

Decency on Immigration

Apart from John McCain, it's hard to find that quality in the Republican presidential contest.

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THE SPEAKER was discussing the human face of illegal immigration. "People are continuing dying in the Sonoran desert, and it's just a very sad thing to see," he said. "One 3-year-old baby died, a 16-year-old girl with a rosary in her hand. There's a side of this that grieves me terribly. These are God's children. They're not from another planet, and the whole thing . . . frankly, this whole issue saddens me a great deal."

These statements were moving, but they would not have been especially remarkable except for the fact that the person speaking is a presidential candidate -- a Republican presidential candidate, in fact -- at a time when the campaign has taken a particularly toxic tone when it comes to the issue of immigration. In a meeting with Post editors and reporters the other day, Arizona Sen. [John McCain](#) described the toll that he believes his championing of comprehensive immigration reform took on his campaign. "It was the issue of immigration that hurt my campaign," he said. "I have not encountered a domestic issue that has provoked the emotional response that this issue does with a lot of Americans."

Indeed, even as Mr. McCain was speaking, his [GOP](#) rivals were busy turning an ugly immigration debate even uglier. Former [Massachusetts](#) governor [Mitt Romney](#), who said in 2005 he thought that the McCain-Kennedy comprehensive immigration approach was "sensible," and former [New York](#) mayor

[Rudolph W. Giuliani](#), who as mayor protected illegal immigrants from being reported to immigration authorities when they sought police protection or hospital care, competed to see who could sound toughest.

"As governor, I opposed driver's licenses for illegals, vetoed tuition breaks for illegals and combated sanctuary city policies by authorizing the state police to enforce federal immigration law," Mr. Romney said in a statement. "As president, I will secure the border and reject sanctuary policies by cities, states or the federal government."

The Giuliani campaign shot back, in a statement by communications director Katie Levinson: "On Governor Romney's watch, the number of illegal immigrants in Massachusetts skyrocketed, aid to Massachusetts sanctuary cities went through the roof and Governor Romney even went so far as to hire illegals to work on his lawn." Mr. Romney and former [Tennessee](#) senator [Fred Thompson](#) have also taken shots at former [Arkansas](#) governor [Mike Huckabee](#) for allowing the children of illegal immigrants in Arkansas to qualify for in-state tuition and academic scholarships if they graduated from high school there. As Mr. Huckabee told [Fox News](#), "the basic concept, and I

know this is still an anathema to some people, I don't believe you punish the children for the crime and sins of the parents."

Illegal immigration provokes strong emotions, understandably so. But it would behoove all the candidates to engage in a little less chest-thumping and speak with more of the decency and compassion that Mr. McCain exhibited.