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Immigration as a National Security Issue

By John Martin

The term national security has in the past usually conjured up images of the threat of nuclear warfare, espionage or of being cut off from vital petroleum supplies. Most of those images were linked to the Cold War environment, and — like the Cuban missile crisis — were real at the time, but today have lost much of their former relevance. Does that mean that national security is a less important concern now than a decade ago?

No, it does not, but the agenda has changed. To some extent, the end of the Cold War has facilitated a focus on other international conditions that are every bit as troubling to the long-term U.S. national interest as the former agenda — albeit less apocalyptic. On that new agenda, the issues of population, environment and migration occupy prominent positions. It is not that they are new issues, but rather that their significance was overshadowed by our previous preoccupations.

A New Security Focus

If we think of the national security agenda as composed of issues that have the potential to pose threats to the life and/or lifestyle of significant numbers of Americans, we have seen several recent foreign policy challenges — like Somalia, in which U.S. troops were committed to foreign peacekeeping operations. We also have experienced recent migration flows that have directly affected the United States, e.g., the influxes from Haiti and Cuba. We are likely to see more of these situations in the future.

The past decade has produced profound geopolitical change. There have been positive changes in regional flashpoints like the Middle East, South Africa and Central America, where there is now a prospect of long term stability and economic development based on the rule of law. But, on the other hand, the end of the Cold War has removed some of the long-standing discipline on foreign leaders, in effect creating a partial power vacuum. And, into this void, new actors have moved to try to take advantage of new opportunities. At the same time, the new democracies of this hemisphere are still frail, and the United States has not shown the ability, either alone or in tandem efforts with European allies or the United Nations, to react surely and effectively to chaos or bullyism. We are faced with violence and troubling political instability in parts of the former Soviet Union

and the former Yugoslavia, in African countries such as Liberia, Somalia and Rwanda, and with international aggression by countries like Iraq. In this hemisphere we find our troops committed to peacekeeping in Haiti and acting as refugee camp guards at the base at Guantanamo and in Panama.

What Are the Implications for the United States?

How do these international events affect the United States, other than by evoking our sympathies? There are, of course, pocketbook issues. But beyond questions of fiscal resources, our concern for the plight of others holds direct implications for the country, because, in addition to sending peacekeeping troops, foodstuffs or other emergency assistance, we also often end up accommodating as refugees or temporary settlers in the United States persons fleeing the chaos.

Even if we were to shift our focus more to helping displaced persons and refugees abroad, rather than bringing or admitting them here, still we are likely to have to deal domestically with protection issues caused by international crises. There were nearly 450,000 foreign students in the United States in the past school year, and there were about 60 countries that contributed over 1,000 students each. This number is apart from tourists or business people or diplomats, all of whom may seek to remain here legally or illegally if conditions become unsettled in their home country. While a few thousand meritorious cases of foreigners needing protection can be accommodated here with little impact, the cumulative effect of instability in multiple areas of the world, at a time when U.S. immigration is already running at nearly one million newcomers per year, is an issue of growing concern.

The Commission on Immigration Reform (CIR), headed by former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, is in the process of studying how the United States should respond to mass migrations. It is clear that there is concern about what the future may hold for us and about our ability to respond effectively. The focus of the current study is on whether a system of safehavens, like the Guantanamo base currently being used for Cuban and Haitian rafters, or the one in Panama for Cubans, offer long-term solutions. That review is prompted by the events of 1994, in which a surge of some 32,000 Cubans and 20,000 Haitians were intercepted by the Coast Guard

and taken to Guantanamo. Some in the administration profess to see the result — stemming the tide of mass migration — as a success. That perspective is challenged by our ongoing responsibility for tens of thousands of these rafters who appear to have no interest in returning home. Perhaps the administration's concept of success comes from comparing the result to the 125,000 Cubans who arrived on our shore during the 1980 *Marief* boatlift.

While the United States must maintain our commitment to generous and humane immigration and refugee policies, we cannot admit all who want to enter the country. Under the economic and job market pressures we face today, we cannot afford to lose control of our borders or take on new financial burdens.

—Bill Clinton, 10/15/93

Time to Go Home

What about mass migrations that do not have to rely on sailing to this country? Already somewhat forgotten by the American public are the Central Americans who, faced with severe political instability and violence in their countries, marched northward during the 1980s. We were recently reminded of that migration because tens of thousands of the Salvadorans who were given temporary protection in this country are still here and we are now contemplating asking them to return to El Salvador. Whether these Salvadorans, who have been living, working, going to school and giving birth to U.S. citizens here for an extended period of time will return to their country or fight to remain here as legal or illegal residents will be watched closely as a sign of how generous the United States can be in the future toward others seeking temporary protection.

The Salvadoran situation points up the dilemma for a developed country in responding to mass migration flows from a developing country. The debate in the 1980s, as Central Americans arrived in the United States after illegally crossing the border from Mexico, was whether these were in fact political refugees — who should be accorded asylum status — or rather were persons seeking to take advantage of American concerns about the violence in their region to seek a greater economic opportunity.

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The question today is, if these Salvadorans were in fact simply escaping the political chaos in their

country, shouldn't they be ready to return home now that the insurgency has ended, and a democratically-elected government is rebuilding the country? The Bush Administration came to the conclusion in 1992 that political conditions were safe for Salvadorans to return home. Was there, at that time, the beginning of an orderly process of return? Not that anyone has documented. Rather, at the request of the Salvadoran government, a new 18-month deferral of the end of the protected status was adopted. The administration has now allowed that status to lapse, but in its place has provided a new grace period of an additional nine months during which Salvadorans may maintain their jobs and pursue the means to stay permanently in the United States. Apart from the temporarily-protected Salvadorans, there are another 60,000 Salvadorans in the asylum backlog. About 50,000 Salvadorans are beneficiaries of an asylum status class action.

