

Guest column: House Republicans, lost in an immigration wilderness

By Bryce W. Ashby and Michael J. LaRosa Special to Viewpoint

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Republican intransigence to immigration reform reached new heights of absurdity in July, producing two entertaining documents. First, there was a Republican congressman's nonsensical draft of a letter to the House speaker outlining the perceived dangers of supporting the sensible immigration reform bill passed by the Senate. Then, Democratic Rep. Mark Takano of California, a former English teacher, marked up the letter, grading it as "F," while admonishing its writer with words familiar to unfocused students everywhere: "Weak-draft, re-do," Takano wrote.

This histrionic debate deserves closer attention. House Republicans' opposition to the Senate's immigration reform plan can be summarized in three points:

1) The Obama administration can't be trusted to enforce immigration law and the Senate's border security provisions.

Seizing on the Obama administration's 2012 decision to stop deporting minors who have a proven record of positive contribution to U.S. society, House Republicans claim immigration reform won't work because President Barack Obama can't be trusted to enforce its border security provisions.

This, of course, ignores the numbers: By the end of this year, at the current pace, the Obama administration will have deported about 2 million people, roughly as many as were deported from the country during the 105 years from 1892 to 1997. Much to the consternation of pro-immigrant activists, Obama has deported more people in his first four years than President George W. Bush did during his two full terms.

As a result of the ongoing enforcement strategy and a sour economy, the U.S. has recorded a net loss of immigrants in recent years. Thus, suggesting the White House should not be trusted with enforcement is simply contrary to the established record.

2) Comprehensive legislation can't fix the problem because — in the words of the draft letter circulated by Rep. Bill Cassidy, R-La. — "(t)o attempt to do everything at once ensures that little will be done right, and, more likely, that nothing will be done at all."

Comprehensive immigration reform is actually the only way to ensure that immigration reform is done right. We've attempted piecemeal reform for the past 15 years. The failed and controversial "Secure Fence Act" of 2006 is one such example of enforcement/security-only legislation. Focusing solely on the border does nothing to resolve the issue of 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the shadows of our

economy, in every corner of our nation. Obsessing over the geographic area of the “border” will neither limit demand for labor nor remedy the current immigration rules that fracture families. The only way to fix an immigration system that is broken, deliberately complex and severely outdated is through a comprehensive legislative reform package.

3) The Senate’s bill was developed in secret and no one knows what’s in it.

The general framework for the Senate’s bill was developed almost a decade ago by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and the late Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass. Anyone paying attention to this issue over the past decade has known the basic outline of pending immigration reform. Additionally, as Takano notes, the text of the bill is available online along with an analysis from the Congressional Budget Office.

More than 200 amendments were considered during five days in the Judiciary Committee, and there were three more weeks of markup (or debate/negotiation) for noncommittee members. This bill passed with 68 votes in the Senate, a rarity in the fractured, hyperpartisan environment of Washington. We know what’s in comprehensive immigration reform and an overwhelming bipartisan group of lawmakers supported it.

Some House Republicans fear primary-election challenges from members of the tea party if they support sensible immigration reform, so their plan is to stall as long as possible without ever attempting to pass a legitimate fix to a systemically stagnant structure. The truth about the strength of the Senate bill is that if offered for an up-or-down vote, it would pass the House with vast bipartisan support. House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, once again held hostage by the most reactionary elements in his party, won’t allow that to happen.

Should House Republicans let this sensible, moderate, comprehensive immigration reform slip away, they will have committed a political blunder with lasting repercussions. First they will further erode political support among America’s growing Hispanic population — a population with the ability to swing important states in national elections. Second, and more important, they will send a clear, cruel message interpreted nationally as a lack of concern for, and a failure to acknowledge the essential humanity of Hispanic Americans.

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