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No poor and huddled need apply

By: Dana Milbank – May 6, 2013

Heritage Foundation President Jim DeMint prefaced his condemnation of immigration legislation Monday with the same form of inoculation conservatives often use on such occasions: He quoted Emma Lazarus.

“There’s a statement at the bottom of the Statue of Liberty,” said the former Republican senator who just took over as chief of the powerful think tank. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses . . .”

He and his colleagues then went on to outline their version of immigration reform: No poor and huddled need apply.

“We feel that the best immigration system is one that focuses on bringing high school [graduate] immigrants in,” said Robert Rector, the Heritage scholar seated beside DeMint for the rollout of a new study on the costs of immigration. “We think the proper policy is that you shouldn’t be bringing immigrants into the U.S. that by and large are going to impose additional costs on U.S. taxpayers by getting more benefits than they pay in taxes,” he explained.

DeMint called this a “merit-based” system in which those who are skilled and can pay their way are admitted. “A properly structured, merit-based lawful immigration system holds the potential to drive positive economic growth and increase the standard of living of American citizens,” he said at a news conference announcing the report. “We need an immigration system that attracts workers our economy needs and encourages patriotic assimilation.”

Latinos have been suspicious of Republicans in part because they assume that conservatives’ desire to crack down on illegal immigration may extend to legal immigration as well. Republicans invariably proclaim that they are big fans of legal immigration. But the Heritage doctrine undermines that, because it would sharply curtail Hispanic immigration — legal and illegal alike.

Of the Mexican-born people in the United States age 25 and older, nearly 60 percent didn’t graduate from high school, according to a Pew Hispanic Center compilation of census data. Among Central Americans, the figure is 50 percent. To shun those without high school diplomas would dramatically reduce eligibility among Latinos.

Rector acknowledged that “all immigration in fact does make a larger GDP.” But, he added, “the question is fiscally whether they pay more in taxes than they take out in benefits. College-educated immigrants do that. Other immigrants do not.”

Even the second generation doesn't pay its way, he argued, citing "very sophisticated data on the expected upward mobility based on historical averages of kids given their ethnicity and their parents' education level."

Many on the right have a more favorable view of immigration's economic benefits, including economist Douglas Holtz-Eakin, activist Grover Norquist and the Cato Institute. Heritage argued the opposite position in 2006, calling for a "comprehensive" reform and arguing that "the real problem presented by illegal immigration is security, not the supposed threat to the economy."

I've known Rector since the welfare-reform debate of the 1990s, and although many quibble with his methodology and his conclusions, I admire his honesty. When I asked at Monday's news conference whether his conclusions would apply to legal immigrants, he answered "yes" even before I could get the whole question out.

"By and large, a person that doesn't have a high school degree creates huge costs for other taxpayers," he said. "It doesn't matter whether he's born in Kansas, whether he's a legal immigrant or whether he's an illegal immigrant." In fact, "the unlawful immigrants are slightly cheaper at the present time because the adults don't have access to means-tested welfare."

From a purely fiscal point of view, Rector said in response to another question, from Roll Call's David Drucker, the current immigration system, with 11 million here illegally, "is an enormously better deal for the taxpayer."

But even if you accept Heritage's calculations, immigration isn't purely a fiscal question. If Republicans don't find a way to deal with illegal immigrants in the country, they risk political oblivion as the swelling ranks of Latino voters turn against them. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) recognized this in reaching a bipartisan agreement to allow legalization — a proposal being denounced by the right.

DeMint, who once championed Rubio, joined in the denunciation of the legislation on Monday. He called the bill "pretty much an open checkbook" and "another large, incomprehensible bill like Obamacare." He repeatedly decried it as "amnesty" and said it was based on fiscal "tricks."

"The only approach that can work at this point is to have a piece-by-piece approach to create a merit-based, selective, lawful immigration system," he said.

Never mind the rest of that Lazarus inscription DeMint cited, the bit about accepting "the wretched refuse" and the "homeless, tempest-tossed." Now they'll need a diploma.