

Forging immigration reform

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EDITORIAL

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For too long, the federal government has let the American people down on the issues of border security and illegal immigration.

A blind eye has been turned as millions of people have illegally entered the country and gained employment. Our porous borders are also a severe threat to our national security. Partisan bickering in Washington has not solved these problems; it has only made them worse. We believe that the time has now come for Congress to put aside its attempts for partisan gain, and start doing what is right for our nation.

Without question, addressing illegal immigration is a difficult task. In fact, one Democratic Party leader has labeled immigration the new third rail of American politics, an issue we touch at our own peril. However, as elected leaders we should not ignore this critical issue simply because it is politically difficult.

The American people expect action on the issue of illegal immigration. Last year, the Senate wrote and debated comprehensive immigration reform legislation. Primarily, the Senate bill failed because it would have granted amnesty providing a pathway to citizenship for millions of illegal aliens. Additionally, the Senate's bill was negotiated behind closed doors. When the public learned of this backroom deal, the outcry was overwhelming — Americans inundated the phone lines of their representatives and filled newspaper opinion pages. Ultimately, the bill was defeated.

Since the Senate's bill collapsed, the House has failed to take up any meaningful legislation to address illegal immigration. That is why we joined together to craft the Secure America with Verification and Enforcement (SAVE) Act. The SAVE Act provides a three-pronged approach to curb illegal immigration: enhanced border security, employment verification and dramatically increased enforcement of our nation's existing laws.

However, what's not included in this bill — amnesty — has given it so much widespread appeal. While we are a nation of immigrants, we are also a nation of laws. We should not reward those who come to our country illegally and punish those who abide by the law.

Why could this bill succeed where others have failed? It already has extraordinary bipartisan support. To date, 49 Democrats and 97 Republicans have cosponsored the SAVE Act. It also has the support of a cross-section of organizations like the 9/11 Families for a Secure America, the National Federation of Independent Business, the

National Association of Police Organizations, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, agriculture organizations and many others.

Among the SAVE Act's highlights: It will ensure that our borders are secured and our laws are enforced. Our bill calls for 8,000 new border patrol agents over the next four years, and provides incentives to recruit and retain them. The SAVE Act also provides for the acquirement of advanced technologies along the border, including aerial surveillance systems and infrared technology. Additionally, 1,200 new Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents are hired to strengthen interior enforcement and provide specialized training and support to local law enforcement officers.

This legislation also calls for 13 more federal judges to hear cases against those who are arrested along the border, including drug traffickers and so-called coyotes, who are paid to transport illegal aliens across the border.

Finally, to eliminate the primary cause of illegal immigration — illegal employment — the SAVE Act expands the E-Verify program to provide all employers with the tools they need to ensure that their employees are here legally. E-Verify is a quick, easy and free Web-based system that cross-references Social Security numbers, and other pertinent information, to ensure that a worker is legally entitled to be employed in the United States. It is already being successfully used by 56,000 American employers on a voluntary basis. The SAVE Act gradually phases it in for all employers over four years, allowing businesses time to adapt. Making E-Verify mandatory will protect American workers and law-abiding businesses from the unfair competition created by a massive illegal workforce.

The use of E-Verify also means that individual employers are no longer expected to be document experts. The liability of determining the legal status of an employee is placed on the government, not the business owner. Since employers will be required to check all potential employees, racial profiling will not be an issue. Additionally, in the rare case where the system makes an error the employer is held harmless.

We believe passage and implementation of the SAVE Act will send a clear message to the American people — and to the rest of the world — that we are serious about securing our borders and preventing illegal immigration.

This bill represents the best and perhaps only chance we have at passing immigration reform this year. The leadership of both parties must now put aside political motivations and move this bill forward. We look forward to bringing the SAVE Act before Congress for a full debate.

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