

## IMMIGRATION WILDFIRES

by Michael Ventura

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The people who know our border best scoff at talk of making it “secure,” especially by building a wall. In Arizona, “Cochise County’s 83 deputies patrol an area of rangeland, high desert and mountains larger than Connecticut.” Cochise County Sheriff Larry Dever calls a wall “a waste of money.” [USA Today, May 1, p1] Those exact words were repeated on the Texas border by Presidio County Sheriff Danny C. Domingues. And T.J. Bonner, president of the union that represents “nearly all” U.S. Border Patrol Agents, calls Bush’s security plan “a smoke screen” and “underwhelming.” Bonner remembers “the last time cameras and sensors were bought and installed... millions of dollars were spent on equipment that was either never installed or improperly maintained.” [Lubbock Avalanche-Journal, May 17, p.3] Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano: “We’re not going to seal the border, [because] we can’t. When I hear congressional and media people saying, ‘Shut the border,’ I think to myself, ‘They’ve never seen the border.’ You can’t possibly have been to the Arizona-Mexico border and believe that is possible.” [Washington Post, June 25, p3] And even if a wall was possible, she adds, “Show me a 50-foot wall and I’ll show you a 51-foot ladder.”

Proponents of a wall neglect to mention that 40% of undocumented workers enter the country legally, then overstay their visas. [Washington Post, June 19, p1] Colorado’s vile GOP Rep. Tom Tancredo can rave, “They’re coming to kill you, and you, and me, and my grandchildren,” [Washington Spectator, April 14, p4]. But in fact the 9/11 hijackers entered the country legally. “The 500,000 or so people who manage to sneak in from Mexico each year are a miniscule fraction -- about 1% -- of the tourists and students and other visitors who enter America legally... Mexico is not the preferred route of the suspected terrorists caught so far because they prefer more convenient options, like the Canadian border.” [New York Times, May 16, p.25]

Republicans rant about immigration but their behind-the-scenes behavior does not match their rhetoric. The Washington Post, June 19, page 1: “Between 1999 and 2003 [that is, since Bush took office] work-site enforcement operations were scaled back 95%... The number of employers prosecuted for unlawfully employing immigrants dropped from 182 in 1999 to 4 in 2003... In 1999, the United States initiated fines against 417 companies. In 2004, it issued fines to 3.” Convictions for hiring illegals in 2004: 46.

The Post goes on to report that in 1998, during Georgia’s onion harvest, 4,034 undocumented workers were arrested during a Justice Department sweep of the fields -- after which, not surprisingly, most of the others didn’t show for work. Onions lay unpicked, farmers were livid, and Georgia’s mostly Republican representatives in Congress howled for immigration arrests to cease. They ceased. In 1999’s Operation Vanguard, the Immigration and Naturalization Service “subpoenaed personnel records from Midwestern meatpacking plants” and found that “at about 40 plants in Nebraska, western Iowa, and South Dakota” 19% had “dubious documents.” Of those workers, 70% disappeared rather than be interviewed... Nebraska’s members of Congress at first called for tougher enforcement, recalled Mark Reed, then INS director of operations. But when the result shut some plants, ‘all hell broke loose,’ [Reed] said.” Republican Governor Mike Johanns (now Secretary of Agriculture) “appointed a task force to oppose the operation.” Former Democratic governor Ben Nelson, now a Senator, became a lobbyist for the meatpackers and ranchers. Republican Senator Chuck Hagel “pressured the Justice Department to stop” the operation. It stopped.

The pattern repeats across the country. Talk tough against immigrants for the redneck vote, then stop any anti-immigrant operation that costs businesses money -- which means, all of ‘em. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff: “It would be hard to sustain political support for vigorous work-site enforcement if you don’t give employers an avenue to hire their workers in a way that is legal, because you’re basically saying, ‘You’ve got to go out of business.’” Or: You

raise wages to hire U.S. citizens -- and the price of everyone's goods and services goes up. The Post article reports that after 1999 (in other words, during the Bush Administration) "numbers of fines and convictions dropped sharply, with fines all but phased out."

Republican voters are being taken for a ride by hypocrite politicians who don't intend to do a damned thing because the people who fill their campaign-coffers are the same people who hire the immigrants. "In contrast to the typical image of an illegal immigrant... a majority now work for mainstream companies, not fly-by-night operators, and are hired and paid like any other American workers." The undocumented are too wedded to American commerce to be weeded out without major economic disruption: 20% of our cooks, 25% of our construction workers, 22% of our maids and housekeeping workers, 25% of our ground maintenance workers, and at least 29% (some surveys say as high as 50%) of our agricultural workers. [New York Times, June 19, p1] If they were paid like Americans, prices would go up across the board. In addition, "Latinos open new firms at a rate of three times the national norm." [The Economist, June 17, p32] All of which is why "500 economists... signed an open letter to Mr. Bush arguing that immigration is a net plus to the economy." [New York Times, June 22, p24]

One headline summarizes the problem: WITH ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS FIGHTING WILDFIRES, WEST FACES A DILEMMA. Half the firefighters in the Pacific Northwest are Mexican immigrants and "government officials won't even hazard a guess" as to how many are illegal. "Forestry workers say firefighting jobs may simply be too important -- and too hard to fill -- to allow for a crackdown on illegal workers." [New York Times, May 28, p1]

Take North Carolina, where researchers "found that Latinos paid \$756 million in taxes annually and cost the state government \$817 million. That works out as a net burden of \$102 a head... [but that] is dwarfed by the positive impact of Latino spending in North Carolina, [estimated to be] at \$9.19 billion in 2004. That translated into nearly 90,000 new jobs..." [The Economist, June 17, p32].

The problem, in North Carolina and all across the country, is that these sizeable immigrant taxes are not paid to the state, but to the federal government -- leaving the state to pay all the millions that immigrants cost in services. The Washington Post, May 26, p21: "Immigrants cost local governments money even as they fill federal coffers with income, especially from payroll taxes. 'The tax costs are local, but the tax windfalls are national,' says Cecilia Munoz, vice president for policy at the National Council of La Raza. 'There's a local-national imbalance. It becomes a potent political issue locally, and there is nothing local governments can do.'"

Walls, secure borders, mass deportations -- these are fantasies. But localities and local taxpayers are rightfully enraged at paying the bills for America's overall profit from the exploitation of the undocumented.

Why don't the states use the same means the IRS uses to collect local taxes from immigrants? Because most state, county, and city governments are controlled by those same business interests that depend on immigrants, and those businesses don't want to pay more taxes. It is those state and local governments, and the business interests behind them, that properly should be the objects of citizen rage. Some states that depend heavily on the undocumented, like Texas, have no state income tax. Such states are supported by property, sales and business taxes, plus licensing fees. Raising the specter of a state income tax of any kind, for anyone, is taboo.

These are the real issues but they're not discussed by most national or state officeholders, at least not in public. Either the states must find a way to tax the undocumented as the IRS does, or the federal government must give their windfall back to the states. But a GOP controlled Washington, running up tremendous deficits, won't give that money back unless pressured by their base. (It goes without saying, or it should, that any immigrant paying taxes should be given a green card.)

USA Today, May 30, page 5: "Hard-liners" against the undocumented are "mostly male and overwhelmingly white. Three of four don't have a college degree." They mostly "live in rural areas and [are] least likely to live in cities." They are, in short, the *voting* backbone of the

Republican Party, opposed and betrayed by the *financial* backbone of their own party.

Solutions to our immigration dilemmas are in practical reach, requiring only the three things in shortest supply amongst our politicians: honesty, frankness, and a passion for justice.

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