

Sam argues in support of a comprehensive immigration policy.

**IMMIGRATION:  
A NEW DEBATE ABOUT AN OLD PROBLEM**

Sam Sedaei

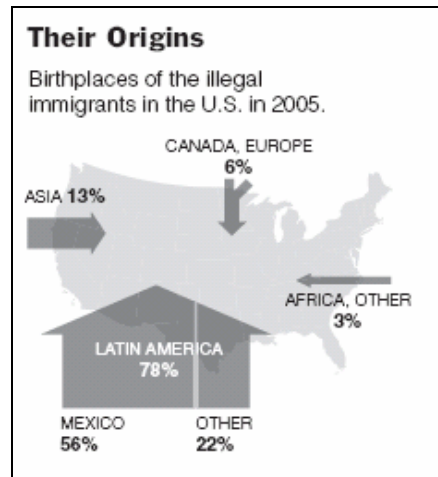
The twenty-first century is marked by grave security threats, economic challenges and serious problems such as the spread of AIDS epidemic and the warming of our global environment. One of those issues that have recently been a great amount of attention from politicians, citizens and immigrants alike is the issue of illegal immigration. Having immigrated to the United States seven years ago, this issue is of great interest to me. A thorough review of various proposals that have been offered by various politicians demonstrate that most do not reflect the realities behind immigration in ways that could reflect compassion, common sense and consistency with the American tradition as a country of immigrants.

It is important to begin the analysis on the current debate on immigration with an introduction of the main issues surrounding the topic and then proceed to review the current legislative proposals by the two houses of Congress and the president as well as a personal take on those proposals.

On March third, 400,000 immigrants marched in Chicago in support of comprehensive immigration reform. According to Chicago Tribune, most of the participants in the march were of Mexican origin, but many were also from India, Pakistan and other Asian and African countries as well as Canada. When they are asked why they came to America, they give reasons that are very much in line with the basic ideas of the American Dream, such as hard work and the hope of being able to prosper and live and raise a family in a free society.

The United States has a system of legal immigration through which individuals can apply to obtain legal residency, and consequently, American citizenship. The current political debate is

surrounding the undocumented workers and illegal immigration. There are now an estimated eleven to twelve million illegal immigrants in the United States. Since the year 2000, an estimated 850,000 unauthorized immigrants have entered the United States illegally, a population closely equivalent to a city the size of Indianapolis. The vast majority of these Immigrants have entered the country illegally through the Mexican border into the desert in Arizona, and most of them have entered the country in the past twenty years. During the previous political debate on immigration in 1986, President Reagan supported the democrats' push for granting amnesty to long-settled immigrants, which resulted in almost all immigrants

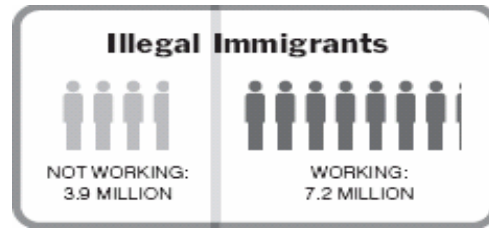


From the New York Times

gaining citizenship status. Most of the current illegal immigrants work at low-wage back-breaking jobs in the agricultural sectors, packing plants, restaurants, construction sites and similar jobs.

According to a public document by the Congressional Budget Office, the United States has been arresting aliens found to be in violation of the American immigration laws as a means of enforcement. In 2000, apprehensions were at a high of 1.8 million, but by 2002, they dropped to one million. According to CBO, apprehensions made along the southwest border between the United States and Mexico accounted for over 98 percent of all apprehensions made by the Border Patrol. But CBO also shows that apprehensions along the U.S. border with Mexico, as compared with other Border Patrol sectors, accounted for the greatest decline in total apprehensions for the year 2001 through 2003. In 2004, approximately 1.2 million aliens were apprehended; the Border patrol made 93 percent of those apprehensions.

