.S. English, and [Numbers USA](#)."

Who is this Mr. Tanton? He is someone who has depicted Latino immigrants as a horde of alarmingly procreative Roman Catholics of questionable "educability," and who runs a publishing company, [Social Contract Press](#), that sells titles on immigration topics like "[The Camp of the Saints](#)," that have been denounced as racist and vile.

The Anti-Defamation League, in a [2000 report on FAIR](#), traced its nativist roots and offered what it called "a glimpse into how advocacy can cross the line into a divisive and troubling tendency toward scapegoating of the foreign born." It's worth reading.

FAIR and its allies are hardly the only hard-core immigration foes out there, and their more unprintable opinions would be rejected passionately by great numbers of people in the enforcement-only immigration camp. But their influence is still significant: their arguments mirror the immigration talking points of many leading conservatives. And it shows just how much of the current panic has its source not in people's gray matter, but in their viscera.

III. An Array of Too-Costly Solutions

The restrictionists have a variety of clear-cut solutions. But the reassurance they offer those who worry about immigration is a false one, for a simple reason: their price tags are simply too costly for them to be seriously considered. Anyone who seriously proposes them is engaging in little more than demagoguery.

Take the restrictionists' favorite solution: deporting 'em all. It is a straw man in the debate, because only the most rabid talk-show callers would be willing to pay that price — \$200 billion or more, at least double the [Department of Homeland Security](#) budget. And that cost does not even count the psychic toll it would take on our nation to rip immigrants out of homes and workplaces and schools and eject them. As unlikely as we would be to pay this cost once, it is even less likely we would be willing to pay it again and again, as we would no doubt have to as new immigrants arrived to replace the ones who were sent home.

Then there is the hard-liners' other favorite solution — fortifying the border, which any restrictionist will tell you is the most urgent priority of immigration reform. Billions have already been lavished at the southern border — California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas — in walls, patrols and technology. Since 1986, the border patrol budget has been raised 10 times, and the number of border patrol agents has gone up eightfold. The House of Representatives, in its disturbingly get-tough immigration bill, wants to erect a 700-mile wall, which will fatten a few powerful contractors' bottom lines by untold millions, and President Bush has already sent in the [National Guard](#).

These price tags will only seem higher when measured against results.

We have already spent a lot on enforcement, and have precious little to show for it. A [Wall Street Journal](#)

[editorial\[S\]](#) titled "The Border Brigades" noted that "U.S. immigration policy at least since the passage of the Simpson-Mazzoli law in 1986 and certainly since the 1990's has emphasized 'security' above all else." But this has not slowed illegal immigration in the least. The Pew Hispanic Center reports that the population of illegal immigrants has shown "[steady growth](#)" in recent years, which is putting it mildly. In 1986, the last time the country was consumed with a debate about immigration reform, the illegal population was estimated at 3 million. Today it's 11 million to 12 million.

Those who are wedded to the iron-fisted approach oppose any immigration reform that would ease pressure at the border by including a temporary-worker program or granting visas to legalize people already here and their relatives waiting to enter. They will not admit, or do not understand, that they are simply insisting on throwing good money after bad.

IV. Local Fear and Loathing

America's approach to immigration has to be worthy of a nation built on immigration, and dedicated to the ideal of equality. Unfortunately, the measures that are being implemented at the local level — where most of the action is occurring — look a whole lot like bullying and bigotry.

Cities and counties in California, Arizona, New York and elsewhere have enacted ordinances cracking down on day laborers, the most visible and vilified members of the immigrant population. That does not mean that illegal immigrants are not being hired. It simply means the government is making their harsh lives harsher. Day laborers have been subject to police harassment and illegal evictions. And that does not include the freelance hostility and abuse directed at them by abusive contractors, regular citizens, protesters and vigilante groups like the [Minuteman Civil Defense Corps](#).

