

Hilltop lessons on immigration

Congress should tighten borders to discourage potential illegals from entering the US.

Opinion

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VISTA, CALIF. – My cycling buddy, Julie, and I had just ridden up the Torrey Pines hills in San Diego, and were resting under the shade of the pine trees overlooking the beach when a small group of Mexicans strolled past.

Julie shifted and cleared her throat, "Tell me, as an economist, what do you think about legalizing illegals?"

I chuckled, stretched my legs, and told her about a call I received at 3 a.m. that day.

It was my cousin, Ifeoma, calling from Nigeria. She determined a long time ago to deliver all her babies in the US so they can all have American citizenship - "in the land of milk and honey," as she calls it. She's now three months pregnant with her first child. Her plan had been to arrive on a visitor's visa when her baby was almost due, drop the baby on US soil, and then go back. But now her plans have changed; having heard that the US Senate may grant amnesty to illegal aliens, she's in a hurry to arrive. And that was really the purpose of her early morning call.

"Should I hurry over to the US now so as to take advantage of President Bush's amnesty?"

I sat up on the bed to explain the facts. I said that even if the Senate bill passes into law (which is a big "if"), it won't benefit her since "amnesty" would apply only to those who'd been in the US for five years.

But Ifeoma was undaunted:

"In the meanwhile I can apply for welfare for my American baby and use my talent to supplement my income and who knows ... in a few years, American Congress may grant another Amnesty Act."

I informed her that it would be hard to get a job in America as an illegal alien. That didn't discourage her, either. "I can always braid hair."

Julie, my cycling friend, nodded and listened with religious attentiveness, and when I paused, she said, "Interesting. What makes her think there'd be another amnesty?" From there, the economics professor in me rose and took over.

The theory of rational expectations states that rational people tend to use all available information, as well as past experiences, in forming expectations about future government action. In this way, they learn to anticipate government policy changes and to act accordingly.

Let's apply this hypothesis to the current immigration debate. If Congress legalizes illegal aliens - without first securing the borders - economists who believe in rational expectations would argue that the policy would be ineffective. This is because potential illegal aliens (such as Ifeoma), would see what Congress is doing and raise their expectation of future legalization. Ifeoma's brother had arrived on a visitor's visa but stayed beyond, and then he benefited from the 1986 amnesty; her sister arrived in America six years ago on a visitor's visa and would benefit if Congress has its way. "That's why Ifeoma believes there'd be another amnesty," I ended. Unless, of course, the Senate acts differently this time around.

"So you don't support legalization?" Julie asked.

Oh yes, I do, I replied. It'd be impractical to round them all up and put them in the already congested jails or send them home (and then let in guest workers). They'd go underground, and the IRS would still lose tax revenues, while at the same time, the illegal aliens would continue to overtax our schools, hospitals, and welfare systems.

"But isn't it unfair to those other aliens who are playing by the rules?"

I reminded her about the landowner in Matthew 20:1-16, who had paid all the day laborers the same amount regardless of their time of arrival for work. When the early arrivals, who had "borne the burden and heat of the day," complained that the landowner gave the same amount of money to those who came late, the landowner replied (in the New International Version): "Are you envious because I'm generous?"

"Okay; be that as it may," Julie said, "What's the solution to illegal immigration into the US?"

An anti-illegal immigration campaign by Congress, I said, is more effective if it is seen as "credible." Such a campaign would be credible if Congress convinces people that it will "stick to its guns" this time around by tightening borders first and sending a strong message to potential illegal aliens such as my cousin, Ifeoma.

I'm not even sure that a fence is what it takes to successfully tighten the borders. It'd be much like an escaped prisoner who's had it behind bars and would chance climbing an electric fence rather than submit to one more day of inhuman conditions in jail. The poor Mexican would rather die trying to climb a border fence than sit by one more day watching his kids starve. But chances are, given how porous the borders currently are, he'd survive. He'd come over, get a job under the table, and send money back to Mexico to feed his kids.

Until we close all existing loopholes, illegal immigration will continue to be a reality of American life with the potential for terrorists slipping into the country, to boot. Until that time, these scenarios will continue to play out with rational- expectations predictability: Legalize illegal aliens every once in a while. More illegals immigrate. And Congress debates.