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PERSPECTIVES ON IMMIGRATION

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Sometimes Imperfect Reform is Better than Perfect Deportation

by Alfredo Gutierrez

I do a daily radio talk show on Radio Campesina in Phoenix and, clearly, since the November elections callers are once more allowing themselves to dream of the day their hard, hidden existence comes to an end. Their dreams are tentative and cautious, but nonetheless hope has been resurrected. Yet in Arizona hope is interspersed with anger. Four anti-immigrant referendums passed overwhelmingly, one of which, Proposition 300, will impose steep tuition increases for undocumented community-college and university students. Most legal observers believe it is constitutional. The only resolution lies now in the hands of Congress. Delay in passing comprehensive immigration reform, or at the very least the DREAM Act (which would provide a path to lawful permanent residence for hundreds of thousands of undocumented high-school graduates), will have immediate and tragic consequences for thousands of Latino kids in Arizona.

Arizona may be the very tip of the arrow of anti-immigrant racism and hostility, but unfortunately for America, the excesses of hatred are no longer limited to the desert. Hate is contagious. There are legalistic attempts to marginalize, exclude, fire, fine, jail, and deport undocumented workers throughout the United States. The "Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005," introduced by Representative F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr. and passed by the House of Representatives last year, was perhaps the most odious piece of legislation since the Japanese Internment Act. If the House of Representatives could debase itself to such depths, then it should be no surprise that many states, cities, and counties would take license and act accordingly. The onslaught seemed unstoppable...until November 7th. The Democratic majority in Congress now has in its hands the dreams of millions. Dreams are made of fragile stuff. Ignored or left unrealized, they can easily transmogrify into desperation and anger. A dream betrayed can crush a child, a family, indeed a whole people.

The heat of the debate on immigration reform has compelled each side to adopt euphemisms that lead to imprecision and confusion. Words are code to be deciphered by the protagonists. Thus those opposed to further immigration define "earned citizenship" or a "pathway to citizenship" as "amnesty." "Attrition," on the other hand, I construe to mean mass deportations. Now that our allies are in the majority, let us demand clarity. Immigrants deserve to understand precisely their fate under the contemplated reforms. The immigration-reform lobby in Washington has a special responsibility to communicate with those affected. The Latino community knows what it wants: for undocumented immigrants to be legalized with a path to citizenship. And it wants it now. Families were prepared to meet the rigors of the Kennedy-McCain bill. They are prepared to sacrifice if ultimately justice prevails.

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The responsibility of the Washington lobby for immigration reform is to do everything possible to make that dream come true. One hopes that peripheral issues can be set aside for another day. One such issue is the proposal for a new guest worker program. This proposal is highly controversial in certain circles. Mostly Chicano circles. But immigrant families view the debate as peripheral to their immediate needs. There is little or no objection to such a program. The U.S.-Mexico border wall recently approved by Congress is another such issue. Yes, I believe most of us find the proposal to be offensive. I also believe most Mexican immigrant families are realistic about conditions in Mexico: a substantial percentage of Mexicans perceive their President as illegitimate, the political upheavals in Oaxaca and the south threaten to spread across the country, increasing violence by drug gangs has risen to a barbarous level, anarchy prevails in much of the country, and the ruling class whistles blithely unconcerned. There is an acceptance by most immigrant families that conditions will worsen and the northern Diaspora will reach historic heights. The U.S. public's response will be to demand greater border security, a call which will only become louder and increasingly bipartisan. Whether it's done with walls, soldiers, or sensors, increased vigilance at the border is inevitable.

As the election campaigns came to a close, Democratic ads across the country took a surprising turn: they too began to bash immigrants. The ads focused on two specific points: first, that the candidate would "lead the fight against amnesty" and, second, that the candidate abhorred the idea that "illegals" have abused the Social Security system. The first claim I pray is merely code speak which, once deciphered, means that the candidate is for "earned citizenship." The second is more troublesome because virtually every undocumented person in America has gamed the Social Security system. They have also contributed billions of dollars in Social Security taxes without a thought of ever withdrawing a cent. I believe they will accept foregoing contributions made under false Social Security numbers. What cannot be accepted is if the use of false numbers becomes a barrier to status adjustment.

For a moment in April, when demonstrations in favor of immigration reform swept the country, hope flowered in our community. Then the words and the deeds of Representatives Tom DeLay and Dennis Hastert, of Sensenbrenner, J.D. Hayworth, Steve King, Mike Pence, Robert Ney, and dozens more Republican congressmen (who in some cases were consumed with hate and in others simply saw political advantage), trounced upon the dreams of the weakest among us. But they could not kill hope. The SEIU (Service Employees International Union), and SEIU Executive Vice President Eliseo Medina, were the most important forces both in organizing the marches in April and in subsequently mobilizing the United Farm Workers, the United Food and Commercial Workers, and hundreds of local organizations across the United States to get out the vote for the November elections. Their success can be measured in numbers, but it can also be felt in the voices of the callers each time we open up the phones. Despair and cynicism are giving way. That grand coalition in favor of immigration reform should be consulted when constructing a final package of laws. This is a case where those on the ground and on roofs, and in the furrows and in kitchens, and laundries, know better than those in the offices of the Washington immigration-reform lobby.

And one last thought: Democrats, based on polling and the wisdom of the entrenched political consulting class in Washington, unleashed those immigrant-bashing ads in the last few weeks of the campaign. The same pollsters and consultants may now advise Congress against the interests of our community. Were the democratic majority to ignore, delay, or pervert immigration reform, the consequences would be devastating for the party. 2008 would be a year of reckoning.

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