



TOM LUCENTE: Anti-immigrant hysteria is un-American

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By THOMAS LUCENTE JR.

"Papers, please."

Don't be surprised if you hear that from some government lackey in the near future.

I'm referring, of course, to a new law in Arizona intended to clamp down on illegal immigration, a law The Economist correctly referred to as "hysterical nativism."

It always amazes me to see such anti-immigrant fervor in a nation of immigrants. Even the American Indians, often erroneously referred to as Native Americans, were immigrants to this land, having emigrated from Asia over the Bering land bridge thousands of years ago.

The new law, sponsored by Arizona state Sen. Russell Pearce and which goes into effect this summer, essentially takes a federal issue and makes it a state crime.

It requires police officers, rather than federal agents, to make arrests and check the immigration status of those who look suspicious. In other words, if you're a Hispanic or some other foreign-looking person in Arizona, police officers can, for no other reason, demand that you prove your citizenship.

If you happen to be an American citizen of Hispanic descent and you inadvertently left your identification at home, you could find yourself in a federal jail cell until you can prove your innocence.

I remember the halcyon days when people were innocent until proved guilty.

Pearce, like a mindless automaton, likes to point out that "illegal is not a race, it is a crime." While it makes for an effective sound bite, it really is an injustice to the complexity of the issue.

The immigration issue is, by its very nature, a federal one.

Unfortunately, the immigration issue has been dominated for decades by a xenophobic minority clamoring to close the borders.

That is simply not the American way. Perhaps some of you have heard of the sonnet "The New Colossus," which is inscribed on a brass plaque and mounted inside the Statue of Liberty.

One part of the poem expresses nicely the traditional American sentiment toward immigrants:

"Give me your tired, your poor

"Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

"The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

"Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,

"I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Contrast that with the dirty little secret that America's immigration police have the authority to lock people up for years without a trial. In fact, some illegal immigrants will spend the rest of their lives in jails simply because they are stateless with nowhere to go.

It is clear the immigration problem will never be solved by locking people up and throwing away the key.

Simple math dictates that the United States will continue to draw illegal immigrants. The U.S. economy creates hundreds of thousands of new jobs every year in retail, landscaping, food preparation and service, and home and commercial cleaning.

While these jobs are attractive to immigrants with limited job skills, they are not so attractive to American workers as the U.S. population becomes older and better educated.

Our immigration system does not recognize this reality and fails to allow a sufficient number of foreign-born workers into the country legally. Hence, the great number of illegal immigrants.

When my grandfather entered this country in 1913, it was a simple process. It took little time and little money. Today, the process is complicated and expensive.

While America's borders should be open to all peaceful, law-abiding people, that isn't likely to happen any time soon. The best measure, then, would be to increase the number of temporary workers permitted into the country.

Because most illegal immigrants want to be here legally for the jobs, such an action would dramatically reduce illegal immigration as it did in the 1950s, when the temporary worker program was expanded.

Such a measure would have a second benefit of increasing the output of the U.S. economy and, according to studies by the Cato Institute and the Center for American Progress, increase the real income of U.S. households by \$180 billion a year.

It seems the logical course is not the regressive Arizona approach of treating everyone as criminals with an abusive law. Rather, the best approach is to loosen restrictions on legal immigration.

That is the enlightened way to proceed and is in keeping with the American melting-pot mentality that made this nation great.

Thomas J. Lucente Jr. is a columnist with The Lima (Ohio) News, a Freedom Communications newspaper. He is also a veteran of the Iraq war and a law student at the University of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio.

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