What has happened to the Nicaraguans and Guatemalans for whom we provided temporary protection? Guatemalans who were protected in Mexico in refugee camps under United Nations auspices have already gone home. But, despite the end of the conditions that led us to take migrants from these Central American countries under our wing, there is no record of a similar return of Guatemalans or Nicaraguans from the United States. Rather, these nationals have swelled the backlog of pending asylum cases. There are about 100,000 Guatemalans on the backlog. Is the message for the United States that, whatever the original motive, temporary protection will become a backdoor route to immigrant status in this country? If so, does that mean that we need to rethink our response to mass migration flows? The answer clearly seems to be yes.

Mexico: A Special Case

Finally, to underscore the national security implications of mass migration flows, it is relevant to give a hard look toward Mexico. Mexico is increasingly prosperous and has just completed an orderly democratic election despite the assassination of the ruling party's candidate. That bodes well for future political stability. But, it must be remembered that Mexico has no experience with peaceful transfer of power between political parties at the national level, that a revolutionary insurrection that broke out in the past year is still simmering, and that Mexico's population is growing faster than its ability to create new jobs. Mexico's natural population growth rate is now 2.3 percent (about three times the U.S. rate). All these latter facts underscore the importance of paying close attention to political developments in that country. [Editor's note: This paper was written prior to the fall of the peso and the subsequent turmoil.]

If there were serious political disturbances in Mexico, what would that mean for the United States? That question is relevant not only because of current conditions, but also because of our historical experience.

We should recall that during Mexico's 1910 revolution at least half a million of the country's then 15 million citizens sought sanctuary here. A similar rate of refuge seekers, with today's Mexican population of 92 million, would amount to over three million people. It could be even greater, given that the Mexican population is now more concentrated in border cities — estimated now to be about six million. Last year we recorded about a million apprehensions of Mexicans illegally crossing the border into the United States. How would we handle detention and removal of Mexicans if they were able to credibly claim to be escaping political conditions at home?

Growing Demographic Pressures

According to the Population Reference Bureau (PRB), Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Central America currently have a combined population of 142 million people. Among these countries, only Cuba has a rate of population growth as low as our own. All of the countries of Central America have growth rates even higher than in Mexico. That gives these countries an average population doubling time of 29 years; i.e., by 2023, the population is projected, on the basis of current demographic assumptions, to increase from today's 142 million inhabitants to 284 million (See Table).

Will these countries be prepared to care for, educate and employ an additional 142 million people? Perhaps politicians in these countries are counting on being able to export their surplus labor force to the United States. Other data, also collected by the PRB, reflect national governmental planning projections of population size for the same countries. By 2025, those estimates total a population of 221 million. If the natural rate of increase is extended two years to make the two estimates comparable, the natural growth rate estimate is 297.8 million in 2025. That is 76.8 million more people than national planners are projecting.

The difference between the natural rate of increase and the projected population may be understood as the number of people (and their offspring) whom the national planners expect to emigrate. Virtually all of the migration from this area is to the United States. Are we prepared to accommodate this number of immigrants from these neighboring countries? The current level of legal admissions from these countries in the past fiscal

year was 223 thousand (about a quarter of all legal immigration). Over a period of 31 years at the same rate, we would admit 6.9 million immigrants from this area. There also will be some illegal immigrants from these countries, and the immigrants to the United States will have U.S. citizen children. But, legislation to be considered in the new Congress will aim to reduce both legal and illegal immigration. What these projections suggest is that there is a huge discrepancy between population increases in neighboring countries for which national planners are supposedly preparing and much larger populations with which they are likely to be confronted. The 70 million difference is an enormous challenge for our neighbors, potentially very politically destabilizing, and it cannot help but have major policy implications for us.

A Need for Cooperation

Future international conditions and their impact on the United States constitute a much more complex agenda than was discussed in December at the hemispheric conference in Miami, or in the NAFTA negotiations with Mexico and Canada. So far, the agenda for regional cooperation has not included the issues of population planning and migration patterns. The recent Cairo Conference on Population and Development did identify troubling future trends in these policy areas. Yet that conference only dealt in a pro forma fashion with

migratory pressures resulting from overpopulation, environmental degradation, and political instability.

Increasingly, the United States will be called on to help other countries address the results of high population growth rates, over-taxed supplies of food and non-renewable resources, and political instability — all of which will contribute to large-scale migrations.

In this environment, the United States will need to have a clearly defined political consensus on how best to allocate finite national resources to various international appeals and how to respond to the plight of those who wind up at or inside our portals seeking our protection and our hospitality. ■

[Editor's Note: Readers who wish to pursue the national security consequences of demographic change may wish to read "National Security Study Memorandum 200: World Population and U.S. Security" by Stephen Mumford, **THE SOCIAL CONTRACT**, Vol.III, No.2, Winter 1992-93, pp.116-125; and the review of Mr. Mumford's newest book on NSSM 200 on pages 228-9 of this issue.]

Projected Population Growth in Mexico, Central America, Cuba and the Dominican Republic: 1994-2025 (millions of people)

1994 Population Estimate	142.0
2025 Projected Population (natural rate)	297.8
2025 Population Planning Projection	<u>221.0</u>
Difference in 2025	76.8
U.S. Admissions Projected through 2025	<u>6.9</u>
Unaccounted-for Population	69.9