COMMON SENSE
BORDER SECURITY SOLUTIONS
THOUGHTS FROM DENNIS E. NIXON • JANUARY 2017
The current reality on the Texas/Mexico border as well as much of the border outside of Texas is the flow of immigrants who illegally enter the US has declined dramatically over the last couple of decades after the massive influx that occurred in the 1980’s. Today, the border is still faced with an illegal entry problem with individuals still coming to the USA in hope of participating in the American dream—a chance to succeed. These economic migrants, a term used by the US Border Patrol, are basically law-abiding people who are seeking work because their country of origin has not given them a chance to succeed even at the basic levels of feeding their families. The primary drivers for Central American migration to the US are family reunification (family members already established in the U.S.), perceptions of amnesty (largely driven by misinformation), fear of violence, and of course better economic opportunities. Much of this is fueled by a lack of consequences, which generally involves detention and removal, if appropriate, and criminal prosecution.

Given that many of these Central American migrants are women and children not from a contiguous territory, and the fact that courts have ruled against detention of family units, there is no real detention, removal, or prosecution of these individuals. Family units are released with a “notice to appear” with a court date that is to be determined, but many never report, and for those who do, their court cases are on average 1,000 days out. Many of these migrants never appear for a court date and end up being deported in absentia.

A secure border is defined as our ability to “enforce the rule of law.” Because of the lack of immigration judges or post-apprehension consequences, there is no rule of law under the current construct. We need to have facilities along the southern border along with sufficient asylum officers, immigration judges, and consular officers to hear cases and then make a final determination on-site. If a decision to release pending a hearing is made at that point, then sufficient protocols and bond amounts need to be established to ensure the individual will report for future hearings; this is not being done at the present time.

The size and makeup of the economic migrant group has changed...
dramatically over the last several years. Previously, 90% percent of economic migrants were of Mexican origin. This migration was driven by low economic reality. The lack of making a satisfactory living in Mexico and the reality of high law enforcement killed circularity. Circularity was when workers came into the US and returned to Mexico after several months of work, in order to be with their families. This circular pattern continued for many decades but was heavily impacted by the large increase in border law enforcement—primarily the massive increase in Border Patrol agents along with the rapid escalation of apprehensions. The number peaked at about 1.6 million nationwide and has steadily drifted downward to about 400,000—95% of which are economic migrants. The other 5% represents criminal activity that has continued but also at a reduced rate. Today, the 400,000 apprehensions are no longer primarily Mexican, instead the Mexican number has fallen dramatically and now only represents about 25% of that total or about 100,000 annually. Today, many believe the net migration of Mexicans, those coming and those leaving to return permanently is now negative. In other words, more Mexican migrants are leaving the US than entering the US. The 300,000 other apprehensions are made up almost exclusively from Central American countries, such as Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. These migrants continue to be 95% economic, but are heavily affected by the heavy movement of unaccompanied minors from these Central American countries driven by the idea they can surrender from these Central American countries, such as Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

The Carrizo Cane in South Texas along the Rio Grande River.

The other economic fact is that there are only two birth rates in all of these countries. The demographic reality facing the world including Mexico and Central America is a crisis point. It takes 2.1 births per female to sustain a population. Virtually all of the developed countries and the developing world except for a few exceptions are not at 2.1. Even Mexico has fallen to 2.0 and most of the population is now concentrated in the major metropolitan areas. In 1960, Mexico’s fertility rate was 7.0 and today it is 2.0. Demographers say no country in the history of the world has declined in fertility as rapidly as Mexico. The demographic winter has hit these countries just as it has the rest of the world. Europe and Asia are in horrible trouble with fertility rates that are below both replacement level and sustainability levels. It is highly unlikely that these countries can recover from such low fertility rates and the numbers suggest that countries will experience a sharp drop in population in the next couple of decades. That process is fully at work today with many countries such as Japan and Russia experiencing actual population loss. The USA is now at around 1.9 births per female, well below replacement level. And with 11,000 baby boomers retiring every day, the outlook is bleak. Without population growth and the prospect of new workers, economic growth is just not likely. Future GDP growth above 2% on a sustained basis will be an enormous challenge facing the demographic winter that will have a huge impact on the world over the course of the next several decades—no people equals no economic growth.

