

The Washington Post

Opinion: Walls don't work. Open borders don't work. It's time to try realism.

Charles Lane

March 23, 2021

We have another mess at the U.S. southern border, in part because bringing people from Mexico and Central America to the United States has developed into a big business for various licit and illicit enterprises, loosely labeled “coyotes.” Here’s an apt description from a book about migration by a Harvard professor:

The process began more or less on its own, he writes, but, “in time, truly dynamic entrepreneurs of migration appeared, and the flows of emigration were propelled forward by them. Agents . . . combed . . . for emigrants and lent support to emigration organizations formed by would-be migrants themselves.”

Conditions at home created “push” factors, the professor adds, but “there was no spontaneous, mechanical relationship between poverty and emigration. The only correlation that can be firmly established is between the activities of recruiting agents and the flow of migrants from areas with a high degree of actual or latent mobility, especially areas from which people had already emigrated to America.”

Fitting indeed — except these words come from an account of how thousands of people migrated from 18th-century Europe to the New World, in “The Peopling of British North America,” published 35 years ago by the late historian Bernard Bailyn.

For centuries, access to opportunity in the territory now known as the United States has been one of the most valuable privileges on earth, for which millions, including our ancestors, have been willing to risk everything — and, in strictly economic terms, to pay a premium. (The transatlantic enslaved person trade was a horrific exception.)

Rethinking policy on migration today should begin with those lessons of history. Immigration is both an integral aspect of American life and a valuable, but finite, resource, the allocation of which should be accomplished fairly, lawfully, at minimum cost and maximum benefit — for all concerned.

At present, debate oscillates wildly between Trumpian zero-tolerance (“Build the wall!”) on the right and indiscriminate humanitarianism (“Abolish ICE!”) on the left.

The de facto result of the latest swing to a more liberal posture under President Biden is a semi-licit privatization of the border, with coyotes determining who gets there and, accordingly, who gets across.

It is a suboptimal situation both for the United States and, probably, for the migrants themselves. By and large they are not the poorest of Central America's poor, but lower-middle or middle-income people with hard-won assets, land included, they must liquidate to pay the coyotes' exorbitant fees, with no guarantee of a happy ending to their trip.

This, by the way, is another point today's migrants and those of the past have in common. As Bailyn notes, some America-bound Scots in the 18th century who owned cattle could sell the livestock for cash, then form groups to charter a transatlantic ship, at the cost of up to 800 pounds. Migrant recruiters targeted such people instead of landless day laborers.

Between opportunity-seekers' urge to leave and the money to be made by shipping them out, Bailyn adds, emigration from Scotland became a mass movement, "celebrated in song and poetry" — just as a Honduran artist, Jimmy Golden, has put out a catchy tune called "Caravana Migrante."

Instead of building walls to prohibit the human flow or twisting asylum law into a pretzel to enable it, the Biden administration and Congress should get creative about managing it.

One possibility is to increase legal immigration quotas for Central America's Northern Triangle — El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, coupled with home-country measures to stop people from trying the illegal route. There's precedent: a 20,000-visa annual quota negotiated with Cuba helped end a 1994 crisis that brought 35,000 people from that country in dangerous rafts.

A new guest-worker program could enable tens of thousands of Central Americans to earn money legally in U.S. agriculture or other seasonal industries, then return to their families, as many would undoubtedly prefer.

Organized labor has historically opposed such proposals, as do human-rights activists who remember the *bracero* program, which was marred by employer abuses of Mexican guest workers from its inception in 1942 until its cancellation at the end of 1964.

However, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico, a man of the left, favors a new guest-worker program. Chaotic illicit migration through Mexico is disruptive to his country (and unpopular). A transparently regulated modern guest-worker program could provide both employers and laborers a humane alternative to the status quo, as Miami-based Latin America analyst Tim Padgett and Cato Institute immigration policy expert Alex Nowrasteh have argued.

Selectively expanding legal immigration to accommodate more of the current demand for it would render enforcement of the legal limits that necessarily remained both simpler and more consistent. It would therefore enhance their legitimacy, actual and perceived.

Walls don't work. Open borders don't work. It's time to try realism.