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Borders, Socialism, and the Free Market

by Jacob G. Hornberger

There are two important things to keep in mind with respect to the immigration crisis: first, the crisis is rooted in socialism and interventionism and, second, the *only* solution to the immigration crisis lies in open borders and free markets. Any attempt to resolve the crisis by resorting to more socialism and more interventionism only pushes the United States further in the direction of the totally controlled economy and the total police state.

A common question asked by those who advocate regulated borders is, “What is it about the word ‘illegal’ that you don’t understand?” Yet, in asking that question, they fail to give much thought to how it is that an immigrant becomes “illegal” or to the many ramifications of that designation.

The reason that some immigrants are designated as “illegal” has to do with the concept of socialist central planning, the same type of central planning that produced all sorts of perversions, distortions, and crises in the Soviet Union and that continues to do so in places such as China, North Korea, and Cuba.

Central planning involves a top-down, command-and-control system in which government officials plan and direct a particular economic activity. As the citizenry in socialist countries have long discovered, central planning inevitably results in crises because the plans produced by the planners are unable to satisfy ever-changing valuations and conditions in the marketplace.

The planners, possessing what Friedrich Hayek called a “fatal conceit,” are convinced that they possess the requisite knowledge and expertise to come up with a perfect plan, a plan that inevitably begins producing perversions, distortions, and crises. It leads to a phenomenon described by Ludwig von Mises in which one government intervention inevitably leads to more interventions, as the planners attempt to resolve the problems produced by previous interventions and by the original plan itself. At the end of that road lie the totally controlled economy and the total police state.

An interstate border crisis

The immigration arena provides a good example of these principles and phenomena. Let's examine why and how this is so.

Consider, for example, the border between Maryland and Virginia, which serves the function of separating these two jurisdictions. Every day, thousands of people from Maryland cross freely into Virginia and thousands of Virginians cross freely into Maryland.

As soon as they cross the border, visitors are subject to the laws of the state they are entering. That is, the fact that people can freely cross the border between Maryland and Virginia does not affect the sovereignty and laws of the two jurisdictions.

Some people stay only a short time, others much longer, even permanently. Some come to shop or visit, while others come to work.

Each person crosses the border in accordance with his own personal plan for his life and coordinates his activity with others who are doing the same. No government official or agency keeps track of the movements or the numbers of people crossing back and forth between the two states. There is no central plan directing the movements of all those people. The activity is entirely part of what is called a "spontaneous order."

Suppose the federal government, with the support of the Maryland and Virginia governments, decides that the "chaos" of all this uncontrolled and unmonitored activity is not in the interests of the nation and that everyone would be better served with a central plan developed by federal planners.

Federal officials also determine that Marylanders are taking jobs away from Virginians, and vice versa. Moreover, they report that there is a severe trade imbalance between the two states that can be rectified only through federal central planning.

Federal studies also conclude that there is an ever-present danger that terrorists will cross from Maryland into Virginia, where the Pentagon is located.

Finally, Federal officials conclude that Virginians are adversely impacting the culture of Maryland and that Marylanders are doing the same to Virginia.

Federal officials come up with a complex plan to regulate the flow of people between Maryland and Virginia. From now on, no one will be permitted to cross the border without a federal permit. To protect the workers in each state from competition, people wishing to work in the other state are required to secure a federal work permit; 5,000 new work permits will be issued each year. In order to protect the jobs of the poor, work permits will be granted only to college-educated people.

To ensure a fairer balance of trade, federal officials erect protectionist barriers between the two states.

The entire plan is enacted into law by Congress and ratified by the state governments of Maryland and Virginia. Government officials in all three jurisdictions celebrate the plan and predict that it will produce all sorts of benefits.

Then, the first problem arises: Many people refuse to voluntarily comply with the law. They continue to cross the border as freely as they did before the federal immigration law was enacted. They continue to visit, shop, work, or do business in the other state.

Federal and state officials soon recognize that they have a crisis on their hands. Thousands of people are crossing the Maryland-Virginia border in violation of the law. Government officials are faced with a crisis entailing multitudes of illegals within both states.

It is important, however, to keep in mind exactly what has caused such people to become illegals — the federal plan that began controlling and regulating the flow of people between Maryland and Virginia. What made countless people “illegal” was their refusal to voluntarily comply with the federal central plan.

Now federal and state officials, supported by a large portion of the populace, exclaim, “Something has to be done! We have a crisis. The illegals are taking over both Maryland and Virginia. The law is the law. It needs to be enforced.”

So, the next intervention comes into play: border guards at all the bridges that cross the Potomac and on the highways that connect the two states elsewhere.

Immediately, a new crisis develops: People are crossing the border in places where there are no checkpoints, even illegally trespassing on private property in the process. That necessitates an expansion of the numbers of border agents and their budgets. Taxes are increased to pay for the expansions.

