

Dan Stein wrote this column for the Miami Herald of May 18, 1991 explaining that six months after then-Congressman Pete Wilson voted in favor of a bill to dramatically increase immigration, now-Governor Pete Wilson is contending with budget shortfalls caused by that very increase. Mr. Stein is executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) in Washington, DC.

STATES, COUNTIES FOOT BILL FOR UNCHECKED IMMIGRATION

By Dan Stein

If people in Florida are casting a wary eye toward that other state noted for sun, fun and bountiful agriculture, it is perfectly understandable.

Both states have large and rapidly growing populations spurred by domestic and foreign migration. Both are feeling the strains of overdevelopment, scarcity of water, and the costs of rapid growth. Florida and California are also struggling to cope with a phenomenon that many had convinced themselves could not occur in these meccas of growth — recession.

While Florida has been hurt by the recession, California has been staggered by it. California's projected budget shortfall of nearly \$13 billion this year is about the size of the combined GNPs of the oil-rich Gulf states of Oman and Qatar.

Nothing grabs a person's attention like the prospect of higher taxes or reduced services. And with the prospect of both staring Californians in the face, people are beginning to examine the state's balance sheets more closely.

In the space of a few days in April, both the governor and the chief executive officer of Los Angeles County came to the same conclusion: Large-scale immigration is imposing enormous fiscal burdens on California and particularly on its largest county, Los Angeles.

Similar effects have been felt in Florida, and Dade County in particular. Sen. Connie Mack, in a letter to President Bush about a year ago, complained that the influx of immigrants was draining state, county, and municipal resources.

Mack's former Senate colleague, Pete Wilson, is now governor of California. He is getting a first-hand lesson in the costs of immigration. During an April 16 meeting with California-newspaper editorial writers, Wilson complained that uncontrolled immigration (particularly illegal immigration) to his state was a prime contributor to California's budget woes. Wilson said that, while Washington's unwillingness to control the nation's borders "makes a fiction of the immigration law," federal law continues to impose new and costly burdens on the states.

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Wilson noted that federal law "requires states to provide a Medicaid program for illegal immigrants, as well as immigrants here legally, as well as "refugees," and that "the children of illegal immigrants be schooled at state expense." The cost to Florida, Mack has stated, "is expected to exceed \$100 million" to respond "to the basic needs of this influx" of new immigrants.

While the states are bearing the brunt of these costs, only the Federal Government can set and enforce immigration policy. Echoing Mack's call "for the Federal Government to assist Florida," California's governor last month asserted that the "Federal Government ought to be paying a greater share" of the burden.

Someone who needs very little convincing is Los Angeles County's chief administrative officer, Richard B. Dixon. On April 22, Dixon's office released a study that enumerated the staggering costs of illegal immigration being borne at all levels of government. Dixon estimates that in the last fiscal year, the net costs to Los Angeles County alone for providing public health, education and welfare benefits to illegal aliens and their children was \$276 million—\$70 million more than just two years ago.

Dixon asserts that one-half of the \$249.1 million Federal contribution to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in Los Angeles now goes to children of illegal aliens. Moreover, he warns that the cost of just that single program in Los Angeles County could reach \$1 billion annually in this decade. [The week of May 18, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that applicants for political asylum are also eligible for AFDC benefits.]

Future costs promise to be even greater. According to Dixon, an astounding 65.5 percent of all

births in Los Angeles public hospitals are children of illegal immigrants. These babies, who are US citizens, are immediately entitled to the full array of social benefits. Moreover, by 1993, most of the 3.1 million illegal immigrants nationwide who received amnesty under the immigration-reform act will be eligible for public assistance as well. Much of this population lives in Los Angeles and South Florida.

So long as the 1980s economic boom was filling state and county coffers in Florida and California, the politicians were happy to appease the array of special interests that benefitted from the expanding pool of cheap labor. In the harder economic times of the 1990s, state and local governments, which do not have the Federal Government's luxury of amassing debt, can no longer afford the growing costs. Their only alternatives are reducing services to everyone, or raising taxes.

Immigration, particularly illegal immigration, is a costly proposition. The buck has finally stopped where it usually does—in the laps of taxpayers. As the economy in `recession-proof' places such as Florida and California (not to mention the rest of the country) drags through the current recession, the politicians may finally come to see what the local officials in the heavily-affected areas realized long ago—that the Federal Government's inability to control our nation's borders comes with a large price tag.

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