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Facing Facts about Immigration

BY PETER SKERRY

Getty Images

An almost unremitting effort to fix a satisfactory immigration policy runs through the second half of American national history. From the 1870s to the 1960s Congress wrestled with the difficulties of regulating migration from other lands. A vast, chaotic, tremendously intricate mass of legislation accumulated. Although never the primary issue in national politics, immigration restriction sometimes aroused the concern of millions and the passions of substantial minorities. At other times interest declined almost to a vanishing point. Yet only for brief interludes was there any general belief that the problem had been settled. Wrangling, confusion, and a welter of special pressures crowd the legislative record. One finds little long-range, intelligent planning.

—John Higham,
“The Politics of Immigration Restriction”

Peter Skerry is professor of political science at Boston College.

This observation by the late John Higham (1920–2003), dean of U.S. immigration historians, helps put the continuing stalemate over immigration reform in perspective. Immigration has always been a difficult and contentious issue. It combines technical complexity with emotionally charged concerns about national identity, ethnicity, and race. Narrow, well-organized business interests have much at stake in the formulation of immigration policy, but the mass of ordinary, unorganized Americans is also deeply invested in this intensely symbolic issue. No wonder, then, that immigration does not play out along typical partisan and interest-group fault-lines.

Penetrating the fog of fears, the moralizing and the complexity will require extraordinary leadership. Yet few among our political and intellectual elites have attempted to make sense of, much less engage, widespread popular disaffection with immigration. Nor have elites sought to clarify for their fellow citizens the genuine dilemmas posed by contemporary

mass migration. Ordinary Americans have consequently been left to sort out this nettlesome issue for themselves. Not surprisingly, they have come up with some downright incorrect and at times offensive claims. Whatever their merits, these claims now constitute political facts. But rather than reckon with these facts, our leaders have either dismissed popular discontent with current policy, or pandered to it. This abdication of responsibility spans the political spectrum from liberal to conservative, from the powerful pro-immigration camp to the restrictionist rump.

I'll examine two aspects of the stymied debate over immigration here: its economic and social impacts on American society and its implications for counterterrorism and national security. As will be evident, economic self-interest explains a good deal, especially among pro-immigration elites. Yet of greater moment is the complacency and short-sightedness of these elites, who routinely dismiss widespread popular anxieties as irrational or even racist rather than seek to understand them. More than a failure of leadership, this has been a failure of political imagination.

Perceptions on the Ground

There is today a sizeable gap between elite and non-elite opinion on immigration, wider than in just about any other policy domain. Underlying this divide are divergent views about immigration across social and economic strata. Economists Kenneth Scheve and Matthew Slaughter note that “less skilled people prefer more restrictive immigration policy, and more skilled people prefer less restrictive immigration policy.”¹ As they sum up their statistical simulations: “If you could put a high school dropout with roughly 11 years of education through both high school and college, ending up with about 16 years of education, then the probability that this individual supports immigration restrictions would fall by some 10 to 14 percentage points.”

These findings are corroborated by opinion surveys sponsored by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. In its 2002 annual report, the Council notes that immigration elicits

much stronger reactions from the public than from foreign policy elites: “The public is substantially more alarmed by immigrants and refugees coming into the United States as a critical threat to U.S. interests by a 46 point margin (60 percent of the public versus only 14 percent of leaders).” This gap has been at least this wide for more than a decade. With regard to illegal immigration specifically, 70 percent of the public believes “controlling and reducing illegal immigration” to be “a very important foreign policy goal of the United States”, compared to 22 percent of U.S. leaders.

Immigration politics get complicated because Americans may know what they're feeling, but don't necessarily understand what they're experiencing. One certainly encounters claims that are wide of the mark. For example, it's often charged that today's immigrant families aren't learning English. Yet while immigrants themselves may not be learning as much English as desirable, their children and grandchildren certainly are.

The public also expresses alarm about the demands immigrants put on government services. In their recent ethnographic study of racial and class tensions in four Chicago neighborhoods, *There Goes the Neighborhood*, William Julius Wilson and Richard P. Taub document how working- and lower-middle-class Americans tend to regard immigrants as free-loaders who don't contribute to the common good. They cite a typical letter to the editor of a local newspaper: “Americans born and raised here better wake up! . . . many of you or most of you are not entitled to the same benefits as many of the immigrants who never paid a dime in taxes.”

