

The Immigration Swamp

As the presidential campaign intensifies, so does the nativist ferocity.

Editorial
The Washington Post
December 13, 2007

THE IDEA that 12 million illegal residents of the United States can be induced to quit the country en masse within four months is absurd on its face -- a non-starter in logistical, humanitarian, political, diplomatic, commercial and economic terms that would leave an indelible stain on this country for years. Yet that is the wrathful centerpiece of [Mike Huckabee's](#) "Secure America Plan," which the Republican presidential candidate issued the other day in the course of his party's escalating enthusiasm for nastier-than-thou prescriptions to deal with illegal immigrants.

Never mind that Mr. Huckabee, when he was governor of [Arkansas](#), actually pursued a pragmatic policy in regard to illegal aliens, urging that exemplary youngsters be eligible for scholarships to public universities even if they were undocumented because, as he put it, "we are a better country than to punish children for what their parents did." Having lately surged enough in the polls to sniff the sweet smell of success, he is not about to let experience, common sense or simple decency get in the way of short-term electoral advantage.

Mr. Huckabee was promptly rewarded for his reversal with an endorsement from [Jim Gilchrist](#), founder of the Minuteman Project, a group of xenophobes who spend their time videotaping and harassing day laborers wherever they find them. The candidate, apparently once fazed by the Minuteman group's vigilantism, said he had undergone a conversion and cravenly apologized for his past skepticism; Mr. Gilchrist, for his part, said of the Huckabee immigration program: "It was a plan I myself could have written."

It's a fair guess that this cruel campaign of immigrant-bashing will eventually turn toxic for the Republican Party itself, whose own strategists ([Karl Rove](#), among others) have long grasped the growing electoral clout of Hispanics. Those Hispanic voters, native-born or not, are anxious and angry about the intensifying nativist zeal in political rhetoric, which many are rightly blaming on the Republicans. In a new survey by the [Pew Hispanic Center](#), half of all Hispanics in America reported that the debate on immigration has had a specific negative impact on their lives; 41 percent said that they or someone close to them had suffered discrimination in the past five years -- up from 31 percent in 2002.

The new data undercut the Republicans' frequent protestations that their targets are not legal immigrants but illegal ones. The attacks have become so venomous, and the policy proposals so pernicious, that, predictably, they have caused collateral damage among Spanish-speaking and non-native-born people generally. The anti-illegal-immigrant

crowd would have us believe it honors and admires legal immigrants; in fact, it is making America a less hospitable place for them.

The candidates are stepping into a breach left by the colossal failure by Congress in June to enact comprehensive immigration reform, which held out the promise of calming a turbulent national debate. The bill would have tightened security at the borders; cracked down on employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers; established a legal mechanism for immigration for the hundreds of thousands of workers who enter the country each year to fill low-skill jobs; and provided a path to legal status for the illegal immigrants now living in America. It was a sensible response to a problem that will not be fixed by grandiose and far-fetched schemes such as Mr. Huckabee's -- cadged from an anti-illegal-immigrant think tank -- which goes heavy on enforcement and security but suggests no realistic plan to address the economy's appetite for immigrant workers in the future, let alone those here now.

Virtually all the presidential candidates now tip their hats to tougher enforcement of existing laws, with the Democrats generally differentiating themselves by saying or hinting that illegal immigrants might subsequently be offered a shot at legalization. But in Congress, some Democrats, mostly from red or purple states and wary of being attacked as insufficiently fierce on illegal immigration, are also going the enforcement-only route. A bill co-sponsored by freshman Rep. [Heath Shuler](#), a North Carolina Democrat, which seeks to purge undocumented immigrants from the work force, would probably drive millions of them further underground; nonetheless, he has attracted a few dozen sponsors from his own party.

Such measures, in addition to state and local legislation that would deny some benefits and services to illegal immigrants, are a response to understandable and legitimate concerns that the nation's borders are porous; that illegal immigrants are straining government services and budgets; and that neighborhoods are being degraded by flophouses, day laborers and immigrant gangs. But the rhetorical excess that has accompanied the proposals, and the suggestions that millions of people might be expelled or hounded from the country, not only respond to popular disquiet; they also whip it up. According to the latest [FBI](#) statistics, from 2006, hate crimes against Hispanics had increased by more than a third since 2003.

America has had its paroxysms of anti-immigrant fervor in the past, also accompanied by spasms of violence and persecution. Today, as in the past, the national atmosphere is subverting the discussion, drowning out reason. Look at the uproar that overwhelmed New York Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#)'s sensible, safety-minded proposal to make illegal immigrants eligible for driver's licenses, and you will see logic defeated by posturing, political cowardice and the poisonous diatribes of talk radio. Sen. [John McCain](#), the [Arizona](#) Republican who championed comprehensive reform, is now chastened by the ferocity of the demagogues who mischaracterized it as an "amnesty"; he says he "got the message" and will now speak only of enforcement in the near term. In such an ugly environment, the best one can hope for is candidates who can appeal to the nation's self-interest as well as its better instincts; who can explain that resolving the immigration mess through a comprehensive approach is not only an economic imperative but also the only realistic way out of a political swamp.