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What Are the Costs of California's Porous Borders?

By Lance T. Izumi

Isn't it interesting how some issues of great concern to the American people are never mentioned in our public policy discussions. Take, for example, illegal immigration. In a 1990 Roper Poll, almost three-quarters of those surveyed said they believed illegal immigration was a serious problem in America. Further, nearly 80 percent of those polled felt that the United States was doing only a poor to fair job in controlling illegal immigration.

With numbers like that you would think that illegal immigration would be right up there with drugs, crime, taxes, and health care as one of our most hotly debated national issues. Instead, what we get is a deafening silence. The presidential contenders have said nary a word on the subject. Here in California, the state most affected by illegal immigration (100,000 illegal immigrants settle in California every year), the vast majority of our politicians have not uttered a peep about the issue (commendably, Governor Wilson has pointed out that illegal immigration is a significant cause of the state's fiscal woes).

This abdication of responsibility by our elected representatives is appalling. Our politicians fail to realize what the American people realize instinctively, that is, that illegal immigration is imposing very real costs on our society. While our officials blather on about the wonders of diversity and multiculturalism, the average citizen knows that the reality is a far different story.

There are three significant costs imposed by illegal immigration. The first is monetary. Now, no one disputes the fact that immigrants are an important economic resource, providing, for instance, a source of labor for industries such as agriculture. We must be careful, however, to balance benefits such as lower food prices with costs such as increased taxes needed to fund government programs which benefit illegal immigrants.

For example, in Los Angeles the net cost of providing health, education and welfare benefits to illegal aliens and their children rose by almost \$70 million (a 34 percent increase) over the past two years to a total of \$276 million. Los Angeles county officials have warned that welfare costs alone could reach \$1 billion by the end of the 1990s.

"There are three significant costs imposed by illegal immigration ... monetary ... social costs such as increased crime ... [and] the intangible costs [such as tolerating illegality]."

At the state level, taxpayers foot the bill for a variety of immigrant programs. In education, spending for the Economic Impact Aid/Bilingual Education program has more than doubled from \$142 million in 1979-80 to \$305 million in 1991-92. (A whopping budget of \$347 million is proposed for 1992-93.) Add in the cost of illegal immigration to state welfare, health care and law enforcement programs and you end up with a very large bill for California taxpayers to pay.

Such purely monetary costs, however, are only one facet of the illegal immigration problem. Another aspect involves social costs such as increased crime. Many of those participating in the looting and pillaging in the recent Los Angeles riots were illegal aliens. Currently, California's state prisons hold 15,000 illegal aliens convicted of felony crimes. Not only do these illegal aliens / felons force the state to pay \$300 million annually in additional correctional costs, one must also remember the agony and suffering that their victims have been forced to endure. This is not a judgment on the inherent criminal proclivities of illegal aliens. These figures do say, however, that society is bearing extensive costs, and it would be wrong for us to ignore the fact.

Finally, there are the intangible costs. We are a nation of laws, and, as liberals like to point out, no person should be above the law. Tolerating illegal immigration, however, allows an entire class of people to be above the law. How can we expect the rest of the members of our society to obey our laws if we allow such open flouting of our immigration laws?

An even more important intangible cost is the strain that such large-scale immigration places on the assimilation process. The huge barrios of our inner

cities have become breeding grounds for all manner of social pathologies, including a thriving youth gang culture. As ever-increasing numbers of illegal immigrants flood into these areas, existing social problems are exacerbated and the possibility of assimilation into mainstream American society becomes more and more remote. California, therefore, risks becoming a cauldron of turmoil and division.

In Jean Raspail's classic novel *The Camp of Saints*, the author tells the tale of a massive flotilla of Third World refugees setting sail for France. The French Government, paralyzed by guilt, does nothing to stop the armada. The novel ends with France and French civilization collapsing as riots and disorder sweep the country.

California may not be at the stage of collapse, but as the events in Los Angeles demonstrate, we are close. ■