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PERSPECTIVES

Managing Immigration as a Resource

by Benjamin Johnson*

The current immigration debate is about how best to repair an immigration system that everyone agrees is broken. For Congress, the question has come down to this: do we pursue an enforcement-only strategy and focus solely on keeping people out, or do we adopt a more comprehensive approach that includes new enforcement strategies but also improves our ability to let people into the country legally?

I would argue that for at least the past 15 years we have been trying the enforcement-only strategy and it has been a complete failure. Since the early 1990s, our border-enforcement budget has more than quintupled. We now spend more than \$4 billion a year on immigration enforcement. At the same time, the number of Border Patrol agents has nearly tripled from just under 4,000 to just over 11,000. And what do we have to show for it? The pace of undocumented immigration to the United States has increased, apprehension rates for the undocumented are down, more people are dying every day at our Southern border, and human smuggling and document fraud have been transformed from relatively small operations into billion-dollar enterprises.

Now I would agree completely that our enforcement strategies have failed in part because we have become fixated on fortifying the Southern border. In the process, we have ignored other critical components of immigration enforcement like an effective employment verification system and more personnel, training and resources to deal with the tens of thousands of applications that are stuck in endless delays and backlogs. But even with significant improvements in our enforcement strategies and adjudication capabilities, staunching the flow of undocumented immigration will continue to be a Sisyphean effort unless and until we reform the legal channels for admitting people into this country.

The bottom line is that immigration is not just a law-enforcement issue. It is a valuable resource to our economy and our labor force, and we must start treating it like a resource and manage it on an ongoing basis. The ability to use our immigration system to supplement and fill gaps in our labor force across the skill spectrum is one of the principle reasons the United States has been able to create the most diverse, most dynamic, and most flexible workforce the world has ever seen. Unfortunately, distracted by our overriding enforcement mentality, what we haven't done for the last 15 years is engage in an honest debate about how to create an immigration system that will help us respond to the economic and labor market realities we face today.

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Over the last two decades our economy has been radically altered by globalization and technological advancements. In response to this new environment, Congress has made dramatic changes to our policies on telecommunication, trade, and banking, but so far Congress has not made a concerted effort to modernize our immigration policies. In fact, we seem to be moving in the opposite direction. While more and more countries invest billions of dollars to attract foreign students and highly skilled immigrants, the United States is making it more difficult for foreign students to enroll in U.S. universities and more difficult for highly skilled immigrants to get visas. This trend raises serious questions about whether or not the United States will be able to effectively compete in the increasingly global battle for talent and to maintain its competitive advantage in research, science, and technology.

At the other end of the skill spectrum, current immigration policies fail to provide effective channels of legal immigration for less-skilled workers. Moreover, the backlogs in visas for family-based immigration are now so long that immigrants are forced to wait 5 to 7 years before they can be legally reunited with a spouse or child. It is the failure of immigration policy on these two issues, less-skilled immigration and family-based immigration, which is the primary reason we have high levels of undocumented immigration today.

There has been a lot of controversy over whether there are some jobs that Americans are less interested in, and whether we need immigrants to fill those jobs. But the truth is, it is NOT an insult to the American worker that we have fewer and fewer people in our labor force who are in the market for jobs that require very little education or training. Our labor markets are attracting younger, less educated immigrant workers because our labor force is getting older and better educated. In the early 1960's over half of U.S. workers were high-school dropouts. Today, only about 15 percent of U.S. workers lack a high-school diploma. We should be proud of that fact, but we have to recognize that this success means we have fewer workers who are looking for jobs that require little education or training. So we are doing what we have been doing for two hundred years: looking to our immigration system to fill the gaps in our labor force.

Unfortunately, while we have been encouraging workers to get an education and improve their training in order to compete in the knowledge-based economy we are creating, we have not created more channels of legal immigration to replace those workers. Today, in a labor force of more than 150 million workers, we have 5,000 permanent visas available for foreign workers in less-skilled occupations. And outside of agriculture, the only temporary visa we have for less skilled workers, the H-2B visa, is only available to seasonal employers. For companies that employ less-skilled workers and who operate year round, there is no temporary visa for foreign workers.

Because we essentially have no legal channels of employment-based immigration for these workers, they either come illegally or they attempt to come through the already overburdened family-based system. In this situation, everybody loses. Families are separated and workers are expected to wait years for jobs that are available today. Nobody should be surprised that when we close the front door on these families and workers they look for ways in through the back door.

The real immigration challenge we face today stems from the fact that we have two signs posted at our borders: “Help Wanted” and “Keep Out.” The by-product of this schizophrenia is that businesses, families, and law-enforcement agencies are stuck between a rock and a hard place. In short, there is an unsustainable contradiction between U.S. economic policy and U.S. immigration policy, and economics is winning. We can either continue to spend billions of dollars in an immigration-enforcement battle against our own economy and our own labor force, or we can create an immigration system that is not only good at keeping people out, but effective at letting people in.

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