

Zero Sum Gains

African Americans and Illegal Immigration

BY FAYE M. ANDERSON

To make sense about the national interest in immigration, it is necessary to make distinctions between those who obey the law, and those who violate it. Therefore, we disagree, also, with those who label our efforts to control illegal immigration as somehow inherently anti-immigrant. Unlawful immigration is unacceptable.

—**Barbara Jordan**¹ (Feb. 24, 1995)

The response to New York Gov. Elliot Spitzer's proposal to give driver's licenses to illegal immigrants drove home the fact: there is no racial gap in Americans' attitudes towards unlawful immigration. Like white Americans, African Americans overwhelmingly opposed Spitzer's reckless plan² that would have rewarded lawbreakers and undermined national security.

Of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States, 56 percent came from Mexico and another 22 percent from the rest of Latin America, according to a report³ by the Pew Hispanic Center. The myth that African Americans and Latinos are "natural" allies flies in the face of our divergent histories, racial identities and social mobility. From South-Central



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L.A. to Southeast D.C., tensions are rising as blacks and illegals compete for jobs, housing, teachers' attention, and scarce resources for public schools and hospitals.

There is a growing crisis in black male joblessness, especially in urban areas. The Joint Economic Committee of Congress reports⁴:

- Black men have the highest unemployment rate at 8.4 percent.
- Labor force participation is lower among black men.
- Nearly 40 percent of black men were not working in 2006.
- The problem of black male unemployment is particularly acute among young men.

A National Bureau of Economic Research study⁵ found a link between mass immigration and black unemployment:

These data reveal a strong correlation between immigration and black wages, black employment rates, and black incarceration rates. As immigrants disproportionately increased the supply of workers in a particular skill group, we find a reduction in the wage of black workers in that group, a reduction in the employment rate, and a corresponding increase in the incarceration rate. Moreover, these correlations are found in both national-level and state-level data.

Illegals' informal networks shut out native-born workers, including African Americans, who would be willing to take jobs in industries now dominated by illegal workers. For instance, to ease tensions following the displacement of African Americans in the hospitality industry, the union contract for Local 2 of UNITE HERE in San Francisco includes new diversity language:

The Employer and the Union commit to act in good faith to outreach to the African-

American and other minority communities in order to continue to attract them as applicants to the hotel.

The Employer and the Union shall work in partnership in their commitment to ensure the diversity of the Employer's workforce, to continue to include all minorities, through a coordinated outreach program.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, thousands of illegal immigrants flooded into New Orleans, according to a study⁶ by Tulane University's Payson Center and UC Berkeley's Human Rights Center. At the same time, black Americans were not allowed to return to their homes in the Lower Ninth Ward prompting Mayor C. Ray Nagin to ask, "How do I ensure that New Orleans is not overrun by Mexican workers?"

While African American and Latino elites talk about a "shared agenda," political analyst Earl Ofari Hutchison⁷, author of "The Latino Challenge to Black America: Towards a Conversation Between African Americans and Hispanics," acknowledges there is a disconnect between black elites and the grassroots:

Although most civil rights leaders and black Democrats publicly embraced the immigrant rights struggle, many blacks privately expressed dread about being bypassed in the battle against poverty and discrimination, and some were actively hostile to the goals of immigrant groups. At a 2005 meeting in L.A., for instance, black radio host Terry Anderson summed up a not-uncommon position in the African American community when he



Terry Anderson

blamed illegal immigrants for stealing jobs from blacks and crowding schools. "We've been invaded," he said. "There's no other word for it."

A presumed black-brown alliance raises some questions: Why? Who benefits? While Latinos are the nation's largest minority group, without the right to vote, population alone will not yield political power. Indeed, a study⁸ by the Center for Immigration Studies found that 50 percent of immigrants from Mexico and Central America are in the country illegally, and one-third of those from South America are illegal. Clearly, it will be *decades* before Latino political power matches their numbers.

So, why should African Americans use their political capital to empower illegal immigrants, who have no political voice?

Consider: The term "Hispanic" is a bureaucratic construct that includes people of any race. Before 2000, there were four racial classifications—American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black and White. Respondents could mark only one box. While there still is no multiracial category, respondents can now check "one or more races" or "some other race."

The majority of Latinos are of mixed blood or *mestizo*. Throughout the Americas, there is persistent racial discrimination against the region's 150 million *Afrodescendientes*, who like black Americans, are of African descent.

In the U.S., a person who has "one drop" of black blood and who is "light, bright, damn near white" is black. But Latinos, whose skin color may be as dark as or darker than mine, do not identify as black. Once they sneak across the border or overstay their visa, they become "white."

In the 2000 Census, 50 percent of Hispanics self-identified as "White"; less than three percent checked "Black." The 2004 American Community Survey⁹ shows that 58.5 percent of Hispanics self-identified as "White," 35.2 percent checked "some other race" and 3.6 percent indicated two or more races. Tellingly, a mere 1.6 percent self-identified as "Black."

In a five-part series¹⁰ on the black experience

in Latin America, the *Miami Herald* reported:

Today, blacks in Latin America face daunting obstacles. Chances are they will get a shoddy education, drop out of school early, earn less money than whites and fade into the masses of urban and rural poor.

To address the marginalization of Afro-descendants, Afro-Latino leaders have organized Afroamerica XXI, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote “solutions to the problems that African Descendants face due to racial discrimination and poverty” in the 13 countries in Latin America, including Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua.