As with many such complaints, this one has *some* factual basis. Researchers report that immigrants typically arrive planning not to remain here, but to work hard, save as much money as possible, and then return home. And while most, do end up staying, their decisions are often hedged by dreams of eventually going home. Native-born Americans pick up on this lack of commitment and conclude that immigrants are less likely to be reliable neighbors.

¹Sources for data and quotations in this article are available on request.

From there, it is but a short leap to the conclusion that “immigrants don’t pay taxes.” But this is not so. Illegal immigrants pay sales and property taxes; many even pay Social Security, Medicare and Federal and state income taxes. Legal immigrants pay all these taxes and usually more.

The relevant question is whether immigrants—in particular the overwhelming majority of them who arrive with low skill and education levels—contribute as much in taxes as they claim in public services. Because they have more children than natives and their households earn less, these immigrants tend overall to receive more in public benefits than they pay in taxes. To be sure, this is not the case at the Federal level. But at the state and local levels, where the relevant services—schools, hospitals and social welfare programs—are overwhelmingly paid for and delivered, immigrants do constitute a net fiscal drain. This negative impact at the state and local levels certainly occurs in the short run and, as economist Gordon Hanson emphasizes, in the long run as well. Thus, while the perception of immigrants as fiscal freeloaders who contribute nothing to public coffers is a gross distortion, the widespread anxiety that immigrants cost more than they contribute is hardly misplaced.

Beyond these fiscal considerations, the transient situation of many immigrants contributes to social strains that are difficult to quantify but visible and vexing to many Americans. Immigrants intent upon saving money cram into overcrowded apartments that are often neglected by landlords. Unattached males, separated from family and loved ones, can be noisy and troublesome neighbors, whose run-down cars jam streets and end up parked on what locals claim used to be plots of grass. Across the country, local jurisdictions have enacted ordinances and implemented programs to address such concerns. Yet these initiatives invariably antagonize immigrants or their advocates, resulting in still more friction.

Even immigrant efforts to find work can foment controversy. For some time now the image of immigrants that most readily comes to mind has been not shadowy figures running across the border, but day laborers in a Home Depot parking lot waiting to be hired by contractors or

homeowners. To some passers-by, such scenes are evidence of ambition and hard work. But to others, they signal public disorder: unkempt men leering at women, darting through traffic to negotiate with potential employers, drinking and urinating in public.

The social disorder associated with immigrants is generally low-level and mundane, which is why such complaints are easily dismissed, especially by those affluent enough to insulate themselves from them. But to beleaguered residents of changing neighborhoods, these seemingly small matters loom large—which is the insight of the much lauded “broken windows” perspective on law enforcement. Wilson and Taub quote a long-time resident of one Chicago neighborhood:

You know, just on this street, we’ve had a couple people move in and they’re not, you know, they don’t understand about block clubs, you know. . . we have people they trying to work on they cars on the street. And this may sound really trivial, but if you don’t maintain standards . . . We have garages and alleys, that’s where you do that stuff, back there, okay?

Noteworthy here is that this is not a white resident, but a lower-middle-class black woman concerned about the arrival of less affluent *blacks* in her neighborhood. When the offenders are Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants, such reactions are even more intense.

Finally, one of the most common complaints is that immigrants threaten American jobs and wages. Economists Timothy Hatton and Jeffrey Williamson cite one recent poll in which more than three-quarters “thought that immigrants robbed jobs from natives.” Other surveys report somewhat lower figures but, whatever the exact numbers, a large proportion of the American public consistently expresses concerns about the negative labor market impacts of immigration.

Here again, there is some support for such anxieties. Economist George Borjas reports that between 1980 and 2000, immigration had its biggest negative impact on the low-skilled, reducing the wages of high school dropouts about 5 percent. David Card finds a smaller negative impact on dropouts—about a 1 percent wage



Day laborers wait for work outside a Home Depot in Los Angeles, California.

decline. Either way, this is a troubling outcome because it disproportionately affects African Americans. It certainly deserves more attention than it gets. But overall, the negative impact of immigration on Americans' wages is quite limited.

