

On immigration, snatch a victory

Senate defeat of a bill need not end efforts to bring both justice and fairness to current laws.

Opinion
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Both gloat and glum hang over Washington after last week's Senate defeat of the immigration bill. But now what? Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff has the best answer: Enforce current laws, however imperfect they may be.

"To regain the credibility with the American people that has been squandered over 30 years, we're going to have to be tough," he said, after losing a months-long struggle on Capitol Hill to pass immigration reform.

The squandering he refers to is the unfulfilled promise by several presidents to treat illegal immigrants with justice – and fairness.

The justice lies in better securing the border, timely deportation of those who break immigration laws, and sustained enforcement of laws against the hiring of illegal workers and against the forging of identification documents.

The fairness lies in finding more humane ways to conduct raids on work places with illegal workers, in better preventing exploitation of such migrants, and in not stepping on their basic civil rights.

President Bush has an opportunity to impel those US agencies that deal with immigration to better enforce the law. "A lot of Americans have lost faith in their government," said Sen. Jon Kyl (R) of Arizona, who helped negotiate the bipartisan bill. "They don't think we can control our borders. They don't think we can win a war. They don't think we can issue passports...."

Mr. Chertoff said he will work harder to fulfill last year's law that calls for 18,000 Border Patrol agents, 370 miles of border fencing, and a "virtual" fence of electronic surveillance. He's also persisting in creating a uniform standard for state driver's licenses.

And many Democrats and Republicans are ready to approve the \$4.4 billion that Mr. Bush requested for additional border security and workplace enforcement during the negotiations over the failed bill.

As this new push for enforcement squeezes the number of illegal aliens available for work, employers can better use the existing – and legal – channels to find the foreign employees they need to stay in business. Congress can also easily raise the quotas for the number of visas from each country.

More improvements are also needed for a 1996 federal program called Basic Pilot that helps employers check the legality of applicants. While the bill defeated last week had a provision for a more secure system of checking applicants, Basic Pilot can go much further in detecting fake Social Security information. In the meantime, a few states are toughening their own laws on worker eligibility.

All of these existing federal programs can be better funded by Congress as it heads to a Sept. 30 deadline for appropriations.

Immigration reform need not be another third rail of US politics like Social Security. Since Sept. 11, the number of Americans who worry a great deal about illegal immigrants has jumped from

15 percent to 45 percent. Most welcome more foreign workers, but they want them in the United States legally.

A consensus has been created out of this near miss on reform to correct the federal government's failure to meet its basic responsibility on immigration. Americans are in Missouriian show-me mood.

Now's the time to deliver. Then other immigration reforms can begin.