

Learn the Sad Story of IRCA —Or Repeat It

By JOHN VINSON

Our nation's on-going travail with illegal immigration began in earnest twenty-five years ago with passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Ironically, the purpose of the law was to solve this problem. Obviously, it didn't. Instead, it set the pattern of evasion and deceit that still prevents effective action to deal with the wholesale violation of our immigration laws. At the twenty-fifth anniversary of this failed and infamous legislation, it would be useful to reflect on why it failed.

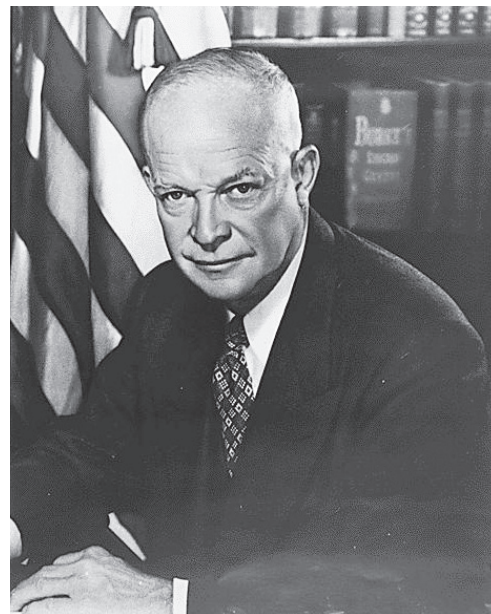
First let's consider the historical background. Though many today will find it hard to believe, there once was a time when stopping illegal immigration wasn't particularly controversial. In days before the dawn of political correctness, most Americans understood that protecting our borders and the privileges of our citizenship was essential to maintaining our nationhood.

Illegal immigration first became a serious problem during the years after World War II. In 1954 President Dwight Eisenhower decided that enough was enough. Ignoring the pleas of cheap labor interests, he ordered swift and decisive action along the border, which resulted in the apprehension and deportation of more than one hundred thousand illegal aliens. Seeing that the U.S. government really meant business, more than one million others voluntarily went back home.

At the time there was little hand-wringing. Even as the civil rights movement was beginning, no one thought to suggest that civil rights for citizens had anything to do with granting foreigners the right to break our laws. Ethnic grievance peddlers had little clout back then, and hardly anyone raised an eyebrow at the name given Eisenhower's roundup of illegal aliens: Operation Wetback.

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Following that action, illegal immigration declined to a manageable level for almost fifteen years. But during the seventies illegal crossings of the border began to rise sharply. With illegal aliens taking jobs and social services, many Americans demanded action. At the time it was not illegal for Americans to hire illegal aliens. Seeing that jobs were a magnet to illegal aliens, border control advocates demanded legal sanctions against employers who hired them.



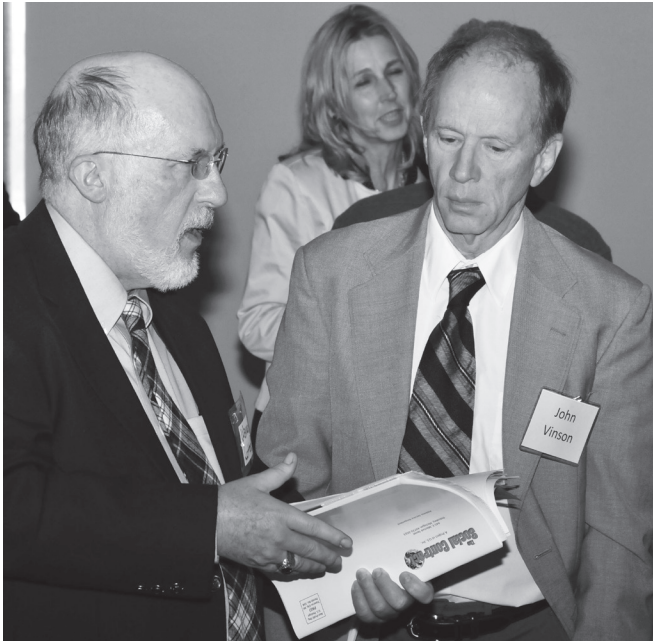
President Dwight D. Eisenhower

This reasonable demand, however, met strong resistance from the rising power of what many have called the "open borders" lobby—which consisted of business interests seeking cheap labor, Hispanic groups with a racialist agenda, and various stripes of leftists. Of the latter, some saw illegal immigration as a means to build a new voting bloc to benefit the Democratic Party. Hence they proposed "amnesty" for illegal aliens, i.e., legislation to give them legal status and a pathway to citizenship. One of the first major proposals for amnesty came in 1977 from President Jimmy Carter.

Among many leftists, influenced by the radicalism

of the sixties, was the idea that American sovereignty was not so important—given that America was an unjust and “racist” nation. In their minds, it was only proper that such a country should atone for its sins by opening its gates to the wretched of all the world.

As illegal immigration continued to rise through the early-to-mid-eighties, bringing the total of illegal aliens in the country to around four or five million, Congress entered into serious debate over the question. The



Social Contract Editor Wayne Lutton and AICF Executive Director John Vinson during a break at the annual Writer’s Workshop, Rosslyn, Virginia, October 2, 2011.

genuine reformers wanted an employer sanctions law, an effective means for employers to identify illegal aliens, and more Border Patrol agents. Their opponents countered that they would accept these demands only in exchange for an amnesty. They promised, however, that amnesty should only happen one time, because subsequent amnesties would indeed weaken the rule of law. A one-time amnesty also was proper, they said, because it

would be impossible to deport millions of illegal aliens and inhumane even to try. It seemed that no one cared to recall how Eisenhower’s crackdown on relatively few illegal aliens caused many more to deport themselves.

In 1986, both sides neared a compromise: enforcement in exchange for amnesty. But in the House, amnesty opponents argued that rewarding lawbreaking would only encourage more of it. They tried to strip amnesty from the final bill, but their effort failed by seven votes. Voting for the amnesty were so-called conservatives Newt Gingrich and John McCain. At the same time, amnesty advocates wanted to expand the number eligible for legalization by including alleged farm workers—and they got their demand. IRCA passed Congress, and President Reagan signed it into law.

No doubt Reagan trusted the promises of the amnesty supporters. He shouldn’t have. An overburdened immigration service struggled to validate amnesty applications, but fraud was rampant, particularly with the agricultural workers. A total of nearly three million illegal aliens became legal. Though illegal immigration declined for a few years, it subsequently shot up again. The promised enhancements of enforcement didn’t happen, and amnesty proponents demanded and obtained more amnesties. All the while, certain members of Congress were telling their constituents that IRCA was a great success.

The lessons from this debacle are not hard to discern. First, advocates of illegal immigrants are pretty indifferent to the sovereignty of our country and its laws. Second, what they promise cannot be trusted. Third, our immigration service doesn’t have the resources to oversee and police an amnesty. Fourth, rewarding lawbreakers encourages more lawlessness. Fifth, take assurances from politicians on immigration with a grain of salt.

President Obama and other amnesty advocates affirm that they have not given up on their goal. When and if they try it again, the wise will remember the sad tale of IRCA. ■