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Deflating the Myths About Immigration in the U.S.

By ALBERT R. HUNT

WASHINGTON — In an America full of irresolution, one certainty: The [immigration](#) situation will be worse a year from now.

The politicians have no intention of addressing this issue in this election year; President [Barack Obama](#)'s recent call for action was about politics, not legislating; his Justice Department's suit against Arizona's anti-immigrant measure, however sound, ends any slim hope for bipartisan action. Most Republicans are pandering to an anti-immigrant base and opposing the president on virtually everything.

Two interesting new books, "A Country for All," by Jorge Ramos, and "Brain Gain," by Darrell West, chronicle what a debacle this situation is.

Mr. Ramos, the anchor of Univision Communications, the largest Spanish-language television network in the United States, conveys the rage many Hispanics feel over the debate and the portrayal of undocumented workers as "illegal aliens."

"They accept working conditions that no legal citizen can imagine," he writes. "They clean up after us in public bathrooms," and "they are the nannies" nurturing future presidents and actors and athletes.

Mr. West, a former university professor now at the [Brookings Institution](#) in Washington, offers a scholarly critique and innovative suggestions for a new policy focused more on economic and employment considerations.

“Practically no one is happy with the administration of the country’s immigration laws,” he says. The current policy is a disaster. There are about 12 million undocumented workers in the United States, up 40 percent from 10 years ago and triple the number in 1990. The United States is deporting about 300,000 people a year; more than that enter illegally. The Center for American Progress, a liberal research organization based in Washington, estimates it would cost \$300 billion to deport those who are in the United States illegally, not to mention the logistical and emotional agony.

It has gotten worse since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, led officials to try to crack down. The number of visas for highly skilled workers is less than half what it was in 2001, and every year there are promising students from abroad admitted to U.S. universities who cannot come because of the bureaucratic hurdles. Those who do often are not allowed to stay after graduation.

The immigration debate has always been affected by economic insecurities and nativist fears; terrorist threats have been added, although none of the perpetrators of the 2001 attacks entered the country illegally. These threats are cited by proponents of the plan to build a fence along the 1,925-mile, or 3,080-kilometer, border with Mexico, a proposal that no one thinks will work.

“If you build a 12-foot fence,” Governor [Bill Richardson](#) of New Mexico has said, “you’ll get a lot of 13-foot ladders.”

In the unlikely event it works, Mr. Ramos writes, “we would quickly enter the age of the Mexican *balsero*, or boat person.” The 12,383-mile U.S. coastline and 5,525-mile border with Canada dwarf the Mexican border. Any terrorist is certainly aware of the Canadian border and the coastline.

Another canard that Mr. Ramos and Mr. West expose is the immigrant crime scare. Illegal immigrants actually commit fewer crimes than U.S. citizens, as they often “make an effort to avoid any sort of legal situation,” says Mr. Ramos. “A sad consequence of this is that they will even let abuses or crime against them go unreported.”

The same misperception persists on the economic impact. Almost every reputable study — the [National Science Foundation](#), the Rand Corporation, the [Cato Institute](#) and numerous academic efforts — suggest that immigrants contribute more to economic output and taxes than they cost

in services.

Mr. West argues, however, that an effective immigration policy should focus more on economic impact. In the sweeping 1965 immigration law, which ended more than four decades of restrictive immigration policies, the centerpiece was family unification. That was good policy; it is well established that intact nuclear families do much better economically and socially than separated ones. This, Mr. West says, has been demonstrated for parents and children, not for aunts, uncles and cousins, many of whom have come to the United States under the umbrella of family unification.

Currently, about 64 percent of the roughly one million new, legal permanent residents each year come in under the family banner; about 15 percent come for economic reasons, ranging from high-tech skilled workers to seasonal farm workers, and most of the rest for political reasons.

The problem, Mr. West notes, is that this policy “slights competing priorities that are vital to the long-term future of the country.” Simply by limiting family-sponsored visas to nuclear family members, Mr. West believes that as many as 160,000 more engineers, scientists, mathematicians, computer specialists or farm workers could be given residence each year without disrupting any core family preferences. This economic priority is the centerpiece of immigration policy in countries like Canada.

The contribution that immigrants make to the United States’ economic success is an underreported story in a media that focuses too much on sensational, often misleading, pieces.

Four of the most recognizable high-tech companies in the United States — Google , Yahoo, Intel and EBay — were founded by immigrants. Citing [Sergey Brin](#), a Russian immigrant who co-founded Google in 1998, Mr. West asks, “How would we feel if Google had been invented in Russia, which would then be the world leader in search engines?”

Despite such success stories, experts acknowledge that nothing is likely to change soon. There is no political will or consensus to deal with a pathway to citizenship for most of the undocumented immigrants now in the United States, and the problem will only get worse.

This is welcome news for the immigration bashers, who have well-known predecessors: 19th-

century organizations like the Know-Nothing Party and the Supreme Order of Caucasians; the architects of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, or the 1921 measure setting immigration quotas by national origin; the employers who flaunted “Irish Need Not Apply” signs; those who interned Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor was attacked, or who used the 2001 attacks as a blanket excuse to assail immigrants.

There is one other certainty: History is never kind to nativists.

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