The enthic point of this section is to clearly point out, we need an immigration policy that addresses America’s need for workers. We need about 600,000 to 650,000 low-skilled workers every year to keep our economy growing. We do not provide that type of worker in America. In fact, the largest part of the workforce is now the millennial generation. This group of workers is not committed to low-skilled work, so where are we going to get people to do the so-called basic jobs which some have called the “dirty jobs”? We better wake up and understand the need to reform our immigration policy in America or we will continue to starve this country’s economy because of the lack of human capital to do the basic work required in a growing economy. This should be a fact-based discussion with the political and emotional elements being pushed aside for the sake of reason.

As Texas’ largest trading partner, and our neighbor, we must support a border security plan with Mexico that continues to foster economic development and our good neighbor policies that have been in place for generations.

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ENHANCED SECURITY OPPORTUNITY

A one-size-fits-all barrier approach does not work, especially on our southern border. It’s vital that we work with the local terrain and topography to create the most effective barriers to entry. Texas has a natural barrier in the Rio Grande that can be easily enhanced to help prevent future illegal entries. Weir Dam projects in the Brownsville and Laredo, Texas sections of the Rio Grande are being proposed. A Weir Dam broadens the reach, width, and surface area of the river thereby making it much more difficult to cross. Security experts state that the best security comes in layers. Weir Dams can be coupled with sensors, cameras, and the eradication of non-native plant species along the riverbank that are hiding grounds for immigrants and pose a risk to Border Patrol agents. Additionally, Border Patrol agents need an all-weather access road to patrol the riverbank. All of these assets, when combined, provide a tiered, multi-layered approach to border security.

There is another project that would add significantly to enhanced law enforcement: paving the Mines Road (FM 1472) from Laredo to Eagle Pass, which would create a modern river road. Currently, there is a significant section between Laredo and Eagle Pass that is not paved and not maintained as an all-weather road. This deficiency creates obstacles to access the river as well as quick response times.

Border Patrol executives have long been in favor of paving this highway to improve access and to significantly improve response times as well as protect the condition of the Border Patrol’s equipment. The current roadway is so bad that traveling at high speeds is nearly impossible and the use of the road is very hard on vehicles. The additional benefit of this highway is to create enhanced commerce between the border cities of Laredo and Eagle Pass, which would provide a favorable asset for economic development.

It also adds traffic to the area which makes clandestine travel much more difficult for illegal immigrants as well as drug and weapons criminals. Another win, win for border security and economic enrichment versus building a physical barrier that adds little value for anyone.

FINAL THOUGHTS

To solve the border security problem, we must look to reasonable and productive solutions that benefit the USA and Mexico. As Texas’ largest trading partner, and our neighbor, we must support a border security plan with Mexico that continues to foster economic development and our good neighbor policies that have been in place for generations. By cleaning up the river in cooperation with Mexico, we provide a natural barrier that is effective, an economically positive solution because it protects and preserves the border’s most important asset, the Rio Grande River, as the primary water source for urban and agricultural use, and preserves private property rights that have existed for 300 years. It also preserves the wonderful history of the Rio Grande and its huge importance to the region from a tourist prospective, a beautiful natural amenity, and its historical importance to Texas and Mexico. By following this path and by sponsoring a doubling of immigration judges to solve the real crisis with immigration, we can provide the citizens with comfort that our border is secure and our economy has been protected. All of these suggestions come at a cost well below that of building walls which only act to destroy our relationship with Mexico which is our ally and partner. So if you really want border security, clean up the river and fix the immigration court system.