

Immigration and America's Promise

Immigration reform through the eyes of Jack Kemp

by Jack Kemp

Now, as always, immigrants have been a vital part of our nation's economic, political and social development. That is why our friends and neighbors abroad may wonder why immigration policy in the United States, the ultimate nation of immigrants, has not only been contentious, but often acrimonious.

Like every important issue in a free, democratic nation, the immigration debate reflects a healthy tension that resolves itself through the political process. Citizens who may see their economic interests jeopardized by new immigrants have the power to shape the laws that protect those interests, while the nation as a whole continues to enjoy the long-term benefits of our openness to new immigrants. That means U.S. immigration law may not be a model of logical

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consistency and legal elegance, but it works.

It also means, however, that few people are ever satisfied with our immigration laws, which remain in a constant state of evolution. As is the case with our tax code, immigration rules and procedures are shaped ad hoc, responding to the crisis of the moment.

A case in point is the H-1 B visa program, an exception to the general framework of U.S. immigration policy that allows us to admit more highly skilled immigrants to meet the economic needs of high-tech industries experiencing critical shortages of workers with specialized training. Right now, there is wide support in Congress to increase the number of workers allowed temporary entry to the United States under H-1 B status to fill jobs which are vital to our continued economic expansion.

This is an important issue because high-tech is one area where we need as free-flowing a labor market as we can get. But it's not the only issue on the immigration agenda. There is also a need for some legislative "clean-up" provisions to rescue from bureaucratic limbo workers already here, on the job and helping to make our economy grow. These clean-up reforms are just good sense and don't require any change in basic

immigration law or an increase in the overall number of legal immigrants.

The heart-wrenching case of Elian Gonzalez, the 6-year-old Cuban boy rescued at sea after his mother and nine others drowned attempting to escape from Cuba on a raft, riveted the nation's attention on just one example of the lengths to which people will go to escape tyranny and poverty and seek a better life in America. Today in America there are thousands of other cases, if not as well-known as Elian's, which carry into the 21st century the moving narrative of immigrants abandoning their homes and struggling to make a new life in this land we like to think of as a Shining City on a Hill.

Four simple adjustments to the law I have in mind deal exclusively with working aliens already in the United States — workers from war-torn Central American countries — who have established a solid track record as law-abiding citizens supporting families and paying taxes, and close family members who seek to rejoin immigrant workers who are either U.S. citizens or permanent residents. All these reforms would promote traditional American values such as diligence, hard work, family unity and putting down roots.

These reforms would allow

Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans and Haitians to apply for document status just as already has been done for Cubans and Nicaraguans; allow undocumented workers of good character who have resided in the U.S. many years to apply for documented status; allow those who have lost their status as legal residents, but remain eligible to become permanent residents, to remain in the U.S. while seeking to regain their status; and help reduce family backlogs by providing more visas for close family members of citizens and permanent residents.

Immigration laws establish the legal framework that allows Congress and the courts to control the flow of immigrants and legal

aliens into the United States. But the indomitable human spirit doesn't first hire a lawyer before fleeing a situation it finds intolerable and getting on a raft or swimming a river to freedom and opportunity in America.

As Ronald Reagan reminded us in speaking of the Statue of Liberty's torch, "The glistening hope of that lamp is still ours. Every promise, every opportunity is still golden in this land. And through that golden door our children can walk into tomorrow with the knowledge that no one can be denied the promise that is America."

The fact is, in a land as free and open as ours, there always will be more people who want to enter

than we can accommodate under our laws. That is a profound vote of confidence in the American dream. And just as surely, there will always be a certain percentage who succeed in forging a life in the U.S. and assimilate in our society sufficiently to become, after many years here, "citizens" in all but name — what one might think of as "common law citizens" — as much citizens of this land as were many of our immigrant forefathers. These true stakeholders in America deserve a chance to gain full citizenship status, and that obliges us to review and adjust our laws on occasion to make that possible. To do anything less is to dim Liberty's lamp. €