

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1585
August 10, 2007

Getting Reform Right: The White House's Immigration Initiative

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With the collapse of the comprehensive immigration reform in the Senate, there are several options for moving forward on immigration reform. Rather than insisting on trying the same approach again or just doing nothing, the best option is to implement incremental but effective reforms designed to achieve a sensible immigration policy. One of the first ways to move forward is for the Administration to take steps to improve enforcement within the boundaries of the laws already on the books. The Bush Administration is undertaking this strategy with a new initiative that it announced today. The Border Security and Immigration Administrative Reform initiative is smart and sensible and deserves to be commended. Virtually all of the policies within it have been proposed by The Heritage Foundation's policy research and analysis.

Carrots and Sticks. Altogether, the initiative presents a good combination of the disincentives and incentives needed to change the dynamics of immigration. It focuses on the tools needed to secure our borders and support law enforcement: building fencing, barriers, and towers on the border, completing the US-VISIT program, expanding the 287(g) program (assisting state efforts), and pursuing absconders from the law.

The initiative contains significant new steps in workplace enforcement as well: a new Social Security "no match" regulation, a reduction in the number of documents accepted to confirm work eligibility, higher civil fines for employers, and a requirement that federal contractors and vendors use the Electronic Employment Verification System, now called "E-Verify."

At the same time, the initiative includes new efforts to streamline existing guest worker programs, such as the H-2A and the H-2B programs, and to improve the current immigration system and help immigrants assimilate, such as by implementing a revised citizenship test.

The Way Forward. It was always misleading to conclude that the only way to achieve immigration reform is with massive, comprehensive congressional legislation. What is needed are smaller but credible steps to get the ball moving, implementing incentives that, over time, will significantly contribute to sorting out the immigration mess.

An incremental strategy—building on the Administration's new initiative with a few new modest legislative steps and working in conjunction with various immigration measures being advanced nationwide in over 40 states—is the way forward on immigration.

With well implemented measures, such as the Administration's initiative, and lots of old-fashioned perseverance, the U.S. can achieve a comprehensive solution in a reasonable amount of time.

After the immigration debacle in Congress, lawmakers need to regain the trust and confidence of

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Immigration/wm1585.cfm

Produced by the B. Kenneth Simon
Center for American Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
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the American people while meeting their solemn obligations to keep the nation safe, prosperous, and free. The Bush Administration's new initiative is a major step in the right direction.

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