

The Social Contract

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A Note from the Editor

'It's 1986 All Over Again' —IRCA's 25th Anniversary

As readers are well aware, like his predecessor George W. Bush, President Barack Obama is proposing that Congress “legalize” the population of illegal aliens, accompanied by promises to “secure the border” and “protect American jobs.” But we have been down this road before. As Senator David Vitter (R-LA) said at a news conference on June 21, 2007,

“It’s 1986 All Over Again...[As] I began studying the immigration bill here in the Senate, my overriding question was, does it repeat the fatal mistakes of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act? That bill was supposed to solve our illegal immigration problem once and for all. Instead, it quadrupled it. We went from 3 million illegal aliens in the country then to over 12 million today. Now, why? In my opinion, two reasons. The ’86 bill provided amnesty for millions here illegally and it lacked strong enough enforcement. Those two fatal flaws combined to create a magnet for more illegal border crossings with inadequate enforcement to do anything about it. Now, this bill is different...But fundamentally, at its core, I believe it repeats those two fatal mistakes.”

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was introduced in the 97th Congress (1982), sponsored by Rep. Romano Mazzoli (D-KY) and Sen. Alan Simpson (R-WY). Simpson likened their immigration reform package to a “three-legged stool.” This included promises for improved border enforcement, penalties for employers who hired illegal aliens (dubbed “undocumented workers”), and the creation of a national identification card verifying eligibility to work.

Liberals, led by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Rep. Charles Schumer (D-NY), insisted that they would support the Simpson-Mazzoli Bill only if it included a “one-time-only” amnesty for the untold millions of illegal aliens then residing in the United States. This should have killed the bill, as opponents, quite rightly, argued that it would encourage more illegal immigration. They also predicted that this new population would hurt American workers, especially our young and unskilled, and add to the burden of taxpayers for public services, including education for their children, housing, health care, and criminal justice.

In this issue, we review the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which finally passed in October 1986, and was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan on November 6, 1986. IRCA has had the most impact on immigration policy since the repeal of the national origins quotas in the 1965 Immigration Act. Two sayings are worth repeating: “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me,” and “Those who ignore history are destined to repeat it.” We are at that point today. ■

Wayne Lutton, Ph.D.