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## **ARTHUR FOULKES: Tough immigration controls have unintended negative consequences**

*Arthur Foulkes*

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TERRE HAUTE — How to deal with illegal immigration is definitely a hot topic right now.

In addition to Arizona's controversial new immigration law, President Obama recently authorized the sending of an additional 1,200 National Guard troops to the U.S.-Mexico border.

Under former President George W. Bush, the United States began construction of a "border fence" to attempt to keep out illegal immigrants. President Bush also authorized the sending of thousands of troops to the border, as did his predecessors back to the late 1980s.

Attempting to gain entry into the United States in search of a better life is something many Mexicans, Central Americans and others are willing to do, even risking their lives in the process. In the past two weeks, U.S. border agents have killed two Mexicans entering the country illegally, the most recent a 15-year-old boy.

I've heard supporters of tougher laws regarding illegal immigration argue that their ancestors entered the country legally, so why can't today's illegal immigrants do the same? The answer is, things are not the same today.

Prior to about 1920, the United States was almost completely open to immigrants (with rare exceptions such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882). Today, things are much different, especially for immigrants with few skills. Currently, the United States grants just 5,000 low-skilled, legal resident visas each year.

This means that legal entry is currently not an option for the hundreds of thousands of low-skilled people who would like to enter the United States to find work. As a result, many of these people risk their lives crossing dangerous terrain, pay human traffickers or find other illegal ways to enter the country.

Combating illegal immigration by spending billions of dollars on border security and expanding the power of government officials to determine who may enter the United States is not a very attractive solution for a free society.

An alternative is to grant far more legal residence visas and concentrate border security on actual criminals or suspected terrorists.

Some people object to allowing more immigrants into the country for economic reasons. They believe these new immigrants “take American jobs” and depress the wages of American workers.

Yet the United States has absorbed new workers and immigrants for most of its history and managed to prosper at the same time. In its 2009 Handbook for Policymakers, the Cato Institute notes that, by historical standards, the number of immigrants entering the country currently is actually quite low. The period between the 1830s and 1920s saw a far larger influx of immigrants as a percentage of the native population.

Furthermore, if immigrant workers take jobs away from native-born workers, then the same ought to be true when any new workers enter the labor market. But, as Suffolk University economist Benjamin Powell notes, the U.S. labor market has grown to 150 million today from about 60 million in 1950. “Yet there has been no long-term increase in the unemployment rate” over that period. “As more people enter the labor force, more people get jobs.”

Some native-born American workers do experience a slight decrease in wages due to illegal immigration. Studies by the National Research Council and the National Bureau of Economic Research have found that low-skilled immigrants exert a small negative effect on wages of American workers without high school diplomas. This group accounts for about 7 percent of the native-born adult workforce.

But, on the whole, immigrants of all sorts actually add to national productivity and wealth, which means they help boost standards of living across the board. Harvard economist George Borjas estimates native-born citizens experience an annual increase in real income due to immigrants of about 0.2 percent each year.

The estimated 400,000 illegal immigrants who enter the United States each year have a very small effect on most wages paid in America because these immigrants often are filling jobs that would otherwise not exist. For example, as Powell notes, about 33 percent of U.S. garment workers are immigrants. If garment manufacturers were required to pay higher wages (in order to attract a 100 percent-native-born workforce) those manufacturers likely would move their operations overseas.

Ball State University economist Michael Hicks puts it this way: “The work done by illegal immigrants is work that mostly would not otherwise be done without them. It is a pure gain to our economy.”

Other problems associated with illegal immigration would be solved by making it easier for peaceful immigrants to cross the border. Human trafficking, which is basically the smuggling of illegal workers into a country, would be eliminated along with the abuses to those being smuggled. And poor working conditions associated with illegal immigrants also would be eliminated or significantly reduced because these workers would be free to quit their jobs and look for other opportunities.

Those risking their lives to cross the U.S. border to improve their lives are no different from immigrants of generations ago. Only the laws have changed; they should be changed again.

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