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Immigration: Good fences still make for good neighbors

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A Washington public-policy expert spoke not too long ago at the Augusta Metro Chamber of Commerce's economic luncheon.

His topic was immigration reform. Anyone in the audience hoping for a talk advocating more aggressive border enforcement and increased deportation of illegal aliens was probably a little disappointed by the time they dug their forks into the vegetable medley.

But, hopefully, they left the luncheon a little more enlightened – I know I did.

The expert du jour was Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration-policy analyst for the Cato Institute, a think-tank whose mission is to "increase understanding of public policies based on the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace."

Obviously, the group skews to the right. But when it comes to immigration, it takes a more progressive "open borders" stance.

Nowrasteh is all about fixing our illegal immigration problem by fixing our *legal* immigration problem. He says the process to legally enter the United States is overly complex, mired in bureaucracy and all but guarantees low-skilled workers will have no shot at legal employment.

This is why immigrants tend to be bookends – mostly illegal and low-skilled workers from Latin America on one side and mostly legal, highly skilled workers from Asia on the other.

To illustrate his point about red tape, he handed out a headache-inducing one-page flow chart describing the myriad steps, sub-steps and sub-sub-steps required to legally reside and work in the United States. I've seen wiring schematics for complex machinery that were easier to understand.

He said work visa programs such as H-2A, H-2B and H-1B – onerous programs that have been made even worse under the Obama administration – are so prohibitive that they practically encourage employers to hire illegals. Seasonal restrictions on foreign guest-worker programs, for example, ensures virtually every immigrant working in year-round agricultural industries, such as milk production, are illegals.

"At just about any U.S. dairy farm, more than 90 percent of the people working there are in the country illegally," Nowrasteh said.

In a recent survey of Georgia farmers, only 3.4 percent of respondents used the H-2A program because overbearing regulations excluded most others from eligibility. The remainder said they didn't bother applying because of the negative things they heard about the program.

These overly rigid rules, he says, is why we have 11 million people unlawfully residing, working and mooching in the United States. Solving the mooching problem isn't too difficult, Nowrasteh said – simply make immigrants ineligible for welfare benefits.

“If you are worried about immigrants on welfare, the easier solution would be to build a wall around the welfare state instead of around the country,” he said.

The "wall" we have around the country is not working, he says, despite a nine-fold increase in Border Patrol agents since 1980. A 2013 Government Accountability Office report said the U.S. Border Patrol only intercepts about 61 percent of illegal border crossers. That means roughly four of every 10 keep on truckin' to a neighborhood near you. It's a numbers game.

Nowrasteh advocates creating something similar to the "Bracero" guest worker program the U.S. had for Mexican agricultural workers in the 1950s and early 1960s. Back then there were only 2 million illegal immigrants.

Under Bracero, a Spanish term for "laborer," immigrants were essentially photographed and issued legal work permits on the spot, a process so easy that nobody had an incentive to enter illegally and work "under the table."

The United States had fewer border guards and fences because they didn't need them. A similar situation existed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when nearly every peaceful and healthy immigrant who passed through ports such as Ellis Island got accepted into the U.S. virtually bureaucracy-free.

The Bracero program was eventually done in by advances in agricultural mechanization and biotechnology, which reduced the need for human labor, and the unionization of farm workers by left-wing darling Cesar Chavez, who extracted higher wages for members of his United Farm Workers by draining the labor pool of nonunion workers.

So that pretty much brings us to the present. Your two choices for coming to America are: a) be a chump and hire an attorney to guide you through a lengthy labyrinth of bureaucracy; or b) hop the fence with nine others and hope you're one of the lucky four who gets away.

The attractive thing about option "b" is that it's free and there are no limits on game play. Keep trying and you'll eventually win. Remember, it's all a numbers game.

I was one of those people in the audience who favor more aggressive border enforcement and increased deportation –real deportation, not the Obama administration version where illegals turned away away at the border count.

Though I found Nowrasteh's presentation educational and walked away persuaded by his position on legal immigration reform, I still believe genuine enforcement of existing immigration laws should remain a priority.

Start with the U.S.-Mexico border, the entryway for the vast majority of the country's illegal immigrants. This 2,000-mile section of the U.S. border is not now, nor has it ever been, secure. I spent two decades living in the Southwest, trust me on this one.

