

Gary Jason, guest column: Legal immigration levels way too low

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The wheel is still spinning, but I suspect that some sort of compromise on immigration is coming.

It probably will include a border fence of some length, tightened security, a better ID card for legal immigrants (which will enable employers more easily to check legal status), but some accommodation for those already here.

Such accommodation, whatever form it takes, will amount to setting a statute of limitations for past immigration law offenders.

This seems reasonable. After all, both federal and state law set numerous statutes of limitations for crimes such as rape, fraud and assault—crimes far more evil than desperately seeking a better life.

If a compromise is reached toward controlling the border, the ultimate effect will be to force all future immigration to be legal. But this begs an important question: Just what should the annual level of legal immigration be?

Currently, the federal government issues about a million green cards a year.

Our current population is roughly 299 million, so the current level of legal immigration is only about one-third of one percent. This may account for why there is such a demand for illegal labor. And it seems too low, for several reasons.

First, remember that for 30 years — from 1971 to 2002 — the U.S. birth rate was below replacement level.

(It takes women having an average of 2.1 children each for a population to simply maintain its level, i.e., for newborns to equal the number of elderly dying.)

During these years, our overall population grew only because the Baby Boomer cohort was so large that even with a lower birth rate the total grew, and because of — immigration. But even now, we are barely at replacement level, and it may well dip again.

Second, many Americans die young — murders, suicides, auto fatalities, workplace fatalities, war casualties, AIDS. Early heart disease, cancer and the like take people in their economically productive years.

These deaths are in the hundreds of thousands annually. To keep a positive growth rate, and help replace people who die in their working age, raising the immigration level to 2 million seems reasonable.

Then again, the 75 million Boomers will be retiring (and then dying) soon. So bringing in more working-age people seems prudent.

Moreover, national defense requires young adults. This would seem to call for an even higher figure, say, 3 million new immigrants annually.

I would suggest tying the immigration limit to the general unemployment level.

In any year in which the unemployment rate is over, say, 6 percent, keep the number of new immigrants to 2 million.

In any year in which the unemployment is between 5 percent and 6 percent, bump the immigration to two and a half million.

If the unemployment falls below 5 percent, bump it to 3 million. I don't think that immigration raises the unemployment rate, by the way. I just think that we have to keep nativist feelings in check.

Perhaps some people's minds would boggle at what they see as demographic prodigality. But some historical context would help here:

The turn of the 20th Century saw a good economy. But in 1921 Congress dramatically cut immigration and in 1924 required that the immigrants ethnically reflect the general population.

This didn't stop the crash of the stock market and the Great Depression. It only stopped ethnic minorities, especially Jews, from escaping the hell of an increasingly totalitarian Europe.

For the record: the immigrants who came in before the doors closed assimilated quite well, and they and their progeny have contributed greatly to the country's economy and culture.

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