So if most American workers are not competing directly with immigrants, does that not mean that they benefit economically from their presence? Probably not. Contrary to the received wisdom, the net contribution to the national economy from immigrants is very small. Borjas calculates that they increase U.S. GDP one-tenth of 1 percent annually. Most other economists agree, with a few insisting that the figure must be higher. Either way, immigration's aggregate economic impact is not large. Skeptics should stop and ponder the low education and skill levels of most immigrants and, of course, the huge size of the American economy.

Yet if immigration barely increases the overall size of the national economic pie, it does affect how that pie gets sliced up. The owners of capital, business entrepreneurs, and well-educated professionals benefit overwhelmingly.

In effect, low-skilled immigrants help increase the productivity and national-income share of those who employ them. It should be no surprise that millions of ordinary Americans perceive immigrants as competitors for jobs, neighborhood turf or public resources, while the more affluent and wealthy tend to regard them as employees—the nannies, gardeners, waiters, maids and laborers who address their needs.

Now, it so happens that this distributional impact of immigration has occurred during a period when, according to economists Scheve and Slaughter, substantial wage premiums have gone to high-skill workers while “the majority of the U.S. labor force has had close to zero or even negative real-wage growth for about 25 years.” Indeed, this period of wage stagnation coincides roughly with the steadily increasing numbers of immigrants arriving since the United States reopened its doors in 1965. This is undoubtedly one reason why many Americans attribute their economic woes to immigrants.

Yet the evidence is that immigration—in addition to trade and other aspects of

globalization—has contributed only modestly to growing wage inequality. Indeed, productivity gains and wage increases have been the most sluggish in service sectors, which are relatively insulated from global economic forces. More to the point, premiums to skilled labor are attributable primarily to technological change.

Neither Victims nor Criminals

All of these complaints get caught up in the broader chorus against illegal immigrants, of whom there are about 12 million in the United States today. This *is* a problem. But once again the public's preoccupation with it is overwrought and often mean spirited. While such anxieties are not without some factual basis, they are not entirely rational.

For example, more than a decade ago survey data revealed that Americans greatly overestimated the number of illegal immigrants in our midst. Such misperceptions have not diminished. Yet it is also true that the number of illegals has continued to grow, and that as illegals have dispersed around the United States, what was once a regional concern has become a national one.

So, the debate over illegal immigration is seductively misleading. Were it possible to stop illegal immigration tomorrow, the concerns expressed by so many Americans—failure to learn English, job competition, fiscal demands and social disorder (putting aside for the moment their factual validity)—would remain largely unaddressed. In fact, because legal immigrants outnumber illegals about two to one, they are a greater source of such complaints. The real challenges here have less to do with the legal status of immigrants than with the social and cultural strains generated by the movement of large numbers of unskilled, poorly educated immigrants in and out of American neighborhoods. Nevertheless, virtually all participants in this debate share the same unexamined assumption: that legal immigration is uniformly benign, while illegal immigration is uniquely problematic.

What this suggests is that popular concerns about immigration are broader and deeper than any of us are prepared to acknowledge. This is

because the dominant frame—“illegal immigrants bad, legal immigrants good”—serves the interests of skittish politicians and other elites of diverse perspectives, all of whom find in this simple dichotomy a relatively safe way to address a technically complex, emotionally charged issue they might otherwise prefer to avoid.

For their part, immigration advocates have learned that retreating tactically and not mounting the barricades to defend “the undocumented” bolsters their case for legal immigration. Restrictionists have done the obverse and narrowed their objections to immigration in general down to opposition to illegal immigration in particular. Indeed, restrictionists have figured out that it is less costly politically to inveigh against illegals than against Hispanic immigrants.

One consequence of this deeply embedded template is that the dominant discourse depicts illegal immigrants as victims—as President Bush put it, “dwelling in the shadows of American life—fearful, often abused and exploited.” They are seldom seen as active agents who have made choices and are responsible, at least in part, for their consequences. Yet as noted earlier, immigrants—including illegals—typically choose to come to the United States with plans to accumulate savings and eventually return home. Anthropologist Leo Chavez's research illuminates how such strategies help explain why immigrants put up with substandard living conditions and endure exploitative, even dangerous work situations.