The country seems to feel ambivalent toward the current debate for several reasons. On the one hand, the majority of immigrants are doing what any of us are doing: working hard, establishing families and sending their children to school. They have immigrated to the U.S. from poor countries with corrupt regimes hoping to be able to make better lives for themselves and their children



From the New York Times

than they potentially could in their own countries. Furthermore, despite the hard work they do in the U.S., many of them are still well below the poverty line because in many cases, they are paid less than the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour. But on the other hand, this is a nation of laws. Despite their hard work, undocumented workers have broken the laws of the United States by entering the country illegally rather than going through the legal process. Such mixed contribution to various aspects of the American society along with the prospects of immigrants becoming able to vote and taking a more active role in politics has made illegal immigration a point of contention in Washington.

There are many legitimate worries about the porous Mexican border, one of which is that there are people who live in the U.S. without documentation and not subject to law. Evidently, the conditions are also not particularly suited for those undocumented workers. It puts them in a position in which they can be exploited by employers without having any legal rights. If they have an accident, they may not seek government services in fear that it might lead to deportation. For these reasons, it is necessary to fix the system.

Following this introduction, we can proceed to review the main issues around which the debate in Washington currently centers.

One is that all politicians believe that we have to improve border security. Almost all of them believe that the U.S. needs to have some kind of “virtual wall” across the borders that will limit massive influx of thousands of people who are coming through places such as Arizona with impunity and often at great risk to themselves. Most politicians believe that higher border protection is part of any sensible immigration bill. Otherwise, the same problems that we are facing today will visit us again in a few decades. However, there are different ways in which politicians are willing to go about it. Some politicians want to place a physical fence along the Mexican border while others intend to increase border patrol agents. A poll by the New York Times showed that 33% of Americans favor more border patrol as means of reducing illegal immigration from Mexico, as opposed to only 9% that favor building more fences.

But the most serious debate on the hill has to do with, even if we seal our borders, what should the United States do with twelve million illegal immigrants who are already here. There are those lawmakers who believe they should be deported. If they wish to obtain citizenship, they must go back to their country of origin and apply for residency through legal routes. Another group of lawmakers has been approaching the issue differently, trying to put those illegal immigrants on a multi-step path to citizenship.

There is also a debate surrounding a third aspect of the immigration debate called the “guest worker program.” Through this program, some of the democrats would like to allow four hundred thousand guest workers to come into the United States, even though they would never have the opportunity toward citizenship. The guest worker program strongly resembles the agricultural worker visas that are currently granted.

While politicians are avoiding discussion about the economic impact of illegal workers, there is a debate on the economics of immigration among various interest groups, immigrants

and citizens alike. It is the general consensus among the economists that illegal immigrants work at jobs that Americans would not take, at least at the wages that are being paid. This has allowed many abusive employers to hire illegal immigrants just to be able to pay them wages that keep the workers in poverty despite their hard work. But while many immigrants are working at jobs Americans are not interested in, there seems to have been some adverse impact on low-skilled workers. This has made many African-Americans who currently hold those jobs concerned as they fear that the new immigration bill could make it easier for immigrants to push African-Americans out of low-skilled jobs.

When it comes to the issue of immigration, we need to have the most comprehensive bill. Otherwise, we will make the same mistake which we made in 1986, addressing the issue only to find ourselves having the same debate and dealing with the same problem twenty years later. Therefore, it is important to review the three main proposals that are currently being debated in order to decide whether any of them could be a real solution to the problem of illegal immigration.

The bill passed in the House of Representatives is considered the “toughest” of the three different proposals that are offered by lawmakers and the president. On border security, the bill requires the construction of "at least two layers of reinforced fencing" as well as "physical barriers, roads, lighting, cameras and sensors" along the approximately 700 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. Furthermore, it would hire more Border Patrol agents "as expeditiously as possible." There are currently 2,000 Border Patrol agents at the border. The House would also hire at least 250 active duty port of entry inspectors for each of the next three years. Most controversially, on the issue of existing illegal immigrants, the House bill makes it a federal crime to live in the United States illegally. Furthermore, individuals who help illegal immigrants

to enter or stay in the country would also face criminal penalties. However, despite such penalties for illegal immigrants, the bill contains no provisions for legalization of current immigrant in the U.S., although a conservative leader in the House, Representative Mike Pence, proposed a separate bill that would allow illegal immigrants to become guest workers, but not permanent residents or citizens. As the bill currently stands, there are no provisions on the guest worker program.

