

'No Thanks'

This is the sensible answer to Mexico's offer of open borders

by Georgie Anne Geyer

The imposing new Mexican president-elect, Vicente Fox, has left Washington, but many Americans, official and otherwise, are still criticizing the unprecedented immigration policies that he carried here last week. Open borders? The idea was not exactly cheered with hurrahs.

But this is the wrong way to look at Fox's idea of eventually creating a "program of convergence" between Mexico, Canada and the United States a la the European union. In truth, we should thank the new president for making us finally consider some sobering realities.

- More and more since the disastrous immigration act of 1965, which gave skewed preferences to the poorest and least qualified of the Third World above those with skills and education, Americans have retreated into their habitual wanton utopianism. Our protective isolation in the world repeatedly has led us to believe that

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the laws of human nature do not apply to us.

On immigration, that reads: "America is a land of immigrants, so we mustn't exclude anyone."

But it is that kind of thinking that has put us in the situation today where fully 8 million Mexican-born adults are now living in the United States, about 40 percent of them illegal, with the population increasing by at least 350,000 every

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year. But far from any real convergence in bringing incomes closer together, the U.S.-Mexico wage gap continues to be the largest between any two adjacent countries in the world, with 33 percent of Mexican immigrants already here living under the poverty line.

Economists such as George J. Borjas have found further that the large-scale (and largely Mexican) immigration of the 1980s and '90s has seriously reduced the relative wages of native American workers with less than a high school

education — indeed, by at least 5 percentage points.

Is it really to America's advantage, then, not only to continue this distorted kind of immigration policy, but to enlarge it, to enhance it and to think about writing it into national and even international law?

- Fox is surely a breath of fresh air in a Mexico exhausted and corrupted by the 71-year rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI. His ideas about addressing poverty within Mexico are excellent — and welcome. But...

The wage differentials between Mexico and the United States remain so great — a worker in Mexico earns \$5 a day and, in the U.S., \$60 a day — that it will be many

years (if, indeed, it happens at all) for wages to converge sufficiently to make a real common market tenable. Moreover, the predecessor institutions of Fox's ideas, like the North American Development Bank (NADB) set up in 1994 during the fight over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have to date been great disappointments, as have similar projects that Fox set up when he was governor of Guanajuato state.

To counter the economic argument that trade and foreign investment alone will eventually

deal with Mexico's massive emigration, one can examine the results of NAFTA. Since the treaty, average wages in Mexico have actually fallen (albeit in great part as a result of the 1994 peso crisis). We know how peoples develop today — we have the examples of such countries as Singapore, Tunisia, Poland — and the pattern is always the same: a relatively free market system, a reasonably representative and authoritative political leadership, an impassioned investment in education (“human capital”), a genuine system of law and justice, and, most important, equal opportunity for all.

As much as we might wish her well on the journey, Mexico is only beginning to ponder those steps.

- Finally, Fox's visit last week subliminally warned Americans of

the dangers to their own cultural and patriotic cohesion from out-of-control immigration. The Southwest today is filled with eager young Mexican and Mexican-Americans students who talk impassioned about Mexican irredentism: retaking for Mexico the Southwest lost in the war of 1848. In many Southwestern schools, Mexican flags fly and classes are all in Spanish. In the Hispanic community, too many voices speak of grievance against America (not enough welfare, not enough good schools) rather than of gratitude to this country.

As Harvard University's professor Samuel Huntington said recently at an immigration conference: “Mexican immigration poses questions unique in American history. Many of things I have seen

lead to the possibility of a cultural community forming in the Southwest in which people could form their lives and careers in an overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking community. We have that already in Miami, and it could be repeated in the Southwest of the U.S. This represents a very unique and daunting challenge to our national identity.”

It is crazy, then for Americans to think about “open borders” at this period of these countries' histories. And if we can extrapolate from the troubles of the European Union over the same subject, it may always be.

What we should tell Fox as we simultaneously wish him godspeed, is that when Mexico has taken serious steps toward development, well, then let's talk again. •