

# Bush Leaves Mexico With Optimism, but No Agreements

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MÉRIDA, [Mexico](#), March 14 — President Bush left Mexico on Wednesday without reaching concrete agreements with the new Mexican president on a host of issues, from greater cooperation on attacking drug traffic to extending protections for Mexican farmers who grow corn and beans.

But as he sought to mend ties with Mexico, Mr. Bush vowed to step up his efforts to persuade Congress to approve a bigger guest worker program for Mexican migrants and to provide a path to citizenship for millions of immigrants living in the United States illegally, most of them from Mexico and Central America.

Mr. Bush said that the mood in Congress had changed and that he was optimistic that he could persuade moderate Senate [Republicans](#) to join Democrats to overhaul [immigration](#) laws. He said the proposed changes would create a border where trade would flow freely but criminals and terrorists would face stiff obstacles.

“A good migration law will help both economies and will help the security of both countries,” Mr. Bush said at a news conference here with President [Felipe Calderón](#). “If people can come into our country, for example, on a temporary basis to work, doing jobs Americans aren’t doing, they won’t have to sneak across the border.”

The meetings with Mr. Calderón were on the last stop on Mr. Bush’s weeklong tour of Latin America. At every stop, the American president tried to highlight the positive things the United States had done in the region, promoting democracy and free trade and providing \$1.6 billion in foreign aid.

Mr. Bush’s tour was widely seen in Latin America as an attempt to counter the growing influence of [Hugo Chávez](#), the leftist populist president of Venezuela. Mr. Chávez has been undermining United

States influence in the region, using his country's vast oil wealth to build an anti-Washington coalition of left-leaning heads of state.

Mr. Calderón is a conservative free trade advocate, but he made it clear at the news conference that he would remain neutral in the ideological battle. He said he would seek to re-establish full diplomatic ties with Venezuela, which were downgraded by his predecessor, Vicente Fox, a staunch ally of the United States.

"We are respectful of the heads of state of other countries, such as Venezuela, and certainly the United States," Mr. Calderón said.

On trade, the two leaders did not resolve the thorny issue of protections for small farmers here that are to expire next year. Mr. Bush said it would be a mistake to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, as many leftists here want.

Nor did the presidents make much real progress in coordinating the fight against drug dealers, though Mr. Bush did praise Mr. Calderón's tough stance against traffickers and pledged to do more to reduce the demand for drugs in the United States.

But the main focus of the talks appeared to be the perennial problem of illegal immigration — more than 400,000 Mexicans cross the border without papers each year.

Mr. Calderón has sharply criticized the United States for plans to build a 700-mile wall along the border. He maintains that policies aimed at bringing more investment to Mexico would be a better strategy to slow illegal immigration.

For his part, Mr. Bush, dogged by a scandal over the firings of federal prosecutors, seemed to embrace a chance to talk about immigration. He used the news briefing to send separate messages to his American and Mexican audiences.

He said his efforts to change immigration laws had been thwarted by the widespread perception in the United States that the current laws were not being enforced. That perception has changed, he maintained, as Congress and his administration have taken

measures to deport more illegal immigrants and to fortify the border, posting 6,000 members of the National Guard as sentinels.

He called on his fellow Republicans opposed to his guest worker plan to get behind it now that he has addressed their concerns about border security. He said he had dispatched his homeland security secretary, Michael Chertoff, and his commerce secretary, Carlos Gutierrez, to negotiate with Republicans, and suggested that the talks were focused on what to do about illegal immigrants already in the country.

“There’s got to be a middle ground, a reasonable way to deal with the 12 million people or so that have been in our country for a period of time,” Mr. Bush said. “And that’s where a lot of the discussions are taking place. And I think we can find a rational way forward, somewhere in between automatic citizenship and kicking people out of the country.”

Mr. Bush also had a message for his Mexican audience, urging patience as the American legislative process plays out. “I don’t know about Mexico, Mr. President,” Mr. Bush said with a wry smile, “but sometimes legislators, you know, debate issues for a while before a solution can be achieved.”

The differences of perspective on either side of the border were evident at the news conference, which was broadcast live on national radio here. A Mexican reporter asked Mr. Bush why people should believe that he could deliver a temporary-worker program after having failed to do so for six years. An American reporter asked Mr. Calderón if his relatives working in America were there legally, a question for which Mr. Calderón had a poignant answer.

“Yes, I do have family in the United States, and what I can tell you is that these are people who work and respect that country,” he said, his voice going misty. “They pay their taxes to the government. These are people who work in the field, they work with — in the fields with vegetables. They probably handle what you eat, the lettuce, et cetera.”

“I am from Michoacán,” he went on, “and in Michoacán we have four million people. Two million of these Michoacán natives are in the States. We want them to come back. We want them to find jobs here in Mexico. We miss them. These are our best people. These are bold people. They’re young. They’re strong. They’re talented.”