

Mr. Bush's Immigration Blunder

by

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The Bush administration has upset liberals ever since it arrived in Washington. Thus, it is threatening to tear down the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to pursue a dubious, if not outrageous, agenda like NMD; or it pursues faith-based initiatives, trampling the thin line between religion and government that is the pride of our nation.

But in these instances, the liberals need no special lens to see what is going on nor a radar to tell them that we are going in the wrong direction. But the President's initiative, as President Vincente Fox arrives this week in Washington, in getting an amnesty only for the illegal Mexicans in the United States and, additionally or alternatively, a guestworker program for which only Mexicans are eligible, is hard to see for the folly it is. For, how can liberals fault a more humane approach to immigration, especially in a country uniquely built by immigrants and whose very identity is therefore based as much on inclusion as on exclusion? Yet, folly it is: for its privileged and exclusive largesse to Mexicans alone strikes at the egalitarian and nondiscriminatory principles, which liberals must hold dear, and which have increasingly characterized our immigration policy for almost four decades.

Indeed, the 1965 immigration legislation under President Kennedy introduced frontally, for the first time in a country that had transited from the state-level Oriental Exclusion Acts at the turn of the century to national restrictionist legislation that unashamedly was built on ethnic and geographic biases, the principle of equal access. This is why we see today, among the legal

immigrants, a multitude of “exotic” ethnicities, a profusion of color and religion, that would have been unthinkable earlier.

True, this is what lawyers call “facial neutrality”. It was compatible, for example, with the fact that, within certain categories such as the Professional, Technical and Kindred quotas, countries such as India, Taiwan and South Korea did exceptionally well, given their domestic support for higher education of quality. But any immigration measure of importance, built on explicit discrimination among potential immigrants, would have been considered repugnant to the new tradition. Indeed, even the last amnesty under the senior Bush in 1986 (even though two-thirds of the beneficiaries were Mexicans) was non-discriminatory and no one would have dared to suggest otherwise.

So, what are the reasons for this proposed regression in our immigration policy? They are the specious ones that assert that Mexico makes a “special” claim on us; and cynical ones that play to domestic politics. Both must be rejected.

Mexico’s special claim is argued on several grounds: We have a Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, with Mexico. So, preferential immigration is simply part of “deeper integration” that should mimic the preferences on trade. But there are several FTAs without immigration preferences. And are we offering similar preferences to Israel and Canada, and down the road to Jordan, Chile, Singapore, Vietnam, and perhaps even India with whom an FTA is being proposed by some?

Then again, the Rio Grande is often thought to be the frontier through which illegal immigrants enter; so that seems to many to be the place to concentrate one’s mind. But even this logic is flawed. For some years now, the proportion of illegal immigrants flowing into the US

has been larger from elsewhere: illegals often come now on legal visas and then disappear into our midst.

But then do we owe a special favor to Mexico because we annexed California and Mexico eventually ceded vast territory to us? But, if we are to pay for our guilt, there is a lot to go around with many non-Mexicans in the queue! Sure, we have been an empire by invitation, even an empire by example. But do not forget our CIA and South and Central America. And, with the growing debate about reparations for slavery, does Africa not also figure for a special relationship for our immigration policy?

But then should not Mexico enjoy a special status as it is part of North America, right on our border? However, the United States is uniquely not defined by its geography. It is the land to which multitudes worldwide aspire and some manage to arrive. It belongs to all. Talk to the South Asian cab drivers in New York; and you find disbelief, distress and anger that the Mexicans are to be favored: why, they ask, do their governments and their compatriots in politics here not drive the United States to do something about it?

So, Mr. Bush's politics alone has to be the driving rationale for his bizarre for-Mexico-only proposals. The Hispanic vote is the obvious explanation. But has Mr. Bush decided to write off the growing numbers of Asians and others, many who now vote, who will see this as a blatant act of discrimination? He has been ill-served by advisers whose achievements include hurting him gratuitously on the environment by "killing" the Kyoto Treaty when it was already dead, and foolishly skewing his tax cut towards the rich. He can do without one more blunder.

