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morning brew

Littwin: Let's stop denying what Arizona laws are really about

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You've probably heard the news about the Arizona sheriff's deputy who was shot along a drug-smuggling corridor, about 50 miles south of Phoenix.

That's what people don't understand, I'm told, about the new Arizona law. It's not about illegal immigration per se. It's a reaction to the Mexican drug cartels and the violence that is overrunning the state. It's about the kidnapping in Phoenix.

There was the rancher who was killed near the border, almost certainly by drug smugglers. And now there's the deputy, whose wound was thankfully superficial, who was apparently shot by smugglers. (We won't ask where the cartel's guns come from. We know, but it's not a topic we

like to broach.)

What we're told is that since the federal government won't act to stop the inflow of violent drug smugglers, the state had no choice but to act — even if acting means that people violating rental codes (you know which codes we're talking about) may be required to prove their citizenship. Start your racial profiling now.

I'm not sure how this applies in, say, Scott McInnis' Colorado, where the border is with New Mexico, not the old one, and where we now get to grow our own marijuana.

But just when you think it might possibly make sense in Arizona, you read about a ruling made by the state Department of Education. That's the one banning teachers with heavy accents, those using faulty grammar, from teaching Spanish-speaking students who are learning English.

I get the bad grammar. As a writer, I'm obviously in the anti-bad-grammar camp. But do you think they mean all accents — Mississippi accents and Brooklyn accents and Scottish accents? Or do you think it's just Spanish accents?

Just guessing here, but I doubt that Spanish-accented teachers have much impact on the violence coming up from the border. Of course, it's just possible this is about something else altogether.

I can remember when bilingual education was the hot topic in the legislative world, as if our

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legislators were somehow the best guides to effective teaching principles. Now that there are no more bilingual teachers to worry about and yet the reading problems remain, it's apparently unilingual teaching that's at fault. But that's another story.

Now, I'm wondering if this Arizona rule is really about troublesome accents — I once had a German-accented professor I could barely understand, or maybe it was just the calculus that confused me — or whether it's about the notion that kids would be somehow harmed by teachers who understand their first language.

But our story doesn't end in the classroom. According to Daniel Griswold of the right-leaning libertarian Cato Institute think tank, the Arizona law isn't really about crime at all.

Citing Department of Justice data, Griswold writes that, as of 2008, Arizona's crime rate was the lowest it had been in four decades. It gets more interesting. Griswold notes that over the past decade, when illegal immigrants have poured into the state, the rate for violent crime in Arizona has fallen by 23 percent and property crime by 28 percent.

In an article Griswold wrote for Commentary last December, he takes his case nationally. Over the past 15 years, in a time of rapid growth in immigration — legal and illegal — Griswold says we've seen "the most rapid drop in crime rates in the nation's history."

If Griswold is right — that the fear of crime from an immigrant population is vastly overstated — his story is an old story, as old as the Know Nothing Party, as old as George Washington warning John Adams of the newest immigrants.

Griswold points to a famous example in which a Harvard economics professor took out an ad in The New York Times in 1913, warning that "hordes of new immigrants" — mostly Italian and Jewish — were "a menace to our Anglo Saxon civilization."

OK, we have immigration issues in this country. We proudly say we are a nation of immigrants. But we worry, always, about the next wave of immigrants — our forbears were always legal, it seems — and how they'll change the country.

Tom Tancredo and Lou Dobbs warn of the threat of multiculturalism. But you might note that in 1900, New York's third-largest newspaper was German-language, and yet I don't hear much German in the streets these days. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, 57 percent of Latinos who have been here at least three generations intermarry. Do their children press 2 at the ATM?

I know that illegal immigration is a real issue. We obviously need to control our borders. We need to stop potential terrorists. We need to combat the violent drug cartels.

The overreaction to people who have come here — most at great risk — is also real. I don't know what the poll numbers show, but it seems like

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time for immigration reform that addresses both issues.

And it doesn't matter which accent you use.

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