

There is a dispute as to whether a free-trade agreement with Mexico will impede or impel migration across the southern border of the US. Richard Estrada, a columnist with the Dallas Morning News urges the administration to take an honest look at what may well be a great influx, at least in the near term. © by The Dallas Morning News, this item is reprinted with their permission.

MEXICO MAY BE OVERPLAYING THE 'IMMIGRATION CARD'

By Richard Estrada

Just before his current tour of US and Canadian cities — designed to drum up support for North American free trade — Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari predicted that if a US-Mexico free-trade agreement does not materialize, "millions" of Mexican illegal aliens will flood Texas and California in search of work. Now, is this hard sell or what?

US-Mexico free trade may in fact counteract mass immigration from Mexico, as Salinas suggests. But prominent US immigration experts, such as Michael S. Teitelbaum, former staff director of the House Select Committee on Population, and David Simcox, executive director of the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies, believe that if those results are to be achieved, they may take generations.

In the short run, the free-trade pact itself might even trigger more northward migration, say veteran immigration observers. Specifically, earned income and enhanced skills from free-trade-related jobs in Mexico could provide workers there with the savings and work qualifications to resettle in the United States even sooner than they otherwise would have. Their decision to move would be based on the assumption that nothing is more likely to close their earnings gap with US workers quicker than to join them in the land of the free and the home of the shopping mall.

What Salinas is really concerned about — although it's politically impossible for him to admit it — is that in the absence of a short-run economic upswing in his country, the Mexican political system (and above all the ruling PRI party that is its emblem) may come under renewed political attack from nationalist political forces. Should the hectoring of the loyal opposition deteriorate into civil disorder, would the government respond with the relative tolerance of the past three years, or would there be an atavistic return to the night of Tlatelolco, the infamous 1968 massacre that left hundreds dead in Mexico City?

A sudden mass migration or refugee influx would center on a few key points along the nearly 2,000-mile US-Mexico border. Many Mexicans

would simply walk across from Tijuana into Chula Vista, California, and others would cross into El Paso in their Broncos and Suburbans.

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Salinas may have overplayed the immigration card, but US presidents are particularly susceptible to ham-fistedness on immigration and refugee issues. Back in the first years of the 'secret war' in Nicaragua, President Reagan argued that the American people were obligated to help topple communism in Central America if they didn't want to see hordes of Central American refugees, fed up with communism, showing up on America's doorstep.

Carefully weighing immigration policy, ex-ante, is something that US presidents seldom do. Instead, they use immigration to ingratiate themselves politically with this or that domestic interest group, or they wave the issue like Teddy Roosevelt's big stick as a means of garnering concessions on some other issue. "Support my policy on the Contras (or free trade) and you'll be rewarded with the sweet carrot of no mass immigration."

But for Bush to accede to the argument that there is nothing the US government can do unilaterally to curb massive immigration is both erroneous and irresponsible. He is sending exactly the wrong message to prospective illegal immigrants and feeding the potential for immigration-induced conflict between the two nations. Let millions of Mexicans abruptly flood Southwestern towns and even the most sensitive of liberals is going to demand the militarization of the region.

If Bush insists on using the immigration issue to garner support for the free-trade agreement, let him complement the dire warnings with a call for more resources for the federal immigration service to control the illegal immigration occurring right now. Such a move would be a good-faith signal to US

workers and taxpayers that in addition to initially losing some jobs to Mexico as a result of free trade, they won't also be forced to face ongoing competition for jobs, low-cost housing and social services.

Immigration has always been of great significance to the American people, it is no less so today. But the setting of immigration policy must be viewed responsibly as an end in itself, instead of irresponsibly as a means to an end. ■