

The New Slavery Must Be Stopped

✖ For several years I (and others) have called the way in which immigrants both, documented and undocumented, are treated – “the new slavery.” If you believe that politics as usual can die, the president’s statements about immigration at the Esperanza National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast and Conference last week were very encouraging.

President Obama declared that he is committed to a “comprehensive immigration overhaul.” The dilemma with this statement is that the word comprehensive often includes an amnesty provision for undocumented persons. The problem with blanket amnesty is that there is a wide variety of people within the huge immigrant community, ranging from criminals who scoff at our laws to dedicated family people. To date, a great number of pandering politicians want to avoid dealing with the complexity of the current situation by simply waving the magic wand of amnesty.

The president paid homage to all the right aspects of the problem. He said three important things:

1. U.S. borders must be strengthened to thwart illegal immigration.
2. Provisions must be made to deal with illegals.
3. Employers of undocumented workers are a huge part of the problem.

Specifically the president stated, “The American people believe in immigration, but they also believe that we can’t tolerate a situation where people come to the United States in violation of the law, nor can we tolerate employers who exploit undocumented workers in order to drive down wages.”

Although there has been a resurgence of actual chattel slavery around the world, the phrase "the new slavery" has been reserved for the American problem of immigration. I coined this phrase nearly five years ago. The comparison with the African-American condition was a natural one because chattel slavery in the U.S. was based on economics. Further, slavery took years to resolve because the moral outrage around the issue was less demanding than the economic needs of the nation. While racism was used to justify this abomination, it took a civil war to ultimately free the slaves. Finally the victims of American slavery could not free themselves.

In the American culture of our day, there is a very large economic component of the problem, which is complicated by the fact that both parties would like to make political capital (namely the large Hispanic swing vote) by claiming credit for breaking the shackles of this huge problem.

The specifics of the president's plan to deal with illegal aliens still seems a little sketchy to me. Simply allowing people to "go to the back of the line," sounds like amnesty. Yet the Immigration & Naturalization Service (INS) must own the fact that their slow administration is a part of the problem. I have known people that were deported days before their green card arrived because they failed to adhere to conflicting rules coming from different branches of the same organization. Others have waited for up to seven years to resolve the problems with their status.

All the major aspects of the president's plan Tony Perkins and I mentioned previously in our book *Personal Faith, Public Policy*. As I have already stated amnesty seems to be the major sticking point we have with his plan thus far. We must have people come out of the shadows for their own sakes. Yet there must be more to the plan than paying a fine, learning English and getting to the back of the line. On the other hand, permanently deporting 12 million people seems impractical.

Let me share about two diverse chicken companies I wrote about a couple of years ago. Late in 2006, Swift & Co. (a meat processor) was raided in six states and 1,200 people were arrested on alleged identity theft and immigration violations. This raid sent a signal to large companies that they were not exempt from the law. Swift could no longer be a third world plant on American soil.

As much as I rejoice over the way companies like Swift were handled, smaller companies operating in smaller communities could have their survival threatened by hasty enforcement transitions. Let me give you an example. Labor Day weekend 2006, Crider Inc. based in Stillmore, Ga., lost nearly 700 of its mostly Hispanic 900-member work force. Originally, Crider's processing lines were made up predominantly of African-Americans but gradually Latinos dominated the work force. Since the late 1990s, the Hispanic population has tripled in the state of Georgia.

After the Crider raid, the black community temporarily benefited from the new jobs, which were made available. Crider experienced a crisis and needed 300 employees to return to normal output levels. Unfortunately, the company did not think through its transition. The company suddenly raised pay. Next, they sought replacement workers. Two hundred were hired through a state funded employment agency. The plant was ill-prepared for such a dramatic change of workers and black workers did not stick. The company experienced high employee turnover and threats of legal action from disgruntled new employees. The plant's productivity dropped by nearly 50%.

In both cases I have cited, the positions opened by the raids were an invitation to be permanently added to the bottom rung of the American work force. In the future, even naturalized employees will want something to look forward to – a career path or a personal road to prosperity.

I think progress will be made if we tackle one issue at a time

instead of bundling too many complex issues together. It seems to me that immigration reform has to become a priority – not an afterthought. Pat answers and blanket amnesty approaches simply muddy the waters. Therefore, I recommend we close the borders and start the long process of Americanizing American businesses so that free enterprise can truly work. You can read a more comprehensive review of our solutions to the immigration dilemma in *Personal Faith, Public Policy*.