A new crisis: People begin hiring guides to take them across the border. A new intervention is called for: a federal felony offense for illegally transporting or harboring illegal Marylanders and Virginians.

Somehow, people continue to make it over the border, and federal officials notice a new phenomenon. Rather than coming for short visits, many of the illegals are staying permanently, bringing their families with them, owing to the increased difficulty of crossing the border. A new crisis erupts, which necessitates raids on homes and businesses in both states to ferret out and deport the illegals.

Finally, people become so exasperated that they begin calling for a wall to be erected all along the border between Maryland and Virginia in order to keep out the illegals. Eminent domain is used to take away people’s land so that the federal wall can be built.

By this time, nearly everyone has forgotten the original cause of all the crises: the federal plan that regulated the flow of people between Maryland and Virginia. All that matters for most people now is the “immigration crisis” and the ever-increasing interventions that are necessary to finally resolve it.

Along comes a libertarian who suggests, “How about simply dismantling the wall, repealing all the interventions, and getting rid of the original central plan for immigration control between Virginia and Maryland?”

People go ballistic! “Would you have us surrender to the illegals? Would you end sovereignty for Maryland and Virginia? Would you have us return to the law of the jungle? Would you want the chaos that would come with unrestricted movements of people between our two states? What about the terrorists? What about our cultures? What about job protection? What about the trade deficit?”

Ever-increasing interventions

While most Americans can easily recognize how ridiculous the idea of immigration controls between Maryland and Virginia would be, actually the principles are no different with respect to international borders. The only reason many Mexican immigrants, for example, are “illegal” is that they’ve crossed the border in violation of a socialist central plan enacted by U.S. officials, a plan that has an arbitrary number and mix of immigrants who are permitted to cross the border.

In other words, the illegals are illegal because they’ve responded to natural laws of supply and demand that federal officials had hoped to repeal with their socialist central plan.

In the absence of border guards, foreigners will simply ignore the law by continuing to cross the border to visit, shop, work, and invest. That starts the long process toward interventions and more interventions. That’s why what began as border checkpoints long ago has metastasized into such measures as a militarized border, a border fence that necessitates the use of eminent domain to take people’s property against their will, raids on American businesses and homes, repatriation of people into Cuban communist tyranny, roving Border Patrol searches along roads and highways, checkpoints north of the border where Americans are required to show their papers, and calls for a national ID card.

Each measure, which inevitably fails to produce the desired result (i.e., a sealed border) brings the country ever closer to the totally controlled economy and the total police state.

Ironically, some supporters of immigration controls decry many of these police-state measures. Yet their position is contradictory, given that those measures are a logical and rational part of immigration controls.

In other words, given that many people will never voluntarily comply with a law that simply declares it illegal to cross a border, measures will inevitably become necessary to enforce the law. As each subsequent measure not only fails to achieve the desired result but also produces new problems and crises, it becomes perfectly natural for federal planners to enact new enforcement measures to address the ever-increasing crises.

A free market in immigration

People sometimes ask, “How would a free market in borders work?” Well, there is already a model: the United States of America, which has the largest zone of free trade and free

movements of people in history. Every day, countless people freely travel all over the United States without having to encounter government officials at state borders. They're seeking jobs, they're touring, they're buying and spending, they're investing.

Who frets about the trade imbalances between the various states? Who complains about how people are leaving one state to secure the welfare benefits of another state? Who complains about the cultural impact on each state? Who paces the floor in fear of the terrorists who are crossing state lines to commit terrorism?

Perhaps most important, no one panics over the fact that there is no federal agency or department monitoring or controlling this vast, unregulated flow of people across state borders, despite the fact that it obviously has an enormous impact on the economy and culture of each state.

The same principles would hold true with respect to open international borders. Countless people would be freely traveling back and forth between countries. There would no longer be an immigration crisis because there would no longer be immigration controls or "illegals." Flows of people would become more natural and normal, enabling people to more efficiently plan their economic decision making. People would pay as much mind to the process as they now do to the flows of people taking place between the respective states.

Open borders would bring an integration of moral principles and economic principles. Not only are open borders consistent with how people should treat others under both the Golden Rule and God's commandments, they also contribute enormously to people's economic prosperity. It is not a coincidence that Americans live in the largest open-borders zone in history and also have the highest standard of living in history.

Hope continues to spring eternal for those who believe in socialist central planning and economic intervention. Despite decades of failure, death, and destruction, they continue to believe that sooner or later they will produce a perfect central plan and adopt the necessary interventions that will finally produce a society in which people are not permitted to enter a country without official permission. In trying to achieve that goal, however, the price is a high one — a price that comes in the form of measures that inevitably lead to a totally controlled economy and a total police state.

Thus, there is one — and only one — solution to the immigration crisis that has beset the United States for so long: the free market, which is the economic heritage of the American people. All other so-called solutions will inevitably lead in the wrong direction — in the direction of socialism, interventionism, and a police state.

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