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Immigration reform: Knocking down political fences

It's possible to stick to an ideology and still be moral, compassionate

by **Linda Valdez, columnist** - Oct. 22, 2011 07:03 PM

TUCSON - This is about economics. It's about morality. It's about overcoming stereotypes - but not the ones you think.

What's more, solving the problem of illegal immigration has as much to do with getting Republicans to remember their ideological roots as it does with getting Democrats to act on their idealistic rhetoric.

And it wouldn't hurt to get everybody to "look in the mirror," as Mike Wilson recently told the Arizona Immigration Solutions.

The people standing behind you in that mirror, he said, are your immigrant ancestors.

"See how hungry they look. See the hope in their eyes," he said. "How dare we, as an immigrant nation, vilify and demonize the brown-skinned immigrant?"

Wilson is a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, which includes great stretches of southern Arizona desert where illegal border crossers frequently die trying to get to jobs or family in the United States. He has gotten crosswise with his tribal leadership for putting out water for the migrants, and he does not exclude himself from the immigrant class.

"We are all standing on the humble shoulders of immigrants," he said.

It was a remarkable comment - especially considering the Native American experience with European immigration.

But Wilson's comment was not the only challenge to the ruling stereotypes.

GOP presidential hopeful Herman Cain may get applause for proposing a lethal-force electric fence on the southern border. But the GOP wasn't always that way.

During a 1980 presidential forum, candidates George H.W. Bush and Ronald Reagan were asked whether the children of undocumented immigrants should be allowed to attend public schools for free.

Bush talked about the need for a solution "that would be so sensitive and so understanding about labor needs and human needs that that problem wouldn't come up; but today, if those people are here, I would reluctantly say I think they would get whatever it is that ... society is giving their neighbors."

He warned that "we are creating a whole society of really honorable, decent family-loving people that are in violation of the law."

Reagan called for a better understanding of Mexico.

"Rather than ... talking about putting up a fence," he said, "why don't we work out some recognition of our mutual problems, make it possible for them to come here legally, with a work permit, and then, while they are working and earning here, they pay taxes here?"

That glimpse back at a very different GOP was brought to the conference via a YouTube clip by Daryl Williams, a commercial litigation attorney and a proud Arizona Mormon.

So, knock out another stereotype: Williams cites his church as the source of moral arguments against such things as SB 1070, the Arizona law that was considered the meanest in the nation until Alabama went after schoolkids.

Williams said people have an "obligation and a duty" to oppose the kind of anti-immigrant rhetoric that has been around since the days when Ben Franklin warned against the pernicious influence of non-English-speaking German immigrants.

"I hope you all understand your responsibility to be moral about issues like this," the attorney said.

Williams, who says, "I'm to the right of Genghis Khan," questioned why the current immigration solutions, which involve more government regulation, "with all of its inefficiencies," were being put forward by those "who call themselves conservatives."

The Oct. 15 conference at which Williams spoke was the fourth of five meetings around the state designed to broaden the conversation about immigration. The conferences are sponsored by Arizona Employers for Immigration Reform, Real Arizona Coalition and One Arizona/Interfaith Leaders Coalition. The final conference will be held in Yuma on Nov. 12.

Dan Griswold of the libertarian Cato Institute, told the Tucson group that the enforcement-only policies of the recent decades have not worked for the same reason that Reagan's 1986 immigration reform did not work: They do not include a mechanism for migrants to enter the country legally to do work that the aging and increasingly well-educated American workforce rejects. They ignore economic realities.

But one thing about that 1986 reform did work. Amnesty was a success.

Research shows the wages of previously undocumented workers rose dramatically following legalization, according to Raúl Hinojosa-Ojeda of UCLA. Once these folks became part of the mainstream, they began to invest in their own human capital, taking GED and English classes to make themselves more employable. In a ripple-up effect, wages for native-born Americans also rose, he said.

Economic arguments also come from the left,

Democratic Rep. Raúl Grijalva told the conference his call for a boycott of Arizona after the passage of SB 1070 was done in "anger and very defensively." He renounced it.

Going forward, Grijalva said, "the meeting ground is going to be the economic ground." He is sponsoring a broad border infrastructure-improvement bill, HR 3049, that sees the U.S.-Mexican border not just as a source of trouble but as an economic engine.

The bill focuses on enhanced trade and port security. It offers an approach with wide appeal that can "break the ice," recast the arguments about immigration reform and make Arizona part of the solution, he said.

So, we have a conservative lawyer talking about weighing immigration reform on a morality scale. We have a progressive lawmaker looking at the border from an economic perspective. We have a Native American identifying with immigrants. We have Ronald Reagan arguing against fences. And we have the widow of a Phoenix policeman who should hate illegal immigrants but doesn't.

Julie Erfle, whose husband, Nick, a Phoenix police officer, was killed by an illegal immigrant in 2007, told the conference that she is "one of thousands and thousands of people whose lives have been shattered by a broken system."

But Erfle rejected the attempt to make her husband's death a rallying cry for the enforcement-only approach. She created a blog called Politics Uncuffed.com, which she uses to argue for solutions that go beyond "that danged fence."

"We all need to be the ones taking the microphone away from the bullies," she said.

She reserved special criticism for some elected officials - many of them Democrats: "We need to take a lash to politicians who say they favor comprehensive reform but do nothing."

The stereotype busters at this conference showed there is a lot more to talk about than the tired, old get-tough venom.

Immigration reform is about economics. It's about morality.

It's about Arizona's future.