

4 of 13 DOCUMENTS

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Immigrants are an asset

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Back in the 1850s, Ireland experienced quite a famine. It was not an unusual thing for people on the Emerald Isle to be in severe want of basic necessities such as food.

That is how my great-grandfather, Jeremiah Lynch, came to Alabama in 1852.

Waves of European immigrants were often greeted with profanity and violence. The Know-Nothings emerged as a political movement that was stridently opposed to the newcomers. Much of the mistrust was directed at their Roman Catholicism, although German Lutherans also were suspect.

Of course, there was never any real danger. Jerry Lynch became a Confederate Army officer and, after the unpleasantness, a policeman in Mobile, Ala. A notorious vaudeville act came out of this noble line and also there is warm, lovable me. As you can readily observe, despite what some might say, immigration is a good thing.

The new Arizona law forces the issue. Under this statute, police are required to question those who might be suspected of being here illegally. The measure contains a provision prohibiting racial profiling. That will certainly be a comfort to lawful residents and citizens who may be inconvenienced because of whatever it is that is supposed to trigger the mandatory interrogation.

There has been far too much emotional reaction and name-calling as a result of this development. Arizona has a legitimate grievance that is the result of long-standing neglect. For decades, the practical policy of the United States government was to encourage cheap labor.

While the long-standing process appears to have been intended as an encouragement for short-term employment in low-skill jobs, it apparently has evolved into something else. Many of the undocumented workers have decided to remain indefinitely.

Meanwhile back in Mexico, the economy is in the tank, drug cartels are stirring things up and the smart money is on getting out. That probably oversimplifies the situation, but it points to our ill-conceived national drug policy and the pressing need for immigration reform.

Arizona's new law is a temporary fix. It's a bad idea, poor public policy and a cry for assistance. The border states are having all sorts of troubles and it is completely unhelpful to ignore the obvious.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, has been considering this puzzle and the results may be surprising. Professor Peter B. Dixon and senior research fellow Maureen T. Rimmer at Monash University in Australia have examined potential outcomes of various proposals for dealing with illegal workers.

You can locate the study online at the Cato site. It is titled, "Restriction or Legalization? Measuring the Economic Benefits of Immigration Reform." Look it up. The authors propose that more restrictive actions on illegal workers have a negative economic effect.

The research also finds that legalization of low-skilled immigrant workers would mean financial gains for American households. According to the study, such a scenario would "eliminate smugglers' fees and other costs faced by illegal

immigrants. It would also allow immigrants to have higher productivity and create more openings for Americans in higher skilled occupations. The positive impact for U.S. households of legalization under an optimal visa tax would be 1.27 percent of GDP or \$180 billion." Is it possible that Dixon and Rimmer know what they are talking about? The Cato Institute seems to think so and, while far from infallible, it has been around since 1977. Cato generally supports free speech and civil liberties, but often ends up on the side of big business.

The notion of permitting some degree of legalization deserves our attention because experience teaches us that immigrants become contributors. The current scheme, unfortunately, prevents undocumented workers from becoming full participants in the American economy.

The individuals that would be encouraged to settle here lawfully bring strong families and outstanding values. These people are not strangers. They are generally young and hard working. Did I mention that these folks will be paying taxes and contributing to Social Security? It never hurts to be a little selfish.

President Obama has begun a national discussion on immigration reform and he seems to have started where former President George W. Bush left off. Both took a reasonable position, and Bush caught four kinds of Hades for his trouble. Obama is bound to get double.

The lawsuit against Arizona is a distraction. If immigration is a federal issue, as the administration contends, where is the central government? The answer is that for decades national leadership has been all tied up with political timidity. Government is afraid to stand up to either business interests or the shrill voices of distrust.

The Arizona statute and similar measures proposed elsewhere, including Arkansas, only point toward a larger failure to reasonably approach a serious situation. The undocumented workers that provoke so much concern are a national asset. Instead of being humiliated and interrogated, they should be included.

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