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Bush Worker Plan Betrays American Ideals

by Sheldon Richman

In proposing a temporary worker program, President Bush promised to reassess “the standard of knowledge in the current citizenship test... [because we] must ensure that new citizens know...the ideals that have shaped our history.”

Maybe he should also look at the standard of knowledge for presidents. If we use the test indicated by Bush — knowledge of the ideals that have shaped our history — he would have to be dismissed from office. All the current aspirants would have to be barred also.

The evidence for this is to be found in Bush’s proposal for allowing “illegal aliens,” or “undocumented workers,” to take jobs in the United States. This may appear to be a blow for freedom, which is certainly an American ideal that once shaped our history, but it really has nothing to do with freedom. Instead, Bush’s plan is consistent with government control of the labor market and therefore of free enterprise and individual liberty.

Bush’s own statement about the program indicates that freedom is not on his mind. He said: “New immigration laws should serve the economic needs of our country.” The country is a big place with many diverse people. It doesn’t have a single set of “economic needs.” If an employer wants to hire someone who has no official papers, he must need that person’s services. But a labor union official may object. Whose need is included among “the economic needs of our country”? Why should the government decide?

Bush went on: “If an American employer is offering a job that American citizens are not willing to take, we ought to welcome into our country a person who will fill that job.” Why the qualification that Americans have to be unwilling to take the job? If freedom was a founding ideal of this country, why isn’t the employer’s freedom to hire whomever he wishes honored?

The rule that no American can want the job before it is offered to a foreign worker would require the government to exercise awesome power over the labor market. As Bush said, “Employers who extend job offers must first make every reasonable effort to find an American worker for the job at hand.” And guess who’ll help? “Our government will develop a quick and

simple system for employers to search for American workers.... There must be strong workplace enforcement with tough penalties ... for any employer violating these laws.”

What a can of worms this will turn out to be! In any dispute between an employer and the government over whether an effort to find an American was “reasonable,” who do you think will prevail? This is another case of non-objective law: you won’t know you’ve violated it until after the indictment and conviction.

Under the plan, employers “must report to the government the temporary workers they hire, and who leave their employ, so that we can keep track of people in the program.” Does this sound like *private* enterprise to you?

Guest workers will be permitted to hold their jobs for three years. “This program expects temporary workers to return permanently to their home countries after their period of work in the United States has expired. And there should be financial incentives for them to do so,” Bush said. What if an employer needs a worker beyond that time? Do you ever get the feeling that people in government are control freaks? No wonder free enterprise is constantly being undercut: it leaves too little for government to do.

And what’s this about financial incentives to make sure the workers leave the country? Must the taxpayers be looted for this purpose? Bush said something about tax-free savings for the workers and credit in their home-country social security programs for time worked here. But you can bet this plan will cost us taxpayers money.

If people took principles seriously, opposition to Bush’s plan would arise from across the political spectrum. Advocates of freedom of association and champions of private enterprise would object in unison. That’s because the foundation of free-market capitalism is freedom of association, which in turn is based on individual liberty. Bush’s plan may be convenient for political purposes, but it has nothing to do with liberty.

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