

# TODAY'S ZAMAN

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## [OPINION] Know-nothings' ghosts haunt immigration debate

**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 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. "They clean up after us in public bathrooms," and "they are the nannies" nurturing future presidents and actors and athletes.

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 US 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 US universities who can't come because of the bureaucratic hurdles. Those who do often aren't allowed to stay after graduation.

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 no one thinks will 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 US 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 Ramos and West expose is the immigrant crime scare. Illegal immigrants actually commit fewer crimes than US citizens, as they often “make an effort to avoid any sort of legal situation,” says 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.

Four of the handful of the most recognizable high-tech companies in America -- Google, Yahoo, Intel and eBay -- were founded by immigrants. Citing Sergey Brin, a Russian immigrant who co-founded Google in 1998, 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 such as West acknowledge that 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.

This is welcome news for the immigration bashers, who have well-known predecessors: 19th century organizations such as 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 interred Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor, or who used the Sept. 11 attack as a blanket excuse to assail immigrants.

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

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*\* Albert R. Hunt is the executive editor for Washington at Bloomberg News. © Bloomberg News, 2010*

13.07.2010  
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