As we have also seen, immigrants' plans change, and even illegals end up staying and putting down roots. Hundreds of thousands of illegals have managed to buy houses (which they may now regrettably lose). Others have joined labor unions. Illegal immigrants have also succeeded in educating their children, some of whom are now knocking on the doors of state universities demanding in-state tuition.

Yet if illegal immigrants are not just victims, neither are they criminals—the popular image that restrictionists get to reinforce under the implicit rules of this curious debate. In fact, illegal entry into the United States is a misdemeanor status offense that does not rise to the

level of a crime. More broadly, if illegals are to be considered criminals, then what of those American employers who violate the law when hiring them?

The fact is that the line between legal and illegal immigrants is not as clear as many Americans would like to believe. Over the decades there have been several amnesties, not just the controversial one that legalized three million illegals back in 1986. More recently, as many as one-third of those acquiring residence papers have had prior experience here as undocumented immigrants; two-thirds of adult legal immigrants from Mexico have. Similarly, the pervasive image of people sneaking across the Mexican border is only half right. As many as 45 percent of undocumented persons now in the country entered legally—as shoppers, temporary workers or tourists—and then overstayed their visas.

Between one million and 1.5 million illegals are in what former INS general counsel David Martin calls “twilight status”, which typically means they were caught in processing delays while waiting to be made a lawful permanent resident. Most of these individuals typically go on to obtain that permanent status. In other words, a non-trivial number of immigrants are here illegally for reasons not entirely of their own making. Indeed, delays and errors by immigration bureaucrats are notorious, and arguably contribute to undermining the rule of law. Immigration law is a complicated maze of exceptions and deadlines carved out by Congress to accommodate diverse constituencies. These rules are difficult for bureaucrats to administer, and easy for individuals to run afoul of. So the popular understanding of illegal immigrants as a distinct class of flagrant law-breakers hardly accounts for the facts on the ground.

Immigration and Terrorism

The immigration debate is similarly contorted whenever counterterrorism and national security policy are raised. Opinion polls as well as casual observation confirm that broad segments of the public associate immigration with terrorism. Yet this is a link that political

elites are typically reluctant to make or even acknowledge. As then-INS Commissioner James Ziglar emphasized repeatedly in the aftermath of 9/11: “These weren’t immigrants. They were terrorists.” As with their economic anxieties, ordinary Americans’ inchoate, often ill-informed but nevertheless not entirely unreasonable concerns about immigration and terrorism get downplayed or dismissed by elites.

Particularly since 9/11, Americans are more likely to connect terrorism with illegal immigration and our border with Mexico. Toward the end of his unsuccessful presidential campaign, restrictionist Congressman Tom Tancredo ran sensationalist television spots exploiting this association in the public mind. On the other hand, it would appear from the broader debate over immigration that Americans are still more concerned about Mexican day laborers than they are about Muslim terrorists crossing the Rio Grande.

How is public sentiment on this critical issue to be evaluated? Robert Leiken of the Nixon Center has highlighted how the average citizen’s understanding of the intersection of immigration and terrorism is flawed. Acknowledging that three Hizballah members were arrested attempting to cross the Mexican border into California in November 2002, Leiken nevertheless concludes:

Latin America in general and Mexico in particular are inhospitable to Muslim extremists in ways Canada and our sea and air borders are not. . . . The Canadian border is more attractive to Muslims because of the large Canadian Muslim presence, the support networks created by indulgent asylum and other immigration policies in Canada.

Other analysts emphasize that terrorists have not typically entered the United States surreptitiously. They have almost always come in through the front door, albeit relying on fraudulent documents and identities. As former senior counsel to the 9/11 Commission Susan Ginsburg observes, terrorists—including the perpetrators of 9/11—are most likely to use legal channels *illegally*. This tactic not only reduces physical risk, but creates the appearance of legality and thereby facilitates their mobility, fund-raising and planning.

Though the public may be uninformed about such policy details, its gut instincts are hardly all wrong. As Leiken points out, because Muslims here are relatively assimilated, the principal terrorist threat to the United States is not sleeper cells relying on support from local pockets of alienated Muslims (the scenario in Europe), but hit squads brought in from the outside (like the 9/11 group). In other words, counter-terrorism in the post-9/11 era underscores the need for vigilance at our borders.

