



Articles & Commentaries



p-Watch — USA



by Michael Manson, long and closely associated with the APO when he was the Assistant Director of the East-West Center's Institute of Economic Development and Politics in Honolulu. He helped to initiate a number of collaboration programs between the APO and the East-West Center. Manson also served in the Asian Development Bank, and was Director of Communications with the State of Hawaii's Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism. He is presently an educator, and a regular contributor to this column.

Immigration: What is America to do?

My college professor was fond of labeling socioeconomic problems as "intractable." The word has since fascinated me as providing an avenue of escape from complex issues that are just too difficult to manage or solve. No doubt the immigration debate now taking place in the USA would sit high on the professor's list of intractable problems. If a resolution to the immigration issue were not so essential to the economic, social, and political well-being of the USA, one could dismiss the problem as just too difficult and move on. No such luck.

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On 1 May over 1 million Americans (including illegal and legal immigrants) took to the streets to express their views on immigration, citizenship, and economic opportunity. While some marched, other Americans scratched their heads in frustration not knowing what to think or do. Their frustration had to do with the fact that there is little consensus among the experts on the economic impact, negative or positive, of illegal immigration to the USA. Can it at least be said that illegal immigrants take jobs away from American citizens and lower the wages for non- and semiskilled workers? No, claim some economists. They argue that the impact of illegal immigration has been positive for the economy. The flexibility, hard work, and purchasing power of the immigrant population have moved the US economy forward. That was the message of the 1 May "Day Without Immigrants" rallies throughout the country.

Supporters of liberal immigration policies point to statistics that highlight a drop in unemployment figures as rates of immigration increase. A Harvard Business School study underscored the fact that cities with larger immigrant populations gained jobs, while cities with smaller immigrant populations lost jobs, signaling the dynamic economic spin-offs of an opportunistic immigrant population.

Undocumented immigrants number about 11.5 million. Legal and illegal

immigrants constitute approximately 12% of the US population. That is less than in 1910, when immigration from Europe reached its peak, and the immigrant population comprised 15% of the American total. In the 1970s, the immigrant population was roughly 5%. Today's immigrants are primarily from Latin America, including Mexico (78% of the total), Asia (13%), central Europe (6%), and Africa (3%). Migration figures also reveal that women are increasingly among the number of illegal immigrants. Approximately one-half of the illegal immigrants from Mexico are female and one-third of them are 18 years old or younger. That compares with 2% younger than 18 years of age in 1994.

A study by the Pew Hispanic Center underscored the dependency of the US economy on immigrant labor. That study estimated that undocumented workers comprised 24% of agricultural laborers, 14% of construction workers, 17% of food preparation staff, 26% of maintenance personnel, and 9% of manufacturing workers. Although the employment of illegal immigrants is obvious, the government response is at best half-hearted with only a handful of threatened legal actions taken against the employers of undocumented workers.

Another recent study estimated that of the roughly 11.5 million undocumented immigrants, 3.5 million are working and paying taxes. Another 3.5 million are working in the "underground" economy, and 4.5 million are not working. Official government statistics, such as unemployment estimates, suffer from the lack of immigrant visibility in the formal economy. The growing use of "day laborers" by small businesses and homeowners has created a niche labor market that further complicates the immigration debate. Approximately one-half of immigrant day laborers are hired by homeowners who do not want to know the immigrant status of those they hire. They care only about minimizing costs and getting the job done quickly. For the most part, homeowners treat those workers respectfully, feed them, and pay them on the spot, which makes homeowners preferred employers. However, such employment is illegal and those homeowners are breaking the law. The government does not gain public support by criminalizing the activities of middle-class Americans.

"American high-tech companies, aware of the dearth of talent at home, are fearful of the future if legal immigration arteries remain clogged."

Legal immigration is stifled by bureaucracy, government inefficiency, and long delays. American high-tech companies and universities are frustrated and embarrassed by the long delays that face invited students, scientists, and engineers. The immigration system as it now exists cannot readily discriminate between possible criminal/terrorist elements and those individuals who wish to contribute to the USA and its economy. Waiting time for visas for overseas family members of American citizens can run from five to 15 years. Workers who have an employer-sponsor wait an average of five years.

American high-tech companies, aware of the dearth of talent at home, are fearful of the future if legal immigration arteries remain clogged. They point to the insufficient numbers of engineers and scientists being trained in the USA. Bangalore, India, reportedly is already home to more information technology workers than Silicon Valley, California. Young Chinese and Indian engineers are returning home as opportunities for profitable and satisfying careers expand along with the region's fast-growing economies.

Over the past 30 years, US universities have not done as well as universities in Asia in encouraging students to major in science and engineering. One-third of US tertiary degrees are currently in science and engineering fields, compared with 59% in China, 46% in the Republic of Korea, and 66% in Japan. To tap this overseas talent pool, US immigration policy must be reformulated to expedite rather than discourage scientific exchange. The US Department of Labor forecasts that computer programming-related jobs will increase by 40% over the next 10 years, but only 1% of US college freshman plan to major in computer science.

Americans have always valued hard work, determination, and opportunity. They are not comfortable denying the chance to succeed to anyone who shares these values. Americans also realize that the USA is a country built by immigrants and take little pleasure in turning away people who simply seek a chance to improve their lives. The problem arises, however, if the economic pie is considered insufficient to support all who seek America's bounty. If it could be clearly demonstrated that all ships would rise with the tide and that national productivity could be increased by utilizing the vast immigrant talent pool available, immigration could easily be removed from the list of intractable problems.



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