

Letters to the Editor

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Bordering on Failure: U.S.-Mexico Border Policy

By Eneas A. Biglione *

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

On a recent flight from the U.S. to Mexico, I had the opportunity to sit next to Gregorio, a 21 year old Mexican. He commented to me that he lives in North Carolina and was traveling to visit his family for four months in Mexico City before returning to the U.S. He said that he had been living in the U.S. with his 18 year old brother and that they were both happy to have jobs with a company installing and repairing ceiling tiles. We spoke about many things, but mainly about their work and their experiences over the last two years. The themes passed from the climate to the turbulence that frequently shook our airplane.

Gregorio mentioned that he loved flying commercial, when a sudden confession changed the course of our conversation over the next hour: "I wish the return trip was going to be this comfortable, because unfortunately I am going to have to do a lot of walking when I return." It surprised me, as his comment sank in, that I had been talking with an undocumented Mexican, one of those who had been the subject of so much debate lately in the United States. The possibility to interview a "mojado," as the Mexicans call them, does not come along every day, especially one with the spontaneity and personality of Gregorio.

After hearing so much about new border control measures, about the controversial private initiative known as The Minuteman Project,

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about the proposals to militarize the border as well as the endless debates among legislators that refuse to implement any amnesty program for illegals (despite the fact that seven separate amnesty programs have been approved since 1986), and after seemingly endless debate that never seems to come up with any solutions for undocumented Mexicans, my next question seemed almost predictable: "Has all this publicity about the problems on the border made it a little difficult to travel like this lately?"

I was stunned to hear his answer that it was "just as easy as always, and that the key is "to have a coyote (those that bring illegals across the border for a price) that you can trust, someone that you have known for a long time, normally someone that is from the same hometown as you."

In Gregorio's case, a chilango (a Mexican from the Federal District) that was a friend of his father was the key to guaranteeing his return. The chilango had actually escorted Gregorio and his younger brother across the border for the first time two years ago. "The bad part is to have to walk most of the way back. The last time we walked for more than 20 hours. It was terrible," explained Gregorio.

According to my interviewee, the Mexicans that come from the smaller towns, or those that come from other countries in Central America trying to get to the United States through Mexico, are the ones that suffer the most in the hands of coyotes. He said that the coyotes often accept their money and then abandon them in the middle of the desert, many times after raping or abducting the women in the group in order then to prostitute them.

My next question concerned the threat posed by The Minuteman Project, the highly publicized group of citizens that had come to the

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border armed with binoculars and telescopes to highlight the ineffectiveness of the border patrol. A spokesman for the group had commented that the project was aimed at avoiding the day in which the “illegal aliens and their offspring will be the dominant population in the U.S. and will have made such inroads into the political and social systems that they will have more influence than our Constitution over how the U.S. is governed.” My question was simple, “How big a problem is The Minuteman Project on the border?”

“Nothing has changed,” said Gregorio once again. “You should understand that the coyotes have American associates on the other side of the border that report to them in real time the position of the border patrol agents, the Minuteman and any other problems on the routes where they cross the border. Once they get the report, it’s just a question of changing the route.”

This conversation led to several reflections. The first one: A border of more than 2,000 miles, that crosses four American states and six Mexican states, would be very difficult and expensive to control effectively. Squandering billions of dollars for the construction of a wall or the mobilization of soldiers to stop Mexicans who are simply trying to find a job that will allow them to feed their families, is so burdensome, extreme and inhumane that it is a non-issue.

President Bush has said in repeated opportunities, "family values do not stop at the Rio Grande." It is now time for the administration to show that it continues to believe that. If the U.S. government decides to apply the anti-Mexican politics of Tom Tancredo, they will end up pursuing Mexican busboys, gardeners and waiters while terrorists continue entering the U.S. as they always have: in a comfortable airplane and with approved visas.

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The amount of anti-Mexican fervor among the American citizenry will continue as long as the liberal media continues repeating the falsehood that the American economy is stagnant. Once the media stops injecting political propaganda in newspapers and on television, and begins to acknowledge today's economic prosperity, the anti-Mexican hysteria will certainly diminish.

A healthy immigration policy would include offering undocumented Mexicans the possibility of complying with U.S. immigration laws. After all, the immigration problem began shortly after the Declaration of Independence of Texas in 1845 and the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848, in which New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona and California passed from Mexican to American hands.

Nowadays the USCIS approves a maximum of 5,000 visas annually for non-professional people from Mexico. Yet the U.S. economy requires hundreds of thousands of people to water gardens, serve drinks, clean hotel rooms and cook. The president of the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, keeps repeating, "as we are creating an even more complex, accelerating economy, the necessity to bring in resources and people from abroad to keep it functioning in the most effective manner strikes me as relevant policy." This statement should prompt those watching the debate to pay attention to Mexican President Vicente Fox's proposal to allow the benefits of NAFTA to extend to Mexican workers by creating a new category of visas for low-skilled Mexicans that come to do repetitive, monotonous and non-challenging jobs that no American will accept. Obviously, heavy fines should be applied to those that have come to the U.S. illegally, so as to not penalize those that have made the effort to comply with the letter of the law. This solution would have, from the point of view of national security, an enormous advantage: the security agencies and American intelligence agencies would then have detailed information on each Mexican

immigrant, including their name, surname, hometown, activities and movements, and a set of their fingerprints.

Undoubtedly, in times of global terrorism, it is best to minimize the number of those that do not have any type of documentation. In the new scenario, Mexican immigrants would be happy to respect the law and to be able to feed their families, working legally in the same activities that they already do, but paying the corresponding taxes and working in collaboration with immigration officials. Moreover, security officials would have detailed information on the location and the type of activities of each immigrant. This new scenario would also be key to the joint efforts of U.S. and Mexican authorities in the fight against drug trafficking on the border as well as the detection of potential threats to the security of the American homeland.

* Eneas A. Biglione is an expert on Latin American issues.

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