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The Border Brigades

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The White House is wading back into the immigration debate, and some GOP restrictionists think (hope) they've detected a change in emphasis, and maybe policy. If that's the case, you couldn't tell from President Bush's remarks yesterday in Tucson, Arizona, which sounded to us as if the Administration is sticking to its plan to address illegal immigration by pairing border security with a guest-worker program.

It's a sensible strategy, especially given that Congress has tried enforcement-only fixes time and again without much success. But short-term memory loss seems to descend on lawmakers every time they turn their attention to immigration. So with House Republicans gearing up to pass yet another enforcement bill, let's rehash how often this approach to curbing illegal immigration has been attempted in recent years.

According to the National Foundation for American Policy, Congress has passed no fewer than six immigration-enforcement bills that became law in the past decade. Combined, the measures run to 450 pages, and they include:

- The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which expanded the border patrol's deportation authority.

- The 2002 Enhanced Security and Visa Reform Act, which established additional data-sharing requirements among local authorities, the State Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

- The 2002 Homeland Security Act, which created the Department of Homeland Security. This new agency swallowed up the INS entirely and divorced its border control functions from service functions -- a move that the restrictionists told us would make both more effective.

- The 2004 Intelligence Reform and Prevention Act, yet another law aimed at making our intelligence agencies "more unified, coordinated and effective" in order to strengthen "the security of our nation's borders," according to Mr. Bush.

- The 2005 Real ID Act, which grants Homeland Security the authority to build barriers along the Mexican border. It also forces states to revamp policies for issuing driver's licenses, thereby making it harder for illegal aliens to obtain them.

This list is far from complete, by the way. It doesn't include administrative measures that don't require legislation. Nor does it include rapidly increasing spending on technology, facilities and personnel in annual appropriations bills. But it does illustrate our point, which is that U.S. immigration policy at least since the passage of the Simpson-Mazzoli law in 1986 and certainly since the 1990s has emphasized "security" above all else.

The results? Well, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, the illegal immigrant population in the U.S. has shown "steady growth" in recent years, with undocumented residents conservatively approaching 11 million, up from 10.3 million last year. This suggests that something more than the desire to dodge border patrols is driving this labor migration -- notably, economic opportunity in the U.S. And it also suggests that an enforcement-only policy won't stop human beings who are determined to seek a better life.

All this came to mind when we learned that House Majority Leader Roy Blunt has promised to mark up a "major piece" of border-security legislation in coming weeks. And it looks like he'll have plenty of options to choose from, even if they all amount to more extreme, and in some cases grotesque, versions of what we've seen before.

Colorado's Tom Tancredo and Arizona's J.D. Hayworth want to deputize state and local police to help round up the 10 million or so illegal aliens already in the country and forcibly deport them en masse. Duncan Hunter of California wants to build a wall along the entire southern border, from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, to prevent them from returning. And Indiana's John Hostettler has introduced a bill that would station U.S. soldiers along that wall, East German-style, to keep all those aspiring gardeners, busboys and chambermaids at bay. We haven't yet heard anyone propose underwater mines in the Rio Grande, but give it some time.

While the House is content to posture, however, the Senate seems interested in taking steps on immigration that would actually move beyond the status quo. Majority Leader Bill Frist has said the Senate will consider a guest-worker bill -- introduced by John McCain and Ted Kennedy -- that would not only lead to a more secure Mexican border but also recognizes the labor demands of the U.S. economy.

President Bush noted again yesterday that he has increased funding for border security by 60% and added 1,900 new border agents. Yet he's also repeatedly called for comprehensive reform that doesn't ignore labor market incentives. "People in this debate must recognize that we will not be able to effectively enforce our immigration laws," said Mr. Bush, "until we create a temporary-worker program."

It's too bad the President's impeccable logic has so far escaped much of the Republican leadership in Congress.