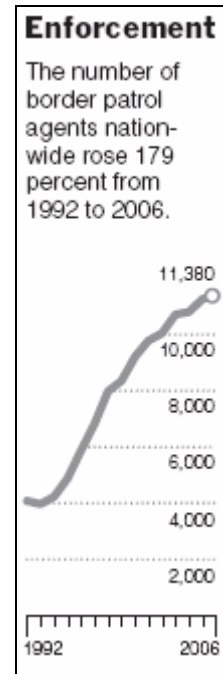
There are many problems with the current House bill from a policy standpoint. First of all, many lawmakers behind this bill intend to deport all of eleven or twelve million existing illegal immigrants. This is not realistic for several reasons. For one, we do not have the means to export this many people back into their own countries. Furthermore, we cannot count on them to leave voluntarily if they came here while enduring incredible hardship and have been knowingly living without legal documentation. Therefore, the idea that passing this law will immediately lead illegal immigrants to report themselves to authorities and allow themselves to be deported makes little sense. Finally as mentioned earlier, we do not have the capacity to track down all of illegal immigrants and all those who have assisted them to enforce this law. Many immigrants have established families in America, which means their children are American citizens. As a country of immigrants, the notion of American police officers that are going to snatch individuals from their homes and families, fathers and mothers from their children and send them off to their country of origin instead of arresting drug dealers and criminals is not one that is sensible policy-wise, or morally.

The president has also been closely involved in the immigration debate and has offered his position which is different in some ways than that of the House. On border security, he called on Congress to provide funding for large increases in manpower and technology at the border.

Furthermore, he has expressed the intention to increase the number of Border Patrol officers by an additional 6,000, but also that he intends to deploy up to 6,000 National Guard members to the southern border. While President Bush rejected “an automatic path to citizenship,” his proposal would give illegal immigrants a chance to gain citizenship after they “pay a meaningful penalty” for breaking the law. Finally, on the issue of guest worker program, he called on Congress to pass a guest worker program for more than two years, explaining his belief in the necessity of such program “to secure our borders.” However, he did not support a specific number of guest workers.

While President Bush’s proposal seems to take a middle-of-the-road approach, it is a political response aimed at scoring points with members from both parties instead of offering a real solution to the problem. The president proposed that we use a small percentage of the National Guard to help secure our borders over the next two years while we train Border Patrol agents. According to his plan, 6,000 guard members will be sent to the border for two or three weeks before being replaced by the next group of 6,000 Guard members a few weeks later. This means that his plan requires the deployment of 150,000 National Guard members along the Mexican border over the next two years. But too many details have been left out. The first question to ask is why would it take two years to hire and train Border Patrol agents? The 9/11 Commission recommended hiring of 10,000 new Border Patrol agents *two years ago*. But each year, the president and his republican allies in congress allocated insufficient amount of resources necessary to implement those recommendations. Now, the president is asking a high number of the National Guard to forgo their training at a time when the guard has already been stretched dangerously thin. The president and many lawmakers may be

over-estimating the impact of border enforcement on illegal immigration. According to the New York Times, over the past decade, the number of border agents has doubled while illegal immigration also doubled during the same time period. While enforcement is an important component of any successful immigration bill, we have every reason to know that protection alone is not going to have a significant impact. President's position on immigration seems to be closest to that of a bill that was recently passed by the U.S. Senate, which also seems to be the most sensible of the three proposals. Hence, it is important to review relevant clauses in the bill.



From  
The New York Times

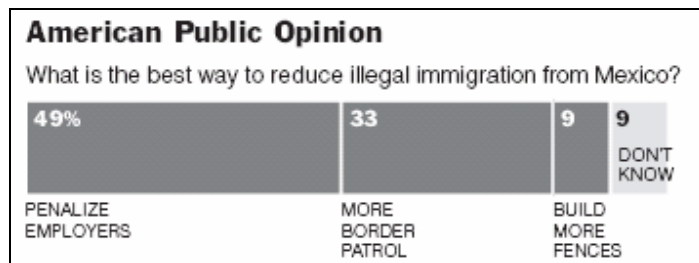
A few weeks ago, the Senate passed a bill on immigration that differed from both that of the House as well as the President's. On border enforcement, the bill initially called for limited "double- or triple-layered fencing" but later on during the course of the debate, the Senate added provisions for 350 miles of border fencing and 500 miles of vehicle barriers between the United States and Mexico. Furthermore, it increased the number of Border Patrol agents by 2,400 each year through 2011 to the current force of 11,300 agents. This would double border enforcement in the next five years. On the issue of existing immigrants, the bill would give those who have lived in the United States for two years or more a path to eventual citizenship. Those illegal immigrants who have been in the U.S. for less than two years would be required to leave the country. They could apply for the guest worker program but would have no guarantees of getting accepted to it. Finally, the bill offers a guest worker program with a path to legal permanent

residence. Negotiations in the bill reduced the number of foreign guest workers to be admitted annually to 200,000 a year from 320,000.

