

*THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT*

## **Border fence bill a grand political deception**

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White House spin doctors are painting it differently, but it's becoming increasingly clear that President Bush's Republican Party, forced to choose between courting Hispanic voters or the xenophobic right in the race for the Nov. 7 congressional elections, has opted for the latter.

Last week, the Republican leadership in the Senate decided to shun Bush's previous proposal for a comprehensive immigration reform that was to contemplate both border controls and a path to citizenship for undocumented workers. Instead, the Senate leadership decided to put to a vote a much narrower bill that mirrors an insane proposal previously approved by the House to erect a 700-mile border fence along the border with Mexico.

The move came amid polls showing that Bush's party may lose one or both chambers of Congress in the November elections. A New York Times/CBS poll last week showed that only 25 percent of Americans approve of the GOP-controlled Congress.

Before I try to explain why the proposed fence extension is a monumental waste of money -- it's estimated to cost up to \$7 billion -- that will do nothing but temporarily placate the followers of Hispanic immigrant-allergic talking heads such as CNN's Lou Dobbs and Republican populist Pat Buchanan, let's spend a few seconds on the proposed legislation's current status.

The motion to proceed with the border fence vote was approved by 94-0 in the Senate, as Democrats did not want to be perceived as opposing enforcement measures with only six weeks to go before Election Day. The final vote is expected in coming days. Bush told CNN last week that if the fence bill is approved, "Yes, I will sign it into law. I would view this as an interim step."

White House officials claim that the president is not abdicating from his previous comprehensive immigration proposal, but is following a new strategy. By signing the bill into law, he would allow Republican congressional leaders to say they have done something to stop illegal immigration, which would in turn allow them to pass legislation to regularize the status of undocumented U.S. residents after the November elections, they say.

"This is crass election-year politics," says Frank Sharry, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, a moderate pro-immigration advocacy group. "In fact, it will make a bad situation worse: It's like giving an alcoholic a drink, thinking he will come to his senses later."

### **WHAT'S WRONG? PLENTY**

So what's wrong with a border fence to stop the flow of illegal immigrants, some of you may be asking by now. Aren't there already about the 12 million undocumented migrants in the country?

Yes, but the proposed border fence will make things worse. It will keep millions of unauthorized U.S. residents who periodically return to their native countries from going home, for fear of not

being able to return. What's more, it will encourage them to bring their relatives to live with them in the United States.

Since the early 1990s, when the U.S. government began building a 14-mile fence along the border in California, illegal immigration has soared. It has only pushed immigrants to cross the border farther east.

The proposed 700-mile fence along the 2,100-mile U.S.-Mexican border would just force migrants to cross the border through increasingly dangerous places (and, of course, it would push them to cross the border now, before the wall is erected).

And even if we built a 2,100-mile fence, would-be immigrants will come through tunnels, parachutes, or the 7,000-mile U.S.-Canadian border. Or more likely -- as is happening now -- they will continue coming through U.S. airports: a recent report by the Pew Research Center shows that, contrary to Time magazine's cover pictures of illegal aliens sneaking across the border under the cover of darkness, nearly 50 percent of unauthorized migrants enter the United States with legal visas, and overstay them.

My conclusion: There will be no end to the illegal immigration crisis unless we begin to narrow the per capita income gap between Latin America and the United States.

#### **HELP OUR NEIGHBORS**

The U.S. Congress should focus on U.S.-Latin America cooperation measures. For instance, it could deepen existing free trade agreements, or allow U.S. senior citizens to use their health insurance in certified hospitals in Latin America, which help reduce the U.S. budget deficit while boosting Latin America's health, tourism and housing industries.

Summing up, what Congress seems ready to vote on -- with Bush's green light -- is a 700-mile-long monument to political deception.