Finally, our huge population of illegals itself creates opportunities for terrorists. As Ginsburg puts it:

The illicit market in travel and identity documents generated by the unauthorized population in the United States is a resource for terrorists. . . . Since one means of entry through illegal channels is to mingle in the flow of migrants and seasonal workers, finding an effective way to reduce the flow of unauthorized migrants is important for reducing opportunities for terrorists.

Once again, the public's instinctive anxiety and even anger that "the rules" are being flouted are not entirely misplaced.

Yet while ordinary Americans struggle to articulate their concerns about immigration and national security, our political elites typically avoid such linkages. Take the 9/11 Commission itself. It issued a thorough and insightful staff report focusing precisely on the intersection of these two domains. Yet clearly seeking to avoid the word "immigration" wherever possible, the Commission coined a new term of art, "terrorist travel." Other analysts refer to "terrorist mobility."

Or consider the Department of Homeland Security's October 2007 *National Strategy*. That document focuses exclusively on how DHS plans to address the challenges from natural disasters and terrorism. Yet immigration, which accounts for more than a third of Homeland Security's budget, scarcely figures into the analysis. The words "immigration" or "immigrant" appear only seven times in the 53-page document. Even so, they are buried in the text such that the connections between

immigration and counter-terrorism go completely unexamined.

The reasons for this gap in the discourse among elites are diverse and complicated. The most deep-rooted spring from the clashing perspectives of an array of Federal bureaucracies. While the FBI and CIA have been notoriously uncooperative with one another, they both share an aversion, if not outright disdain for, their counterparts in immigration. Ginsburg refers to "the cultural divide between the immigration, customs and border control agencies and the civilian and military intelligence communities." Leiken is more blunt: "Immigration specialists, taken as a whole, have viewed national security specialists, as a whole, with suspicion, while security experts have tended to regard immigration experts with disdain and immigration as an issue marginal to foreign and national security policy."

It is easy to dismiss these as petty personality conflicts or bureaucratic turf battles. Such factors are obviously in play, but so are fundamental differences of perspectives and interests. Immigration enforcement is a technically complicated and emotionally taxing undertaking that requires officials to make wrenching decisions as to whether families remain together or get torn apart. Intelligence professionals develop a certain self-protective aversion to dealing with such messy interpersonal matters.

Even when such bureaucratic obstacles are overcome, the result can be disappointing. On July 5, 2001, the CIA conducted a White House briefing on that summer's heightened terrorist threat. At the behest of counter-terrorism adviser Richard Clarke, two staffers from the National Security Unit of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) were included. Yet both individuals later told the 9/11 Commission staff that the briefing was "over their heads." One of them did nothing to follow up on the meeting; the other wrote a memo about it. In any event, the acting INS Commissioner never heard about the meeting or the heightened terrorist threat.

In the decade or so leading up to 9/11, the INS was preoccupied with stanching the flow of illegal immigrants across the Mexican border. So it is understandable, but nevertheless revealing, that Doris Meissner, INS Commissioner



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An anti-illegal immigration demonstrator in Fort Lauderdale, Florida in 2005

for the entire eight years of the Clinton Administration, told the 9/11 Commission that she had never heard of Osama bin Laden until August 2001—ten months after she had left the government.

To be fair, there have been serious efforts since 9/11 to overcome such barriers to coordination and cooperation across Federal agencies. Before that fateful day immigration personnel were completely preoccupied with stopping illegal immigrants and those who smuggled them. Today, those responsible for immigration at Homeland Security—agency executives, managers and line personnel—typically report that counter-terrorism is at the core of their mission—even if the *National Strategy* paper neglects to make that clear. Such declarations, it seems safe to conclude, are no doubt driven by bureaucratic calculations to justify manpower and budgets to higher ups and, of course, Congress. Even so, Ginsburg recently wrote of DHS, that “terrorist mobility is only beginning to be embraced as a subject for policy attention at senior levels.”