The Senate bill is the most sensible and practical proposal of the three for several reasons. For one, it is a bipartisan effort. The bill is sponsored by a range of senators from both parties, such as Senators Obama, Kennedy, McCain, Hagel, Martines, Salazar and Graham. If this issue is not solved in a bipartisan matter, we may have to visit the same issue again when the democrats take control of either Houses of Congress or the White House. Bipartisanship helps make laws more sustainable and responsive to more people's concerns than one that could come out of either political party alone. The second and more important issue is one surrounding the issue of existing immigrants. The Senate has recognized that it would not be practical to declare twelve million people felons solely based on their citizenship status. Furthermore, while the opponents of this provision call it an "amnesty," it is very different than the amnesty that was given to illegal immigrants during the eighties. Based on this bill, illegal immigrants would be required to get on an eleven-year multi-step path toward earning citizenships. In addition, they will be paying a fine. This path will filter out those who are not capable of complying with the laws of the United States over this long period, leaving mostly those who only have the intentions of working hard and raising families in the United States. It will also increase accountability because they will be required to pay taxes and take other responsibilities that are expected of U.S. citizens. Finally, it will prevent abusive employers from taking advantage of immigrants' citizenship status and hiring them while paying them a fraction of the federal minimum wage.

There are a few practical solutions to the problem of illegal immigration. But they are all based on the idea that we need to first acknowledge that illegal immigrants have broken the laws. There must be a difference between those who immigrate through legal routes and those who do not. So as a country that is ruled by law, undocumented workers must be required to pay a fine. They should also be required to “go to the back of the line” and go through the ten steps required by the Senate bill. But after they show their commitment to being a U.S. citizen by taking all the steps, then they should be allowed to stay here permanently. Americans also strongly believe that

employers should be penalized for hiring illegal immigrants. This is an important measure to enforce, because it forces illegal immigrants



From the New York Times

to enter the citizenship path offered by the Senate *before* being able to obtain jobs.

Immigration policy is an emotional issue due to the millions of lives that are greatly affected by it. But it is also emotional for many Americans as many become afraid of seeing the increasing number of immigrants from year-to-year. But there is no better time to remember that this country is a country of immigrants and it is also a democracy. Hence, while we have to secure our borders, we also have to treat the people that are already here humanely. Today's immigrants are following the path toward what Americans call the American Dream. Immigrants contribute to the booming of the economy and rising GDP, and we would do our policies a disservice if we don't recognize the contributions of those individuals. Therefore, lawmakers need to put partisan politics aside and agree on a comprehensive immigration bill that would both secure our borders and give existing immigrants the chance to become assimilated, learn English, and consequently earn United States citizenship.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

“The Debate Over Immigration Reform.” 2006. *The New York Times*.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/16/washington/16IMMIGRATIONBILLS\\_GRAPHIC.html?ex=1149652800&en=81d31e0e7c0ba27c&ei=5070](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/16/washington/16IMMIGRATIONBILLS_GRAPHIC.html?ex=1149652800&en=81d31e0e7c0ba27c&ei=5070)

“Democrats See Opportunity in Arizona.” 2006. *The New York Times*.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/04/washington/04kyl.html>

“Bush Urges Bill Compromise.” 2006. *The Washington Post*.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/01/AR2006060100804.html>

“Senate Approves Immigration Bill.” 2006. *The Washington Post*.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/25/AR2006052501548.html>

Congressional Budget Office. “Immigration Policy in the United States.” 2006.  
<http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/70xx/doc7051/02-28-Immigration.pdf> **(On PAIS)**

Hanson, Gordon H. 2006. “Illegal Migration from Mexico to the United States.” *National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc.* NBER Working Papers: 12141 **(On EconLit)**