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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Securing the Border (Again)

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President Bush heads to New Mexico today to visit his new favorite school, the Border Patrol Academy. He wants it to train thousands more federal agents, but they'll make little difference unless Bush can teach Republicans the lesson learned by agents like Buck Brandemuehl a half century ago — the last time anyone could seriously claim the border was under control.

In the 1950's, federal agents were initially overwhelmed by waves of Mexican farmworkers illegally crossing the border. The number of immigrants apprehended surpassed half a million in 1951 and was approaching 900,000 in 1953, a level roughly comparable to the situation now.

Back then there were fewer than 2,000 federal agents patrolling the borders, less than a fifth the size of today's force. But within two years, the flow of illegal immigrants declined so drastically that the immigration service declared in its 1955 annual report, "The border has been secured."

And it stayed that way the rest of the decade. The number of immigrants caught kept dropping until it reached 45,000 in 1959 — a decline of 95 percent in just six years.

"We really had to scratch for illegals," recalls Brandemuehl, who worked along the New Mexico border in the late 1950's. "We'd do traffic checks and freight-train checks, but we weren't apprehending many people. We'd go camp on the border and look for tracks, but in 30 days you might apprehend only 15 or 20 people, and a lot of them weren't even farmworkers. They were criminals sneaking back and forth to rob ranchers."

What stopped the farmworkers from sneaking across? It wasn't simply the get-tough measures that Republicans are calling for today. Although federal agents did intensify their efforts, conducting sweeps of farms and ranches, immigration officials realized that stricter enforcement wasn't enough.

Along with the crackdown, officials encouraged farmers and ranchers to legally hire Mexican temporary workers called braceros. As new rules made it easier to hire braceros, the number of these legal workers doubled to more than 400,000 at the same time illegal immigration was plummeting.

"We wanted people to come in the front door, not the back door," Brandemuehl says. The agents' job became simpler not only because there were fewer Mexicans to catch but also

because there was more help from American employers. Once farmers and ranchers could legally get the workers they needed, they were more willing to cooperate with agents tracking down illegal immigrants.

Unfortunately, though, Congress started shutting the front door. The bracero program became controversial, partly because American labor unions objected to the competition and partly because of concerns that Mexicans were being exploited. Some of the complaints were legitimate, but Congress's response didn't leave immigrants any better off.

They ended up with even fewer rights because they were working illegally after the bracero program was restricted in 1960 and then eliminated four years later. As the number of legal workers entering from Mexico dropped during the 1960's, the number of illegal immigrants shot back up, and kept increasing after new limits were placed on other visas available to Mexicans in 1968.

The border has been out of control ever since, even though the number of agents has grown to 11,000. "Tough enforcement alone can't work unless you allow more people in legally," says Stuart Anderson of the **National Foundation for American Policy**, who has studied the impact of the bracero program.

Today President Bush and the Senate are trying to apply that lesson by expanding the number of legal immigrants and temporary workers. These visiting workers would have more rights than braceros, which is why the reforms are supported by the United Farm Workers and other unions.

But Republicans in the House are resisting. They say they won't expand legal opportunities until the border is first secured — which will never happen if they have their way.

In 1958, a high-ranking immigration official named James Hennessy was quizzed by a House committee about his agency's success in controlling the border. He said it was due in large part to the increase in legal immigration. When he was asked how his agents would control the border if the bracero program ended, he gave a prescient reply that's more relevant than ever today:

"We can't do the impossible, Mr. Congressman."

For Further Reading

- ["The Impact of Agricultural Guest Worker Programs on Illegal Immigration,"](#) by Stuart Anderson. National Foundation for American Policy, November 2003. [PDF]