It is thus all the more doubtful that counter-terrorism is reflected in the day-to-day routines of immigration personnel. This is

almost certainly not for lack of revised mission statements, and even new training programs. What has not changed are the intractable realities facing the street-level bureaucrats who implement immigration policy. Take, for example, immigration inspectors at the nation’s ports of entry, who typically face a trade-off between the need to conduct thorough and effective inspections of those entering into the country and the constant pressure to minimize long lines and wait-times. These not only frustrate those held up, among whom are American citizens, but also business interests that depend on the easy transfer of goods and people across borders. In the extreme but not uncommon scenario, inspectors sacrifice thoroughness in order to keep traffic moving, thereby avoiding chaos on the scene and complaints to Congress. Such are the imperatives of the situation at our borders that that are not feasibly overcome by managers back at regional headquarters, or by Federal executives in Washington.

Similar constraints are evident at the nation’s 354 international airports. Here the usual pressures to keep the flow of people moving are heightened by the scrutiny of foreign governments advocating on behalf of their nationals

and of airlines on behalf of their customers. The congressional response to such interests prior to 9/11 was to mandate that international flights be processed within 45 minutes of arrival. This afforded inspectors less than one minute to determine whether an arriving visitor was admissible and, if so, how long that individual would be allowed to remain in the United States. No wonder the 9/11 Commission report characterized immigration agents as working in a “culture of facilitation”, in which the emphasis had long been on speedy processing rather than effectively screening for terrorists.

Reorienting bureaucratic forces rooted in such operational routines will not be easy. Just to begin the process would require elites to challenge allies whose values and interests they likely share. For example, out of concern that civil liberties would be threatened, liberals have shown no enthusiasm and considerable hostility to linking immigration and national security. Nor were the Bush Administration and its reform allies eager to associate immigration with terrorism, particularly when advocating a temporary worker program designed to facilitate the easy movement of migrants back and forth across the border. Any such linkage would have rendered an already controversial (and ultimately ill-fated) proposal even less popular.

The entrenched bureaucratic and political forces that relegate immigration and national security to distinct policy domains will not soon be overcome. Elite opinion understandably reflects this reality and will almost certainly not challenge it. Meanwhile, popular opinion continues to be unconstrained by any such pressures. Whatever its plausible well-springs, that perspective will be raw and unfiltered. The self-proclaimed tribunes of the people will pander to such sentiments, and the dominant tendency among our elites will be to close their ears.

If Americans today are paranoid about immigrants, our elites have helped make them that way. Even before the events on 9/11 and the current financial and economic crises, profound transformations in the global economy were arousing anxieties among mil-

lions of Americans, who understood clearly that they were losing ground. Just as clear for many has been the mistaken belief that immigrants—especially illegal immigrants—contribute significantly to their economic difficulties. On the other hand, Americans have more or less rationally attributed a raft of specific fiscal and social strains to this huge influx of newcomers.

So Americans have turned to their government to do something to protect them—in their neighborhoods and workplaces and at schools, hospitals and other public institutions. What has been demanded is often mean-spirited and ill-considered. Prudent leaders will listen carefully and devise policies that are responsive to such concerns without resorting to gimmicks that pander to the emotions of the moment. But unfortunately, immigration attracts demagogues, both the washed and unwashed variety. Cavalierly dismissing the anxieties of millions of Americans as nativism and racism is no more responsible than scapegoating immigrants for our woes.

The Obama Administration might have what it takes to address this issue, but it has thus far been emphatic that there is no room for immigration on its already over-burdened agenda. This has led to wishful thinking that the recession will resolve our immigration dilemmas. But this seems improbable. While the influx of immigrants, particularly illegals, will probably diminish, the millions already here are not likely to return home, where the downtown will be as bad or worse than it is in the United States. Meanwhile, increased economic stress here will likely lead to more vilification of immigrants.

Echoing John Higham, Timothy Hatton and Jeffrey Williamson observe: “Changes in immigration policy usually come in very big, discrete steps and only after long, acrimonious, and time-intensive debates.” We are almost certainly not yet at the point of any such big steps. But if we are to negotiate the present juncture successfully—more successfully than we did after World War I, when we ended mass immigration and attempted to withdraw from global economic and political realities—then we will need stronger and more capable leadership than we have thus far seen. 🌐