

EDITORIAL

Looking Over the Wall

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Congress has adjourned to plead for its re-election, having bequeathed to the nation a giant fence-building project as its official strategy for fixing the immigration problem. No doubt some voters will be reassured by the idea that covering 700 miles of the 2,000-mile southwestern border with razor wire and floodlights will solve this thing once and for all. But many others will continue to suspect that it is more complicated than that.

With a better start, this election year could have featured a rational debate about immigration policy that went beyond xenophobia and the fear of disorder caused by the presence of immigrant day laborers on suburban street corners. Americans — particularly those struggling to find decent jobs themselves — have a reasonable concern about what effect the presence of so many unplanned-for workers has had on the economy. They deserved to hear that talked about in a realistic way.

Last month the Center for Immigration Studies, a group that wants to reduce immigration, released a study that found that a sharp immigration increase in the last five years corresponded with a steep decline in the employment of young native-born Americans, particularly black men without high school diplomas. Last week in *The Times*, Rachel Swarns reported on the ways the booming population of Latinos in the Deep South — particularly Georgia — had left many black Americans resentful of the immigrants' comparative success.

But there is compelling evidence that instead of harming the economy, unskilled immigrants prop it up, filling jobs that better-educated Americans do not want and giving everyone access to cheaper goods and services. The case made by the Center for Immigration Studies is rebutted by other studies that have found that there is no nationwide

pattern of job displacement by illegal immigrants, and that immigration has broadly been a net plus to the nation. In Georgia, immigrant labor has kept textile mills, farms and service industries humming.

Right now across America, fruit is rotting on the ground because the crackdown along the border has created a shortage of immigrant workers needed for the harvest. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore stories of poor American workers who believe that their livelihoods were undermined by immigrants willing to work for below-subsistence wages, and of honest employers who could not compete with unscrupulous competitors using undocumented workers.

These serious problems will not be solved at the border with Mexico. Setting things right means adopting policies that fence-obsessed members of Congress have not exactly championed, like raising the minimum wage, improving public education, having a progressive income tax and making sure that workers' rights are protected.

These are only a few reasonable solutions. A host of others is offered in a new report by the Migration Policy Institute, in which Lee Hamilton, the former congressman, and Spencer Abraham, the former senator and energy secretary, argue that immigration needs to be seen as an integral element of a national economic policy. It is a resource to be embraced and managed, with a lawful, orderly flow of workers governed by flexible quotas set by a national commission advising Congress.

It's a comprehensive approach and then some. It offers a new way of framing a stalled debate. The wall builders have made their point, and it's a lousy one. Now it is time for those who want serious immigration reform to look beyond them.