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Outlook Under the New Immigration Commissioner

By George High

Although she has only been in office several months, initial statements and earlier writings by the Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), Doris Meissner, provide indicators of the direction she is likely to take. These suggest concentration on management and procedures, and some adjustments in handling illegal immigrants, but no attention to the larger question of the number of legal immigrants to be allowed into the country each year.

Meissner has stated that her major priorities will be developing greater professionalism at the INS, controlling immigration with compassion, encouraging immigrants to naturalize, and assuming a larger role for the INS in policy leadership.

The Commissioner has stressed the importance of the family unification priority, claiming that this provides important skills to the work force and encourages cultural adaptation. She argues that immigration is a self-selecting process which brings to the United States hard workers and quality people. On the opposite tack, others, like labor economist Vernon Briggs, identify family unification priorities as a principal source of unskilled labor in a declining and already saturated unskilled job market.

Meissner cautiously claims that new immigrants do not "directly" displace large numbers of native workers "at the outset," but she acknowledges that they undermine overall working conditions and impede labor market adjustments. She seems to recognize the need for secure identification to strengthen employer sanctions against the hiring of illegal aliens, but she has said that the whole program needs to be reviewed.

While she supports INS efforts to speed up political asylum procedures (an effort apparently aimed at drawing support away from even stronger proposals by Congressman Romano Mazzoli and Senator Alan Simpson to address spurious claims), she fails to recognize that many claimants from Central America do not come from areas of conflict and are exploiting the asylum process to find work. The commissioner trusts that greater resources will allow INS to process asylum claims promptly and deal with a backlog of 329,000 cases, but so far the

administration has not funded the required staff increases, and a number of elements in the program (like effective procedures to deport persons whose claims are denied) are only wishes.

In hopes of reducing the tensions building in the United States, the commissioner intends to expand the naturalization functions of INS to encourage legal alien residents to become citizens. She sees this as a way to absorb immigrants more effectively into the social structure.

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Papers that Meissner wrote previously for *Foreign Policy* magazine and the Trilateral Commission give insights into her views on migration, which she accurately describes as a defining issue of the post-Cold War world. She is critical of European national leaders, faced with a large number of legal and illegal immigrants, for closing down their borders and resisting migrant flows. She calls on them to recognize Europe as a region of immigration. In contrast, she applauds those Europeans responsible for measures to establish a more expansive European immigration policy and to recognize the continent's responsibility to welcome immigrants.

She might apply that same test to the United States, which she criticizes for having a narrow and legalistic interpretation of asylum claims. Apparently she is not comfortable with the wisdom of the authors of the post-war international conventions. They established asylum protection for a limited number of the most endangered migrants so that they would be well-received and so that host societies would not be overwhelmed by larger flows and react negatively.

Yet Meissner also recognizes the importance of "a new international imperative, the right of

individuals to stay where they are." How she would define and deal with that remains to be seen. While there is hope that the Commissioner might come to a clearer recognition of the negative effects of large and uninterrupted flows of immigrants coming to the United States or of the relation of immigrant numbers to the job market, there seems to be little prospect that she will initiate an examination of our very high level of legal immigration. But such a review may be forced upon her by popular pressures and initiatives from Congress, such as the Reid Bill, which, *inter alia*, would cap legal migration at 300,000 annually, well below the present level of over 800,000 persons.

In summary, we can expect efforts aimed at more competent administration from INS Commissioner Meissner, and some tinkering at the margins of policy, but there are no signs that she will undertake a full-scale re-examination of the purposes and impact of legal immigration and its relationship to the national interest. ■