A New Argument About Immigration

by Phyllis Schlafly May 28, 2008

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Many arguments, pro and con, about how to deal with illegal aliens have been passionately debated over the past couple of years, but there are still other arguments that need public exposure. Mark Krikorian presents a new argument in his forthcoming book called "The New Case Against Immigration: Both Legal and Illegal."

The pro-more-immigration crowd argues that today's immigrants are just like immigrants of a century ago: poor people looking for a better life who are expected to advance in our land of opportunity. Krikorian's new argument is that while today's immigrants may be like earlier ones, the America they come to is so very different that our previous experience with immigrants is practically irrelevant.

The essential difference between the two waves of immigrants was best summed up by the Nobel Prize-winning advocate of a free market, Milton Friedman. He said, "It's just obvious that you can't have free immigration and a welfare state."

The term "welfare state" does not just mean handouts to the non-working. Our welfare state encompasses dozens of social programs that provide benefits to the "working poor," i.e., people working for wages low enough that they pay little or no income taxes.

Immigrants of the previous generation were expected to earn their own living, pay taxes like everybody else, learn our language, love America, and assimilate into our culture. Today's immigrants likewise come here for jobs not welfare.

During those prior major waves of immigration, the United States didn't have a welfare state. Native-born Americans survived the Great Depression of the 1930s without a welfare state.

The Social Security retirement system was established only in 1935. Most other agencies that redistribute cash and costly benefits from taxpayers to non-taxpayers started with Lyndon Johnson's Great Society in the late 1960s.

Today's low-wage immigrants and lower-wage illegals can't earn what it costs to live in modern America, so they supplement with means-tested taxpayer benefits. And many immigrants don't learn our language or assimilate into American culture because of the multicultural diversity taught in our schools and encouraged in our society.

Today's immigrants fit the profile of the people who benefit from our welfare state: the working poor with large families. Krikorian sets forth some dismal figures.

About 30 percent of all immigrants in the U.S. workforce in 2005 lacked a high school education, which is four times the rate for native-born Americans. Among the largest group of working-age immigrants, the Mexicans, 62 percent have less than a high-school education, which means they work low-wage jobs.

Nearly half of immigrant households, 45 percent, are in or near poverty compared with 29 percent of native-headed households. Among Mexicans living in the United States, nearly two-thirds live in or near the government's definition of poverty.

Costly social benefits provided to the working poor include Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (now called TANF, formerly AFDC), food stamps, school lunches, Medicaid, WIC (nutrition for Women, Infants and Children), public housing, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is one of the most expensive parts of income redistribution. Twice as many immigrant households (30 percent) qualify for this cash handout as native-headed households (15 percent).

Health care is another huge cost. Nearly half of immigrants are either uninsured or on Medicaid, which is nearly double the rate for native-born families. Federal law requires hospitals to treat all comers to emergency rooms, even if uninsured and unable to pay.

Hospitals try to shift the costs onto their paying patients, and when the hospitals exhaust their ability to do this, they close their doors. In Los Angeles, 60 hospitals have closed their emergency rooms over the past decade, which imposes another kind of cost.

Immigration accounts for nearly all the growth in elementary and secondary school enrollment over the past generation. The children of immigrants now comprise 19 percent of the school-age population and 21 percent of the preschool population.

The Heritage Foundation estimated that in order to reduce government payments to the average low-skill household to a level equal to the taxes it pays, "it would be necessary to eliminate Social Security and Medicare, all means-tested welfare, and to cut expenditures on public education roughly in half." Obviously, that is not going to happen.

Attempts to limit welfare eligibility for illegal aliens by provisions added to the 1996 welfare reform law, SSI, food stamps, Medicaid and TANF all failed. Krikorian concludes that "Walling immigrants off from government benefits once we've let them in is a fantasy."

As Americans are pinched between falling real estate values and the inflation of necessities such as gasoline, they are entitled to know how their tax dollars are being spent. The big bite that social benefits to immigrants (one-third of whom are illegal) takes out of taxpayers' paychecks should be factored into any debate about immigration or amnesty policy.