

Common Sense and Immigration in the U.S.

Currently, there is a lot of publicity and emotion surrounding U.S. immigration policy. It has certainly become a highly controversial topic during the presidential campaign. However, it's clear that when people hear about immigration, they quickly formulate differing images about the issue, especially when the topic is only driven by the rhetoric of political candidates.

Typically, our perspectives depend upon our occupation, where we live, and our personal experiences with other cultures. If you live on the border in Arizona or Texas, your vision of immigration is likely quite different from folks who may live more distant from the border.

And if you're not directly involved in agricultural production (or the myriad other businesses that hire immigrant labor) immigrants may be seen as an unwanted but growing segment of the community. In this case, it is very easy to succumb to the hyped up media coverage on the negative aspects of immigration and how "those people" are destroying our nation, stealing U.S. jobs, and costing U.S. citizens millions of dollars in social services.

As is the case with most issues, a narrow perspective generally fails to denote the complete – and truthful – picture of reality.

There is little question that there are many illegal immigrants in the United States and that some undocumented immigrants cost taxpayers money, engage in illegal activity, and create language challenges for our school systems. However, that's only a small part of the tale even if it's the *only* part of the story that the anti-immigration folks want you to hear.

If we focus on the Agricultural labor component of immigration, we can also tell the success stories of thousands of immigrants who have integrated into our society in a productive and lawful manner. They have a work ethic that is reminiscent of the hard working Americans from our past. They pay taxes and mortgages, have strong family values, go to church, and otherwise fit the very mold of the classic American family.

Also, from an Agricultural perspective, there really is no direct relationship between the rising rate of unemployment in our nation and the number of available workers willing and able to work in agriculture. Even with high unemployment, American job seekers avoid agricultural work like the plague. The work is perceived as too hard and the pay may be deemed to be too little, even if job seekers *might* otherwise be willing or qualified to try.

Realistically, qualifications for jobs on the farm are not as basic as some folks like to believe. Farm work requires a body that is fit enough to work out in the elements. Picking fruit, training or pruning trees, and working with farm equipment (among many other tasks) require a set of skills that relatively few Americans can put on their resumes. For farmers, the costs of training unskilled workers can be very high, not unlike many other businesses.

Today there is a huge disconnect between our farms and the understanding of the origins of our food supply. But the fact remains that immigrant labor fills the gap to accomplish the work that feeds our nation. Consequently, U.S. citizens have enjoyed a safe, plentiful, and inexpensive food supply for generations.

Historically speaking, the topic of immigrant labor has always been contentious in our country. After World War II, the need for workers to do manual labor in Agriculture escalated and the U.S. began the Bracero program. This guest worker program in agriculture was justified in the U.S. largely as an alternative to illegal immigration. From 1942 to 1964, the Bracero Program sponsored some 4.5 million border crossings of guest workers from Mexico. The Bracero program was not renewed after 1964.

However, the need for immigrant workers did not dissipate. Accordingly, Congress created the H2-A visa program which, by design, was a highly bureaucratic system that imposed strict regulations, substantial fees and extensive guidelines for employers. As many growers discovered in the 1980s, the H2-A program also created enormous liabilities for employers who were attacked relentlessly by legal advocacy groups.

However, the use of the H2-A program has never fully blossomed due to the strict regulations and costs of a system that is inherently difficult to navigate. Compounding those limitations,

applications must pass through a tedious process with a government agency that self-admittedly has far too little capacity to handle the total number of Agricultural workers currently required in our country.

How does this discussion connect to the immigration issue at hand today? It may be easy to stipulate that someone who entered the U.S. illegally simply broke the law and is a criminal. But who can debate that few are the legal issues that are resolved so simplistically?

For example, under Congress' own dictates, employers have followed the law of the land and hired under the I-9 regulations. And so, *decades* of employment have evolved under those rules. And despite the claims of naysayers, U.S. citizens are not the folks who have filled the employment void in Agriculture, hospitality (hotels, motels, restaurants), construction, landscaping, factories, etc. When our economy weakened, Americans did not rise to fill those positions.

Admittedly, these factors do not address criminal activity, drug trafficking, or misuse of our social system. However, immigrant workers represent a minority when it comes to the "negative" side of the social issues. There are tens of thousands of American citizens that can be classified as criminals, drug dealers or users, or abusers of our various social support systems. Welfare has extended through generations in many families. Fraud and abuse of Medicare, welfare, etc. is not exclusive to immigrants. And "citizenship" is not automatically interchangeable with "law abiding citizen", even if the majority of us adhere to the laws of the land.

The fact of the matter is that no one can paint the "broad stroke" and limit the aspects of the immigration issue to only one, narrow perspective. We Americans have learned very well the skill of blaming someone else when things go wrong. But if we're going to play the "blame game" we'll have to acknowledge that immigrants aren't the only component of our society that is costing tax payers millions of dollars. And no matter how one wants to paint the picture, immigration can still be accurately described as an important part of the foundation of many segments of our nation's economy -- from Agriculture to Medicine to Computer Technology.

From the position of Agriculture, it is important that the next effort to address the immigrant worker issue comes from Congress so that the rules can be consistently applied across state lines. The outcome must incorporate a sensible period of transition with a clear goal of how the use of immigrant labor will evolve. "Amnesty for all" may not be the best approach as we mold the future. However, amnesty for folks who have lived and worked a significant part of their lives on the farms of America may be a sound approach given certain, sensible limitations.

If American farmers are to consistently use a federally sponsored guest-worker program, it must be inexpensive to process applications, easy to navigate, provide a combination of both seasonal and extended term work visas, and be managed in a reliable manner with enough capacity to satisfy the needs of our nation. Falling short in any of those areas will only lead to the demise of any new program. Or, we'll end up right back with the same dilemma again.

Broad acceptance of a new guest worker program will do more to cut down on illegal immigration than almost anything else that Congress can do – if the system is done properly. Farmers want to work with legal workers. Workers want to work legally for farmers. The problem is the system, not the people.

Should the politics of the day result in America abandoning Agriculture in favor of implementing restrictive immigration policies that have no transitory worker solutions, there will be a massive collapse in our food system. We all want a safe food supply. But a critical aspect of our nation's security lies in our ability to feed ourselves. Jeopardizing that capacity is diametrically opposed to the intent of securing our borders.

If we go down that pathway, we will get what we deserve: an outcome that will fuel the recession, weaken our recovery, and threaten the fabric of our society.

What do you think will happen when America becomes hungry?

- Brad Hollabaugh
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