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A Free Market in Immigration

by Jacob G. Hornberger

Once again, the federal government is proposing immigration “reforms” to address the immigration woes that confront our country. The proposals in Congress include extending a fortified “fence” (for some reason, government officials shy away from using the word “wall”) along the Southern border, criminalizing illegal residency, criminalizing assistance given to illegal immigrants, providing a means for illegal immigrants to seek citizenship, and instituting a guest-worker program.

The immigration crisis that besets our country demonstrates the problems of central planning that the economists Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek addressed in their critiques of socialism. Immigration policy, like so many other federal programs, entails a group of politicians and bureaucrats who think that they possess the requisite knowledge to plan, in a top-down, command-and-control fashion, the activities of millions of people, especially with respect to labor markets. That central-planning mindset is what Hayek called the “fatal conceit.”

The results of immigration central planning are predictable — tremendous distortions in the labor market, armies of federal gendarmes patrolling the border, repatriation of Cuban refugees into communist tyranny, building a Berlin-type Wall along the Southern border, deaths of immigrants in the backs of trucks or on parched deserts, raids on American businesses, tragic deportations, and, of course, endless calls for “immigration reforms” to deal with all the distortions that previous government interventions have produced.

U.S. immigration policy also demonstrates the follies of interventionism. As Mises pointed out, government interventions into economic activity inevitably produce artificial distortions, which then produce calls for more interventions to deal with the problems arising from the previous interventions. It is not a coincidence that what began with laws criminalizing illegal entry into the United States ultimately led to criminal laws making felons out of Americans who hire, shelter, or transport illegal immigrants. It is also not a surprise that U.S. officials are now calling for interventions that would subject American church groups to criminal prosecution for simply providing assistance to illegal immigrants.

There is a simple solution to America's immigration woes, but it lies not with more socialism and interventionism. It is a solution that is consistent with our American heritage rather than the central-planning-regulatory heritage of the Soviet Union. That solution is individual freedom and the free market.

Freedom and the free market have worked well for handling movements of people between the several states. That is, no government agency, either at the national or state level, plans the flow of people from state to state. People rely on the free market, including the supply of labor and the demand for it as well as living costs, to make their individual determinations to move and where and when. They simply have to check the pay rates and the prices in different parts of the country, which are often changing, and then make their decisions accordingly. No one has to seek government permission to move or to rely on government planning to make his decision. We often take it for granted, but the free market has proven to be a remarkable system that regulates the flow of people in interstate travel.

The same principle — freedom and free markets — is the solution to international travel. Leave foreigners free to travel to the United States, tour, visit, trade, interact, work, and open businesses. Some immigrants would retain their citizenship (as Americans who live and work abroad do), while others would try to seek U.S. citizenship. Foreigners would be treated more decently and humanely, especially since they wouldn't fear being arrested, reported, and deported. The militarization of the border could be ended. The Border Patrol could be abolished. No longer would immigrants be repatriated into communist tyranny. The government could focus its limited resources on genuine criminal activity rather than trying to monitor and control everyone's activities.

God has created a consistent universe — one in which moral principles coincide with free-market principles. Tear down the walls and open the borders! What better place for Americans to embrace their heritage of Christian values and free-market principles than in the area of immigration?

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