



PRESIDENT BUSH PUSHES OVERHAUL OF IMMIGRATION LAW

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President Bush traveled to Yuma, Ariz., Monday to inspect border security measures and outline his new plan for immigration reform. Speaking to a group of U.S. Border Patrol agents, he urged Congress to consider a guest worker program and resolve the legal status of the estimated 12 million undocumented people currently living in the country.

Mr. Bush has long been in favor of comprehensive immigration reform -- a law that addresses the country's immigration situation as a whole, rather than dealing with border security, visa, and citizenship issues separately.

Last year, he supported a Senate bill that would have increased border security while giving illegal immigrants a path to citizenship without leaving the country, provided that they learned English, paid back taxes, and had worked in the country for many years.

Republicans in the House of Representatives criticized this plan, calling it "amnesty," and eventually convinced Mr. Bush to sign a bill that addressed only border security.

Since then, the president has called this "enforcement only" measure a first step toward overhauling the country's immigration policy.

Policing the border

While in Yuma, President Bush touted a program aimed at stopping illegal immigration across the 2,100-mile U.S.-Mexico border.

In the last nine months, 6,000 National Guard troops have been deployed to California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas to stem illegal crossings, as part of a program called Operation Jumpstart.

The number of Border Patrol agents has increased, too. Since last April, 4,000 new officers have been hired, bringing the total to 13,000. By year's end, that number will rise to 18,000.

Government officials also are building barricades and using a number of new surveillance technologies -- from skyboxes to portable watchtowers and even unmanned aircraft -- to deter crossings.

The measures, Mr. Bush claimed, have been working. In the last six months, the number of people caught illegally crossing into the United States from Mexico fell from 594,142 to 418,184 -- or 30 percent -- from the same period a year earlier. In his speech, the president reasoned that if fewer people were being caught, fewer were trying to cross.

Immigration experts, however, say this assessment fails to take into account other factors which affect the number of border crossings, such as economic conditions in Mexico and Central America and the frequency with which illegal immigrants return to their homes.

Comprehensive immigration reform

After praising the new border security measures, Mr. Bush cautioned that those measures alone would not solve the country's immigration problem.

In addition to continued security, he called for a new immigration law that would include ways for employers to verify the legal status of the people they hire and a way for undocumented workers already living in the country attain legal status.

Though lawmakers have still not finalized a bill, the president is likely to support a plan allowing illegal immigrants to apply for a work visa that would cost \$3,500 to renew every three years.

To apply for citizenship, illegal immigrants would first have to return to their home country and file paperwork at the U.S. consulate. There, they would have to get in line behind everyone else waiting for citizenship, then face an additional \$10,000 penalty.

By advocating this "touchback" approach, the president hopes to avoid the claims that he is offering amnesty to the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants already in the United States, while offering an alternative to mass deportation.

Critics of these measures have called the penalties too steep and naturalization process too long to be attractive to the millions of undocumented workers already living in the country.

Over the weekend, thousands marched in Los Angeles, saying that these new measures were a "betrayal by Mr. Bush" after last year's proposal to give illegal immigrants a path to citizenship.

Political roadblocks

Given these contentious points, overhauling the country's immigration law may be difficult for President Bush, especially as he continues to spar with Congress over funding for the war in Iraq.

One of the chief architects of last year's Senate immigration bill, Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., said no measure would be approved unless it had "strong Republican support," the New York Times reported.

The prospects for this support now seem uncertain. Some Republicans have said they will not approve a measure that gives illegal immigrants work visas or a path to citizenship.

And Senator John McCain, R-Ariz., a high-profile Republican who last year supported the president's plan, is now leaning farther right, as he tries to woo conservative votes in the Republican Party's presidential primary.

Despite these roadblocks, Mr. Bush remained optimistic in his speech, saying, "I've been working to bring Republicans and Democrats together to resolve outstanding issues so that Congress can pass a comprehensive bill and I can sign it into law this year."

The Senate plans to start debating an immigration bill in May.

-- *Compiled by Noah Buhayar for NewsHour Extra*

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