Should Illegal Aliens Get Driver's Licenses?

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The hottest controversy in state legislatures today regards allowing illegal aliens to obtain driver's licenses. Americans were shocked to discover that most of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 carried driver's licenses from Virginia, Florida or New Jersey.
A driver's license is the pass to board a plane as well as the license to drive car. It confers a sort of quasi-citizenship and, as described by one illegal alien in Texas, "The driver's license ends up becoming our pass to be in this country."

Since 9/11, 21 states have enacted new legislation to make it harder to get driver's licenses, and legislation has been introduced in another 22 states. Even in Idaho, State Senator Cecil Ingram told a public hearing, "This has turned out to be a bigger problem than I thought."

The states embarrassed by the 9/11 hijackers have gotten the message. Virginia passed a bill to stop issuing driver's licenses to illegal aliens, and Florida and New Jersey passed legislation to coordinate driver's licenses with immigration visas.

New Jersey, where driver's licenses have been made of paper and do not require a photo, has long been the target of document fraud and counterfeiters. The state is now converting to state-of-the-art digitized driver's licenses with a dozen covert and overt security features, including a mandatory photo, bar code, hologram, and digital signature.

Peter Gadiel, whose 23-year-old son James died in the World Trade Center attack, has traveled from Connecticut to Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina and Tennessee to support beefed-up identification laws. Twenty states do not require applicants to prove they are legally in the United States.

Tennessee, another state known to be casual about issuing driver's licenses to illegal aliens, is considering a measure that would require driver's license applicants to present a document showing they are legally in this country. A Tennessee legislative committee also heard testimony about the need to tighten driver's license rules from April Gallop, a survivor of the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon.

Minnesota is trying to address the controversy through rulemaking by the Department of Public Safety. The proposed rule would require visitors to present documents to prove they are in the country legally, and the license would expire when their visas expire.

Georgia would seem an unlikely state for immigration controversies, but an estimated 435,000 Hispanics live in Georgia, a 300 percent increase over 1990, according to the U.S. Census. A lively big group showed up at a hearing in Gainesville from the town of Hall, where at least 19 percent of the population is Hispanic and 85 percent of those are not citizens.

Georgia has been wrangling over a bill that would allow driver's licenses to be obtained by illegal aliens who come only from the "Free Trade Area of the Americas," i.e., from Canada, Latin America, and some Caribbean islands.

Among those who spoke against the proposed legislation was retired Col. A.R. "Mac" MacCahan (whose Army unit lost 206 of 212 men fighting in the Korean War). He asked, "What part of illegal don't you understand?" Others ask, why reward people who have committed at least three felonies: illegal entry into the U.S., purchasing fraudulent documents to get a job, and misrepresenting the legality of those documents at the workplace?

Kentucky was once one of the easiest states for illegal aliens to get a driver's license. That changed after a 1998 incident in which the Immigration and Naturalization Service arrested a vanload of illegals from Russia who had traveled from New York to Louisville to get driver's licenses.

After that, Kentucky reinstituted a policy of requiring that noncitizens applying for licenses take a written test. County Circuit Clerk Tony Miller said, "We try to be helpful. We offer that test in 21 languages," but Miller didn't explain how it promotes safety to license drivers who can't read the road signs.

Arizona and Mississippi have killed bills to make it easier for illegal aliens to get a driver's license. California Governor Gray Davis has twice vetoed a bill to allow illegal aliens to obtain driver's licenses, but the legislature is still debating this issue.

INS public affairs officer Garrison Courtney identified one of the biggest problems: "If they were illegal when they came here, it's very difficult to determine who they really are because they've created illegal IDs for themselves." The Seattle Times reported that one U.S. Department of Justice raid discovered piles of cash totaling $95,262 plus $10,000 worth of computer equipment and specialty papers that had been used to print 800 fake driver's licenses, green cards, work permits, Mexican birth certificates, and Social Security cards.

Many are concerned about the danger from issuing licenses to terrorists who might use trucks loaded with gasoline or other hazardous materials in the same way that hijackers used commercial airliners on 9/11. The U.S. Transportation Department reported last year that we lack sufficient safeguards, particularly from the many states that do not require applicants to prove they are legally in the country.