

SNG-Nowlan-Is Newt right on immigration?-12-12-11 (650 words)

Is Newt right on illegal immigration?

By Jim Nowlan

Presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich stirred the pot recently when he endorsed a proposal to create a path to legal status for illegal immigrants who have lived in the country a long period of time, have children in the U.S., pay taxes and belong to a church. Polls show the American public is with him, but is this the best way to deal with a possibly insoluble problem?

Decades ago I dated a lovely senorita who lived in Guadalajara, Mexico. One weekend when I was visiting, we went up into the mountains to a modest resort. Late one afternoon we walked down to the nearby pueblcito (village). We walked by a long row of attached one-room, dirt floor homes with a single bare light bulb hanging from each ceiling.

My lady friend asked me what the families inside tiny home were thinking? Then she responded for herself: “They’re wondering what they will have to eat tomorrow, if anything.” For some reason, that simple statement about the abject poverty in much of rural Mexico has stuck with me. Certainly it explains the desire to strike out for greener pastures in the U.S., even with the risks of deportation back and the exploitation they often face here in America, because people figure as illegals they are vulnerable.

The Pew Research Center recently looked at the living patterns of “unauthorized immigrants” (why don’t they just say “illegal”) and found that nearly two-thirds of the 10.2 million illegal adult immigrants in the U.S. had been here for more than 10 years.

Half of those are parents of minor children, most of whom were born here and are thus American citizens.

In contrast, the share of illegal immigrants who have been here less than five years is half that of a decade ago. This means that the sharpest growth in illegal immigration happened during the 1990s and early 2000s, according to Pew. About 150,000 illegal immigrants from Mexico came annually to the U.S. between 2007 and 2009, down 70 percent from the rate of the early part of the decade.

This reflects a lack of jobs up here as well as tighter border enforcement and higher numbers of deportations. There were 390,000 deportations overall in 2010, more than twice as many as in 2000, with most of the removals being of Mexicans.

In a 2011 poll taken by Pew, which is known for its solid research, almost three out of four respondents to a national survey said they support a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants who pass background checks, pay fines and have jobs. Staunch conservatives in the poll were evenly divided on this issue while all other subgroups such as “Main Street Republicans,” Democrats and solid liberals strongly favored a path to citizenship.

All groups in the survey also emphatically favored stronger enforcement of immigration laws, which seems indeed to be happening.

Unfortunately, Latinos, who make up most of the illegal immigrants, are performing poorly in school. A 2010 analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education found that only 57 percent of Latinos in Illinois graduated from high school versus 83 percent of whites, and another study showed that only 44 percent of Latinos graduated from college within six years compared with 66 percent of whites.

No one who knowingly enters the U.S. illegally has a right to be here. If we provide a path to citizenship, those here illegally should be required to complete high school and take training for a skilled job or enroll in college. While illegal immigrants are generally known as hard workers, such an attribute will not be sufficient in a future where manual labor jobs will be less available than the numbers of unskilled.

The idea of deporting 10+ million illegal residents, many of whom have children here who are citizens, is impractical. On the other hand, a path to citizenship should be a strong incentive for illegal residents to meet requirements that they become productive members of our society.