



Obama on Immigration: A first step six years in the making

By Victor Landa
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It's an announcement six years in the making, a slow cook by modern political timing.

What President Obama will say tonight regarding immigration is no mystery. Neither is it a mystery what his loyal opposition will do in response. Obama will act unilaterally, because he threatened to do so ... some time ago, a couple of promises ago. He's doing it because he doesn't trust Congress to move on a comprehensive immigration reform. And the GOP faction of congress won't move because they don't trust the President to enforce the law.

And there you have it, a political stalemate made for television. Except that the major U.S. English language television networks couldn't care less – they won't air the President's address because the prime-time slot is too valuable.

It's all a matter of anticipating the minutia.

Will the President's plan call for increased border security? Will it legalize 5 million undocumented, 11 million? Which group of undocumented will be affected? Why? What about DREAMer parents?

The truth is that Obama's announcement would have been different six years ago, at the beginning of his term in office. Today, with two years left before his administration ends, and a few weeks before the 2016 election shoves this White House to the sidelines, he's got little to lose. I expect his move to be what the more dramatic commentators call "bold." I expect his detractors to be harsh. And it'll all be for naught.

The most that Obama can do is offer a temporary stop-gap. He can't do reform.

The most that the GOP can do is complain, loudly. Then sometime next year, once the new Republican congress is installed, everyone can get to work on real change. So what's all the fuss about?

It's a gauntlet. And we love a narrative with tension. Obama is going to set the immigration goal posts tonight, and that's what the GOP doesn't like. He beat them to the punch – it's his narrative, for the next couple of months.

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration analyst at the CATO Institute, told me he expects to hear good things tonight. "It'll bring an end to six years of inaction and 10 million deportations," he said.

And the GOP, he thinks, has two options in response: “Do nothing but oppose, sue and defund the programs that may enable Obama’s plan. Or pass a series of reform bills and send them to the President’s desk.” The challenge will come in the form of questioning the constitutionality of the President’s actions. And knowing Washington as it now operates, that question could take up a lot of space and time.

Former U.S. Treasurer and GOP Latino stalwart Rosario Marin is hopeful she might agree with some of the President’s proposals. But she can’t help but question his timing. “Why now,” she said, “he had six years ...” Still, she believes “it’s an inopportune time for unilateral action.” I’m not sure if there ever was an opportune time. But that said ... Marin characterized Obama’s move as a tantrum. “He’s throwing it (the immigration issue) in their (GOP) faces.”

The good news is that the President’s executive order will probably allow some 5 million undocumented persons to come forward and begin a legalization process. The not so good news is, taking the DACA experience as an example, maybe half of the eligible persons will actually take advantage of the process.

The reason, Nowrasteh told me, is that any Presidential order is temporary. Of the 1.2 million persons eligible for DACA legalization, only 600,000 came forward. The rest understood it to be a temporary fix and stayed in the shadows. The same could happen this time.

So tonight could be more about politics than policy, more about perceived tantrums and claiming a narrative. It’s been six years in the making, at least it’ll be a first step.