FORTUNE

Trump's Immigration Plan Took a Well-Deserved Tumble. What's Next?

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February 16, 2018

The Trump administration repeatedly insisted during the Senate's immigration debate this week that it would not accept any plan that did not incorporate its pillars for reform. By the debate's end on Thursday, a bipartisan plan that would have provided a long path to citizenship for the Dreamers, significant funding for border enforcement, and some limits on family-based immigration failed to garner enough votes to pass. The president's preferred bill received far fewer votes, yet again stymying the Dreamers' 17-year quest for full membership in their nation.

The central pillar of the president's immigration agenda is an "impregnable" wall spanning the length of the U.S.-Mexico border. This idea began as a not "fully informed" campaign promise, and the U.S. public still largely opposes it. Successive administrations have built fencing along major crossing and smuggling routes, and there remains a need for increased infrastructure and screening capacity at ports-of-entry. Yet illegal entries have fallen to levels not seen since the 1970s.

The southwest border, according to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), "is more difficult to illegally cross today than ever before," and a forthcoming report by the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) will show that the U.S. undocumented population fell by nearly one million between 2010 and 2016. Moreover, as reported by CMS, twice as many newly unauthorized persons have entered legally and overstayed temporary visas since 2008, as have illegally crossed the southern border. The wall will do nothing to stop them. Moreover, the wall would be impossible to build in places, would require epic land seizures, and would have disastrous economic, environmental, and social consequences for border communities.

The United States already spends an immense amount on immigration enforcement: $19 billion a year on its two immigration enforcement agencies alone. This amount—which would rise to more than $24 billion under the administration's 2018 budget-— exceeds the combined budgets of all other U.S. federal law enforcement agencies and federal and state labor standards departments. By way of comparison, the United States spent $103 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars on the reconstruction of Europe after World War II. Robust border enforcement is needed, but it is also appropriate to ask whether the nation could use some of its enforcement dollars more effectively to address the conditions that drive migration.

The president campaigned against illegal migration, but his main immigration targets in office have been legal migrants and legal migration programs, particularly family-based immigration. Families are essential to the well-being of immigrants, to immigrant integration, and to the U.S. labor force. Yet according to the Cato Institute's Stuart Anderson and David Bier, the president seeks to cut *legal* immigration levels by 44%, the largest "policy-driven" decrease in nearly a century. Anderson points out that while the president argues for more "merit-based" immigration, his administration is widely seen as the most hostile in a half-century to employers that seek to hire highly skilled foreign workers.

The president has falsely claimed that the U.S. family-based immigration system allows a single immigrant to bring in "virtually unlimited numbers of distant relatives." In fact, it allows U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents (LPRs) to petition only for select *nuclear* family members. In addition, the family-based immigration categories slated for elimination are subject to strict numerical caps, and overall admissions under them have remained remarkably steady over the last 15 years. CMS's research shows that the U.S. immigration system produces the same ratio of *skilled* workers as that of the native population. In short, it produces necessary workers at all skill levels.

The president would also eliminate diversity visas, which he argues are "randomly" awarded "without any regard for skill, merit, or the safety of American people." Yet this program includes criminal, security, and health screening, as well as education and work requirements.

The administration has evidenced particular hostility to humanitarian programs. Beyond cutting refugee admissions to historically low levels, it has eviscerated the U.S. safe-haven program, temporary protected status (TPS), terminating TPS for 200,000 El Salvadorans and 50,000 Haitians, and lesser numbers of Nicaraguans and Sudanese. It has also ended a program that allowed refugee children from the Northern Triangle states of Central America to enter the U.S. legally to join their legally present parents.

A recent CMS profile of the DREAM Act-eligible found a long-term, highly productive population, with deep ties to the United States. More than 2.2 million U.S. residents would qualify for conditional residence under this act. Dreamers live in large numbers (5,000 or more) in 41 states. On average, they have lived in the United States for 14 years. About 65% work: Many are highly skilled and 70,500 are self-employed. About 88% speak English exclusively, very well, or well. They have 392,500 U.S. citizen children, and more than 100,000 are married to U.S. citizens or LPRs. Nearly 30% have attended college or received a college degree, a figure that will rise dramatically as this population ages. States and localities have already invested $150 billion in educating the Dreamers and, by virtually every indicia—education, employment, self-employment, tax revenues, and U.S. family ties—the return on this investment would increase with legal status. All it takes is for Congress to pass and the president to sign the DREAM Act.