In the first comprehensive assessment¹¹ of Afro-Latinos in Latin America, the Congressional Research Service reported:

People of African descent comprise a significant portion of the population in several Latin American countries, and account for nearly 50 percent of the region’s poor. For many Afro-descendants, endemic poverty is reportedly exacerbated by isolation, exclusion, and racial discrimination. The IDB [Inter-American Development Bank] notes that Afro-Latinos are among the most “invisible” of the excluded groups as they are not well-represented among national political, economic, and educational leadership in the region. They have also been, until recently, absent from many countries’ census and socioeconomic data.

Afro-Latinos make up less than one percent of Mexico’s population of more than 108 million. As in the rest of the Americas, they are invisible. That changed in 2005 when Memín Pinguín, an Afro-Mexican comic character with exaggerated lips and eyes, was featured on a series of five stamps issued by the Mexican Postal Service.

The NAACP, National Urban League, Rainbow/PUSH Coalition and other African American organizations called on then-Mexican President Vicente Fox to apologize for the racist images and cancel the stamps. The stamps were defended as “cultural icons of the Mexican people.” Fox told the Associated Press that Memín Pinguín

is “an image in a comic I have known since infancy. It is cherished here in Mexico.”

The racial hierarchy and stereotypes that Mexicans bring with them was laid bare by Fox in remarks before a group of Texas businessmen meeting in Mexico:

There’s no doubt that the Mexican men and women—full of dignity, willpower and a capacity for work—are doing the work that not even blacks want to do in the United States.

As the daughter of a blue-collar laborer and domestic worker,



Joe Madison

Fox’s comment was deeply offensive. Who performed those jobs before the wave of illegals from Mexico?

What, pray tell, is the predicate for a black-brown alliance, or more accurately, a black-Mexican alliance since Mexicans

make up 64 percent of the Latino population? Simply put, there is none. It is naïve to expect illegal aliens from Mexico will be invited to join hands and sing “Kumbaya.”

It bears remembering that in 1994, 47 percent of blacks voted for California’s Prop. 187, which would have denied certain government services to illegal immigrants (the initiative was struck down by a federal court). In 1998, 48 percent of blacks supported Prop. 227, which eliminated bilingual classes in California’s public schools.

Fast forward to the debate over so-called comprehensive immigration reform, black talk show hosts note their callers overwhelmingly opposed the Senate’s amnesty legislation. Joe Madison, host of XM Radio’s “The Black Eagle,” told Lou Dobbs that “not one person” supported Gov. Spitzer’s licensing plan.

Still, African Americans have been slow to move beyond criticizing illegal immigration and actually enter the arenas where the policy debate is unfolding. Truth be told, reports¹² of a resurgent Ku Klux Klan have had a chilling effect on black Americans speaking out. Blacks are ambivalent about being on the same side as groups that have historically opposed our full participation in American society.

But black Americans can stand firm for the rule of law *and* stand against those who would deny us our claim to the American Dream. We stand on the shoulders of an earlier generation of black activists who during World War II launched the “Double V Campaign,” victory abroad against the enemies from without and victory at home against enemies from within, including the Klan and Jim Crow laws.

Today, we can follow the lead of Congressional Black Caucus members, Rep. Sanford Bishop (D-Ga.) and Rep. Artur Davis (D-Ala.). Reps. Bishop and Davis are co-sponsors of the “Secure America through Verification and Enforcement Act of 2007,” which would secure the border and strengthen interior enforcement.

The rule of law is paramount for black Americans. It was, after all, our trust in the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause and the Fifteenth Amendment’s right to vote that gave us faith and hope that we would overcome.

Illegal aliens make a mockery of our history when they draw parallels between their “movement” for vague “human rights” and black Americans’ struggle for enforcement of rights guaranteed *citizens* by the Constitution. Black Americans must get in the immigration policy arena to ensure the illegal immigration lobby does not co-opt the moral authority of the civil rights movement to confer public benefits on illegal aliens whose very presence in the country is an unacceptable flouting of the rule of law.

Endnotes

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2. “Poll: Americans want fewer illegal immigrants in U.S.,” CNN.com (Oct. 17, 2007).

3. Jeffrey S. Passell, “The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.,” Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2006.

4. “The Crisis of Black Male Joblessness,” Washington, DC: Joint Economic Committee, 2007.

5. George J. Borjas, Jeffrey Grogger and Gordon H. Hanson, “Immigration and African-American Employment Opportunities: The Response of Wages, Employment, and Incarceration to Labor Supply Shocks,” Washington, DC: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2006.

6. “Rebuilding after Katrina: A Population-Based Study of Labor and Human Rights in New Orleans,” Berkeley, CA: UC Berkeley International Human Rights Center and Tulane University Payson Center for International Development and Technology Transfer, 2006.

7. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, “The black-Latino blame game,” *Los Angeles Times* (Nov. 25, 2007).

8. Steven A. Camarota, “Immigrants in the United States, 2007: A Profile of America’s Foreign-Born Population,” Washington, DC: Center for Immigration Studies, 2007.

9. “The American Community – Hispanic: 2004,” Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007.

10. “A Rising Voice: Afro-Latin Americans,” Miami, FL: Miami Herald, 2007.

11. Clare Ribando, “Afro-Latinos in Latin America and Considerations for U.S. Policy,” Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2005.

12. “Ku Klux Klan Rebounds,” New York, NY: Anti-Defamation League, 2007.