Other places are focusing on ripping immigrants out of the social fabric — passing rules that bar them from being helped by the society they are contributing to. In April, [Gov. Sonny Perdue of Georgia](#)

signed one of the harshest anti-immigration laws in the country, a package of restrictions that, among other things, requires adults seeking state benefits to prove they are here legally, and state agencies to check every employee's immigration status. Never mind that much of Georgia's economic vitality stems from the immigrants operating its textile mills, picking its peaches, preparing its meals and building and tidying its expansive suburbs.

Some of these outbursts are merely silly. In Danbury, Conn., [the mayor has cracked down on volleyball](#), a favorite pastime of Ecuadoran immigrants. Nashville tried to [ban taco trucks](#) but not, tellingly, hot dog stands. Silly, but mean-spirited.

V. Sending In the Police

Others local measures are more serious. The most wrongheaded of the local crackdown impulses may be the one to enlist state and local police to enforce immigration laws. Law-enforcement officials themselves hate it. City councils and police departments around the country are resisting efforts to make them shoulder what is and should remain a federal responsibility.

For example, Minneapolis and St. Paul's mayors and police chiefs have [spoken out against a proposal](#) by the

Minnesota governor to enlist local police officers in immigration enforcement — and they are speaking for many other mayors and police chiefs who feel the same way. Chief John Harrington of the St. Paul Police Department told the St. Paul Pioneer Press that local cops were already buried in other work — like fighting violent crime — that was more urgent than checking people's immigration papers.

"The City of St. Paul doesn't have enough cops to handle the load of things we already have on the books, the basic city ordinances and statutes and those egregious federal crimes — drug trafficking, kidnapping, bank robbery — that we have now," Chief Harrington said. Checking up on immigrants, he insisted, would take his officers away from tracking down serious criminals, including sex offenders. He also argued that the cost of sending 550 officers for the six months of training that [Immigrations and Customs Enforcement](#) officials recommend could better be used fighting crime at home.

There is another way cracking down on immigrants hurts, rather than helps, in the fight against crime. As Chief Harrington and many others have pointed out, local police officers — unlike their federal counterparts — need the help of the community to do their jobs. Illegal immigrants are already a hidden population. Turning local cops against them will drive them further into the shadows. This will hinder investigations — witnesses will vanish, and criminals, uncaught and unpunished, will flourish.

Part 2: The Harder but Better Way

I. A 796-Page Attempt to Do Better

If the hard-liners trying to kill comprehensive immigration reform are a disciplined chorus singing one note, pure and bell-clear, the other side is more like a crowd struggling to pull together the "Messiah" in a stadium sing-along. They are an alliance of the dirt-poor and powerful, of plainspoken Republicans like Senators [John McCain](#) and [Lindsey Graham](#) and a lion-in-winter liberal, [Edward Kennedy](#). They include business interests, some labor unions, editorial pages like this one and editorial pages not at all like this one. A diffident President Bush has been trying to fit in somewhere.

What unites these motley allies and distinguishes them from the hard-liners is their understanding that bountiful immigration is a blessing — a mixed blessing, but a blessing all the same. Their efforts to solve the problem lack clarity. They grapple with contradictions. Their approach, embodied in a 796-page brick of a Senate immigration bill, is at once punitive and forgiving. It throws money at the border but also includes a path to citizenship for many, though not all, of the illegal immigrants already here. It paves the way for millions more whose hopes of entering the country have been stymied, sometimes for decades, by bureaucratic backlogs.

Critics of the bill have called it unworkable and incomprehensible. They have a point. But flawed as it is, the Senate bill is the only one that acknowledges and seeks to enhance the contributions that immigrants make to this country's economy and culture. It's the only one that tries to enlist immigrants present and future, illegal and otherwise, in the job of making this country better. And therefore it is the only one with any hope of making the excruciatingly difficult and complicated cost-benefit equation of immigration end up in the black.

II. How Badly We Need Them

As a conduit for workers into this country, the existing immigration system is greatly out of balance with demand. The legal path for an unskilled worker to enter the United States is through one of about 5,000 visas issued for such workers each year, which means it is no path at all. The United States economy has adjusted, of course, by hiring temporary workers and illegal workers by the millions. The invisible hand doesn't ask for ID for the roughly 500,000 people who enter illegally each year.

