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Immigration situation, debate are debacles

By Albert R. Hunt
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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 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 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.

Ramos, the anchor of Univision Communications, the country's largest Spanish-language television network, 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.

West, a former university professor now at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., 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 Washington research group, estimates it would cost \$300 billion to deport those who are here illegally, not to mention the logistical and emotional agony.

It's gotten worse since the Sept. 11 attacks caused officials to try to crack down. The number of visas for high-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 can't come because of the bureaucratic hurdles.

The immigration debate always has been affected by economic insecurities and nativist fears; terrorist threats have been added, although none of the Sept. 11 perpetrators entered the country illegally. This is cited by opponents of the plan to build a fence along the 1,925-mile border with Mexico, a proposal that few think would work.

"If you build a 12-foot fence," New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson has said, "you'll get a lot of 13-foot ladders." In the unlikely event it works, 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.

Another canard that Ramos and 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 Ramos.

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

Yet nothing's likely to happen soon. There is no political will or consensus to deal with a pathway to citizenship for most of the undocumented immigrants here now, and the problem will only get worse.

Albert R. Hunt is the executive editor for Washington at Bloomberg News.

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