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Leave Immigrants and Their Employers Alone

by Scott McPherson

A basic tenet of a free and open society is the right of everyone to try to better his own life. That's why millions of people come to the United States every year looking for work. For that same reason, people hire them.

With mid-term elections on the way, "immigration reform" is a hot topic. Republicans, desperate to define what they stand for after years of increased federal spending, widespread domestic-privacy invasions, and failed foreign entanglements, are frantic to rally their base. An easy target is immigrants.

A popular refrain in this year's debate is that law enforcement should pursue those who employ illegal immigrants. A number of immigration-related proposals currently before Congress would increase penalties for breaking the law.

In that spirit, federal agencies operating under the aegis of the Department of Homeland Security recently conducted highly publicized raids across the country, arresting hundreds of executives and employees of various firms alleged to have hired illegal immigrants.

Two decades ago Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which was specifically designed to stop the flow of illegal immigrants by making it a crime to knowingly hire one. Twenty years and 10 million illegal immigrants later, we can say with confidence that that "reform" has proven to be a joke.

Anti-immigrant spokespeople, between ad nauseum assertions that they are not anti-immigrant, seem to have a mixture of objectives. On the one hand, they want to "enforce existing laws," while at the same time they admit (tacitly or otherwise) that these laws are not working, ushering in the predictable chime that "new laws are needed" to stem the flow.

Such refrains sound familiar to students of government intervention: problems created by intervention always lead to calls for more intervention to address the troubles caused by the last intervention. Once the process is started, few if any have the courage or wisdom to question the premises upon which the initial intrusion was made.

And immigration restrictions *are* an intrusion. Employers should have the liberty to hire whomever they want. Excluding a huge number of people from the labor force because they were born on the other side of the Rio Grande lacks any moral justification. Anti-immigrant types routinely rail against those who would “take our jobs,” but they never ask or answer a basic moral question: whose job?

Thomas Jefferson’s advice on the “sum of good government” was that the state should “leave men free to regulate their own pursuits of industry” — and labor is most definitely an integral part of industry.

Those who come to the United States seeking jobs (“cheap labor,” they’re pejoratively labeled) and those who wish to hire them (“exploiters of cheap labor”) actually represent a very noble part of our history, namely, a free-market system where every man was his own master. For 400 years immigrants have been willingly coming to this country and seeking the best possible terms of trade for their labor and for the better part of that time government stayed out of that relationship.

America for much of its past was a place where people stood or fell on their own merit. As a result, general prosperity expanded to a degree never before witnessed in the history of the world. The incredible standard of living we experience today is in large part attributable to centuries of immigrant labor.

While politicians, labor “leaders,” nativists, demagogues, and others clamor for more laws restricting the pursuit of happiness, they undermine the very ideal upon which our nation was built: a free society where individuals voluntarily interact in hopes of creating a better life for themselves and their families.

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