Here's one tale from the vault: A college buddy and I once visited the border town of Nogales, Ariz. We happened upon a huge hole in "the fence" big enough to drive a small truck through. We walked up to it, looked around, then giggled like idiots as we walked through to illegally enter the United States. Then we walked back through to illegally enter Mexico.

We did this back-and-forth routine for a few minutes until the novelty wore off and we decided to go back to doing the kinds of things 19-year-old Americans do in border towns. As we were leaving, a Mexican with a backpack rode past us on a bicycle, pedaling through the fence into America.

This breach, by the way, was less than a quarter-mile from the official port of entry.

Now, I'm sure this hole has been fixed sometime in the past 20 years, but I'm willing to bet there's another one just like it within a mile in either direction.

There will always be holes in the fence as long as we lack the political will to ensure there isn't. It's that simple. There are powerful forces in this country that don't want a secure border, just the illusion of one.

Clearly, the issue is political, not logistical. Do you really believe a nation that is technologically and financially capable of operating a remote-control robot on the surface of Mars somehow lacks the chops to build and maintain a security fence?

Show me a person who believes that and I'll show you a moron, or a Democrat politician.

Every time this country tries to get even semi-serious about border security – the last time being the Secure Fence Act of 2006 – there is political pushback, internally and externally.

There are domestic groups – everyone from big businesses to public-sector employee unions – whose livelihood, profits or political power is dependent on the steady flow of low-skilled and undereducated brown people.

Then there are the foreign governments whose economies are more than a little dependent upon the \$70 billion a year these illegal workers send home every year. Honduras, for example, has a mind-blowing 20 percent of its gross domestic product tied to remittances.

And let's not forget mainstream media, whose reporters who are eager to give their liberal self-esteem a boost by producing two-hanky pieces on the humanitarian plight of Pedro and Lupe (and more recently on their unaccompanied minor children) yet have virtually no interest in reporting the very real and non-emotional ramifications of their illegal sojourn.

This illegal immigration game we play – it's all so silly, really. Can you think of another public-policy issue that has been so undeservedly complicated?

I mean, either we have borders and laws, or we don't. Residents are either here legally, or they are not. You're either a citizen, or you are not. People living here legally get to stay. People living here illegally have to go. Is this not how it's supposed to work?

Unless you are blinded by ideology or money interests, or a tenured professor, that's probably how you see it too.

The contemporary politics of immigration are not uniquely American. People from poor and dysfunctional nations have been flooding prosperous and well-governed ones for decades. To the immigrant, the name of the country, its history and its endemic culture is immaterial. What's crucial is that the nation have a gullible government, a compliant native population and a robust welfare system.

Proximity, of course, also plays a role. It's safe to say that if it weren't for the Atlantic Ocean, a good number of the Mexican and Central American peasants streaming into the United States would instead choose England or France, as the Muslims from east Asia and Africa already do.

The issue of immigration, both legal and illegal, has turned into a major issue because the decades-old numbers game is starting to mean something.

Countries struggling with high unemployment and underfunded services are finally starting to question the wisdom of allowing even more people into already-tight labor markets.

Prosperous nations are finally questioning the sustainability of a system in which large numbers of illegal workers remit substantial portions of their off-the-grid earnings to their homelands while living off social services paid for by legal, on-the-grid residents.

Democratically peaceful peoples are finally questioning the logic of admitting unlimited numbers of foreigners who refuse to assimilate yet demand extreme tolerance and accommodation for their own belligerent and retrograde cultures.

Look at it this way: Think of a nation as a bowl of soup and immigrants as salt. Put a little salt in the bowl, and you have a more flavorful soup. But put in too much and you disrupt the flavor. And if you keep pouring it in, you no longer have soup, just a bowl of salty mush.

In America right now, people are complaining the soup is too salty. And this is a country that likes its salt.

This brings us back to Nowrasteh's talk. He sees immigration as vital to our economy – which I agree with, more or less – and says we should make it so easy for people to come here legally that it's foolish to do so any other way.

The workers come out of the shadows, the businesses don't have to play games, the economy grows, the government gets its share and everybody wins, or thereabouts. If we stick with the soup analogy, his recipe for avoiding salty mush is expanding the size of the soup bowl.

I agree with him on that. I mean, who doesn't want more soup?

But I also don't believe we've done enough to keep salt from sneaking into the bowl, or removing the salt that's already in the bowl.

By all means, lets make the soup bowl bigger, but can we first put a cap on the salt shaker?