Immigrants — legal and illegal — fill a vital niche in the American economy. They make up 12 percent of the United States population but 14 percent of its workers, according to the Congressional Budget Office. From 1994 to 2004, [the agency said in a report last December](#), the number of foreign-born workers grew to 21 million from 13 million, a rise that accounted for more than half of the growth of the U.S. labor force. According to the [American Immigration Lawyers Association](#), immigrants hold 40 percent of farming, fishing and forestry jobs in the United States, 33 percent of jobs in building and grounds maintenance, 22 percent of food preparation jobs and 22 percent of construction jobs. Tearing the approximately one third of those workers who are illegal away from their livelihoods and families would be ruinous to the economy, particularly the agricultural and tourism industries in states like California.

Throw away the arguments that immigrants are tax leeches. On the contrary. They pay more in taxes than they consume in services. They all pay sales taxes. Illegal immigrants who use fake Social Security numbers to get hired pay income and payroll taxes — but don't collect Social Security and are ineligible for Medicaid. The amount of unclaimed Social Security tax has more than doubled since the 1980's, to roughly \$189 billion. Because immigrants tend to be younger and healthier than native born workers, they use government services more sparingly. A [comprehensive study of immigration and its economic effects](#) — "The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration," by James Smith and Barry Edmonston for the National Research Council in 1997 — summed up its conclusions this way: Because immigrants on average have less education than the native-born, they earn less and pay lower taxes. But immigrants also consume far fewer services. As a result: the average immigrant pays nearly \$1,800 more in taxes than he or she costs in benefits, even when you factor in the cost of public education for his or her children.

The report emphasizes that the proper way to understand these expenditures is as an investment in America's future. In a country that absorbs about one million newcomers per year, each yearly cohort of immigrants pays \$80 billion more in taxes over the course of a lifetime than it consumes in services. In other words, there is no economic crisis being caused by immigration — but there could be one if it came to a halt.

[An open letter to President Bush and Congress](#) made the rounds of the Internet last week. Signed by more than 500 economists in varied fields, including five Nobel Prize winners, it argues that immigration is a net economic gain for America and its citizens and "the greatest anti-poverty program ever devised."

III. Acknowledging the Costs

It would be wrong to argue that tighter enforcement has no place in sensible immigration reform, or that immigration does not bring with it an array of problems. There are all sorts of things that supporters of immigrants should — and do — own up to. It is not only good-hearted immigrant workers with sore feet, blisters and hungry families, for example, who pour across America's borders. Drugs, counterfeit goods and weapons do, too. No terrorists have been known to have entered from Mexico, but it could happen. If there

were a realistic way of sealing the borders against all drug dealers, felons, and terrorists, we would certainly want to consider it. But there is not. Law enforcement should focus vigilantly on all of these, but the border is not where those battles will be won.

There is one conundrum of illegal immigration that is very real: the cost it imposes on people who would compete for jobs with undocumented low-skilled immigrants. It stands to reason — how could a job market absorb so many new people and not see wages fall? An [often-cited study](#) by two Harvard economists, George J. Borjas and Lawrence F. Katz, found that from 1980 to 2000, a wave of illegal immigration from Mexico had reduced the wages of high school dropouts in the United States by 8.2 percent.

But that study gave only a partial picture. It failed to account for the economic growth that immigrants cause — the many jobs that cheap immigrant labor creates, and the gaping demographic niche it fills. As Eduardo Porter pointed out in [The Times](#) in April, "Over the last quarter-century, the number of people without any college education, including high school dropouts, has fallen sharply. This has reduced the pool of workers who are most vulnerable to competition from illegal immigrants."

