

How Eisenhower solved illegal border crossings from Mexico

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Opinion

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WASHINGTON – George W. Bush isn't the first Republican president to face a full-blown immigration crisis on the US-Mexican border.

Fifty-three years ago, when newly elected Dwight Eisenhower moved into the White House, America's southern frontier was as porous as a spaghetti sieve. As many as 3 million illegal migrants had walked and waded northward over a period of several years for jobs in California, Arizona, Texas, and points beyond.

President Eisenhower cut off this illegal traffic. He did it quickly and decisively with only 1,075 United States Border Patrol agents - less than one-tenth of today's force. The operation is still highly praised among veterans of the Border Patrol.

Although there is little to no record of this operation in Ike's official papers, one piece of historic evidence indicates how he felt. In 1951, Ike wrote a letter to Sen. William Fulbright (D) of Arkansas. The senator had just proposed that a special commission be created by Congress to examine unethical conduct by government officials who accepted gifts and favors in exchange for special treatment of private individuals.

General Eisenhower, who was gearing up for his run for the presidency, said "Amen" to Senator Fulbright's proposal. He then quoted a report in *The New York Times*, highlighting one paragraph that said: "The rise in illegal border-crossing by Mexican 'wetbacks' to a current rate of more than 1,000,000 cases a year has been accompanied by a curious relaxation in ethical standards extending all the way from the farmer-exploiters of this contraband labor to the highest levels of the Federal Government."

Years later, the late Herbert Brownell Jr., Eisenhower's first attorney general, said in an interview with this writer that the president had a sense of urgency about illegal immigration when he took office.

America "was faced with a breakdown in law enforcement on a very large scale," Mr. Brownell said. "When I say large scale, I mean hundreds of thousands were coming in from Mexico [every year] without restraint."

Although an on-and-off guest-worker program for Mexicans was operating at the time, farmers and ranchers in the Southwest had become dependent on an additional low-cost, docile, illegal labor force of up to 3 million, mostly Mexican, laborers.

According to the *Handbook of Texas Online*, published by the University of Texas at Austin and the Texas State Historical Association, this illegal workforce had a severe impact on the wages of ordinary working Americans. The *Handbook Online* reports that a study by the President's Commission on Migratory Labor in Texas in 1950 found that cotton growers in the Rio Grande Valley, where most illegal aliens in Texas worked, paid wages that were "approximately half" the farm wages paid elsewhere in the state.

Profits from illegal labor led to the kind of corruption that apparently worried Eisenhower. Joseph White, a retired 21-year veteran of the Border Patrol, says that in the early 1950s, some

senior US officials overseeing immigration enforcement "had friends among the ranchers," and agents "did not dare" arrest their illegal workers.

Walt Edwards, who joined the Border Patrol in 1951, tells a similar story. He says: "When we caught illegal aliens on farms and ranches, the farmer or rancher would often call and complain [to officials in El Paso]. And depending on how politically connected they were, there would be political intervention. That is how we got into this mess we are in now."

Bill Chambers, who worked for a combined 33 years for the Border Patrol and the then-called US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), says politically powerful people are still fueling the flow of illegals.

During the 1950s, however, this "Good Old Boy" system changed under Eisenhower - if only for about 10 years.

In 1954, Ike appointed retired Gen. Joseph "Jumpin' Joe" Swing, a former West Point classmate and veteran of the 101st Airborne, as the new INS commissioner.

Influential politicians, including Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson (D) of Texas and Sen. Pat McCarran (D) of Nevada, favored open borders, and were dead set against strong border enforcement, Brownell said. But General Swing's close connections to the president shielded him - and the Border Patrol - from meddling by powerful political and corporate interests.

One of Swing's first decisive acts was to transfer certain entrenched immigration officials out of the border area to other regions of the country where their political connections with people such as Senator Johnson would have no effect.

Then on June 17, 1954, what was called "Operation Wetback" began. Because political resistance was lower in California and Arizona, the roundup of aliens began there. Some 750 agents swept northward through agricultural areas with a goal of 1,000 apprehensions a day. By the end of July, over 50,000 aliens were caught in the two states. Another 488,000, fearing arrest, had fled the country.

By mid-July, the crackdown extended northward into Utah, Nevada, and Idaho, and eastward to Texas.

By September, 80,000 had been taken into custody in Texas, and an estimated 500,000 to 700,000 illegals had left the Lone Star State voluntarily.

Unlike today, Mexicans caught in the roundup were not simply released at the border, where they could easily reenter the US. To discourage their return, Swing arranged for buses and trains to take many aliens deep within Mexico before being set free.

Tens of thousands more were put aboard two hired ships, the Emancipation and the Mercurio. The ships ferried the aliens from Port Isabel, Texas, to Vera Cruz, Mexico, more than 500 miles south.

The sea voyage was "a rough trip, and they did not like it," says Don Coppock, who worked his way up from Border Patrolman in 1941 to eventually head the Border Patrol from 1960 to 1973.

Mr. Coppock says he "cannot understand why [President] Bush let [today's] problem get away from him as it has. I guess it was his compassionate conservatism, and trying to please [Mexican President] Vincente Fox."

There are now said to be 12 million to 20 million illegal aliens in the US. Of the Mexicans who live here, an estimated 85 percent are here illegally.

Border Patrol vets offer tips on curbing illegal immigration
One day in 1954, Border Patrol agent Walt Edwards picked up a newspaper in Big Spring, Texas, and saw some startling news. The government was launching an all-out drive to oust illegal aliens from the United States.
The orders came straight from the top, where the new president, Dwight Eisenhower, had put a former West Point classmate, Gen. Joseph Swing, in charge of immigration enforcement.
General Swing's fast-moving campaign soon secured America's borders - an accomplishment no other president has since equaled. Illegal migration had dropped 95 percent by the late 1950s.
Several retired Border Patrol agents who took part in the 1950s effort, including Mr. Edwards, say much of what Swing did could be repeated today.
"Some say we cannot send 12 million illegals now in the United States back where they came from. Of course we can!" Edwards says.
Donald Coppock, who headed the Patrol from 1960 to 1973, says that if Swing and Ike were still running immigration enforcement, "they'd be on top of this in a minute."
William Chambers, another '50s veteran, agrees. "They could do a pretty good job" sealing the border.
Edwards says: "When we start enforcing the law, these various businesses are, on their own, going to replace their [illegal] workforce with a legal workforce."
While Congress debates building a fence on the border, these veterans say other actions should have higher priority.
1. End the current practice of taking captured Mexican aliens to the border and releasing them. Instead, deport them deep into Mexico, where return to the US would be more costly.
2. Crack down hard on employers who hire illegals. Without jobs, the aliens won't come.
3. End "catch and release" for non-Mexican aliens. It is common for illegal migrants not from Mexico to be set free after their arrest if they promise to appear later before a judge. Few show up.
The Patrol veterans say enforcement could also be aided by a legalized guest-worker program that permits Mexicans to register in their country for temporary jobs in the US. Eisenhower's team ran such a program. It permitted up to 400,000 Mexicans a year to enter the US for various agriculture jobs that lasted for 12 to 52 weeks.