

The Relationship of Legal to Illegal Immigration

By JOHN TANTON, M.D.

In the early years of our work on the immigration question, we at *The Social Contract* viewed legal and illegal as fairly separate and distinct phenomena. They seemed to require different measures for their control.

Illegal immigration was, of course *illegal*, and hence easy to oppose. The measures needed for its containment included such things as more border patrol agents, better detection of illegals within the country, employer sanctions, more care at our embassies overseas in issuing visas, repatriation to the country of origin (or in the case of Mexico, deep into Mexico, rather than just across the border), and so on.

Legal immigration in contrast seemed to require reconsideration of such things as family reunification, education policy for foreign students, economic effects, the brain drain, and the related questions of asylum and refugees. We did not see—or at least I didn’t—that legal immigration *per se* was one of the major causes of illegal immigration.

This realization came through reading Phil Martin’s papers on immigration, in which he characterized the causative factors as demand-pull, supply-push, and “networks.”¹ The “networks” are those informal channels of communication that transport cash, goods, and information *from* the United States *to* the country of origin. Since the direction of the flow is away from us, we tend not to see it. It is this counter-flow that helps stimulate interest in (and facilitate) emigration.

John H. Tanton, M.D., is publisher of The Social Contract, and served as editor for its first eight years. He is co-author with Wayne Lutton of The Immigration Invasion, and has written numerous editorials and opinion pieces, including “End of the Migration Epoch.”

In the United States, we tend to look at immigration as either legal or illegal, as outlined above. I contend that in the country of origin, migration is looked at as either *go* or *not go*. Whether or not it’s legal is, I believe, a minor point. If legal spots are available, fine. If not, there are plenty of rationalizations available to justify proceeding illegally: the need to feed family; the irredentist idea that the land was stolen from the migrants’ forefathers in the first place (an idea applicable for some Mexicans); the several amnesties we’ve given to illegal aliens, indicating that we’re not really serious; the welcoming reception by employers, welfare workers, and church people; the back-across-the-border-and-try-again charade of the border patrol; etc. Legality is not a major consideration.



Put simply, high levels of migration, whether legal or illegal, beget high levels of migration, whether legal or illegal, because the network flows back to the country of origin and encourages others to try emigration.

Without reducing legal immigration, we are unlikely to succeed in reducing the illegal variety. ■

End Note

1. See for instance his “Immigration and Integration: Challenges for the 1990s,” *The Social Contract*, Vol. IV, No. 3 (Spring 1994), pp. 177-182.