This is no consolation to the janitor in Los Angeles who has seen his job disappear, or the by-the-book contractor who can't compete with the fly-by-night operation that hires — and underpays and exploits — illegal day laborers by the truckload. Any serious attempt at immigration reform has to grapple with the fact that many Americans — young black men, among others — who have been overlooked and shunned in the job market for generations will likely continue to be overlooked. That is especially true as the economy hums along through the energy of immigrants, many of them illegal. If immigration decreases costs and increases the national prosperity, we need to find a way to make sure that those gains are shared with those on the low rungs of the economic ladder.

IV. Anger on the Ground

[Farmingville, a working-class community on Long Island](#) that has been utterly transformed by Latino immigration, is a prime example of the challenges that burgeoning immigration poses and the resentment it inspires. Longtime residents became acutely aware of the presence of dozens of Latino men on street corners and piling up in illegally subdivided rooming houses. This was a clear example of globalization at the local level, and to many in Farmingville the costs were obvious and unacceptable. Young men crowding the 7-Eleven parking lot, intimidating women and girls with sexually aggressive catcalls. Men urinating in the street, loitering and generally creating a nuisance of themselves. You couldn't talk to these people, and you couldn't make them go away.

They were the visible manifestation of broken borders, and some aggrieved people took it on themselves to solve the problem. They beat up workers and firebombed their homes. They held signs and marched. They harassed and heckled day laborers, they wrote letters and had meetings.

The Farmingville conflict is being repeated, in different forms, in communities across the United States. But the anti-immigrant activists in Farmingville accomplished nothing, unless you consider waging a successful battle against the creation of a day-labor hiring site a success. Five years after the furor erupted and became the subject of a well-regarded documentary, Farmingville has as many day laborers as ever. It doesn't have a hiring site.

V. The Cost Abroad

There are many books that document the hardship for Latinos migrating to El Norte. [The book "Coyotes" by Ted Conover](#), a white journalist with a fondness for living his stories, is a good one. In villages where most of the young men go abroad, the result is a [reliable stream of remittances to their hometowns](#) — \$25.5 billion in 2003, according to the Congressional Budget Office — which is a vital source of revenue for poor countries.

But it also means that communities, particularly small ones in the south of Mexico and Central America, lose their brightest, best and strongest men and women for months or years at a time. The energy that could be expended in making a community grow or a local business prosper is spent in another country, and while cash is welcome, it is often a poor substitute for having children and spouses at home, as the toll in broken families attests.

VI. Uncertain Possibilities

The current immigration "system," if you can call it that, is broken. It's rich in perversities. So is the effort to fix it.

The House bill is simply noxious. The Senate alternative has some serious flaws. It attempts to divide the population of illegal immigrants into three groups, being relatively gentle on some immigrants and tough on others, depending on how many years they have been here. Millions of newer arrivals will have to volunteer to leave the country — to report to be deported. It's hard to imagine that a significant majority of them will ever do so. But in any case, it seems highly unlikely the full Congress could, in the current climate, pass anything as good as the Senate bill.

A significant number of pro-immigrant groups have already concluded that doing nothing — passing no immigration bill this year — would be better than passing some awkward hybrid of the existing Senate and House bills.

They may be right. With elections looming in November, the get-tough argument may have the upper hand. It is an approach supported by a majority of the House, backed up by thousands of constituents who have been making phone calls and mailing bricks (yes, actual bricks) to their elected representatives to drive the point home. But it's foolish to think that walling off America and reforming immigration through enforcement alone is anything but self-defeating.

It's not only because the costs of security are so high, or because the contributions that legal and illegal immigrants make to this country are so positive. Those who have been working as hard as the hard-liners have been to close this country off to people who came here to seek work and a future have a radically astringent vision of what this country should be. To militarize the border, to turn illegal immigrants into felons, means trying to reverse the polarity on the American magnet, to repel the people who have struggled, dreamed and died to get here.

It means turning this singular country into just another industrial power with a declining birthrate and a self-defeating antagonism to the foreign born. It means defining down what America stands for, no matter what the cost to the American economy, its traditions and values and moral standing.

It's dangerous. It's not rational. But the argument on the restrictionist side isn't about being rational. It's about being afraid.

Lela Moore contributed research for this article.

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