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Independent Migrants, Welfare, and the Law

by Sheldon Richman

It's a sad sign of the times that political candidates — even those who profess to be proponents of limited government — feel they have to one-up their rivals in showing how hard they would crack down on people who have the gall to come to the United States without the government's permission. "Border security" is the odious buzzword of the day, and one of the worst things you can be called in the presidential race is "soft on immigration." It's a half-step from "soft on terrorism."

Many issues are jumbled up under the border-security rubric — the rule of law, national sovereignty, jobs, welfare, culture — but a most telling point is that there is far more concern about the southern border than the northern border. That speaks volumes.

Politicians love to make populist appeals by creating alarm about immigrants. These days the focus is on so-called illegals — those who refused to wait in line for government papers — but it's hard to avoid the thought that the real target is immigration in general. In the midst of all the steam let off about immigrants who break the entry laws and refuse to live by "our rules," one is hard pressed to find a politician calling for much freer immigration, not to mention open borders, as a way to remedy the "illegal" problem. This is curious if we assume sincerity on the part of the immigration legalists.

One reason people sneak into the country is that it is close to impossible to get here any other way; the criteria are burdensome and the wait, at best, very long. Someone merely concerned about the flouting of the law might be expected to call for a change so that many more people could get in quickly. Advocates of strict limitations on government power have long pointed out that bad laws — legislative decrees that do not mirror natural law or justice — destroy respect for law. This principle has been applied to the impossible tax code and to legislation that attempts to eliminate "vices." It applies to restrictions on the freedom of movement as well.

One does not see this insight on display among people who claim their only concern about illegal immigration is the rule of law. Thus I think this is a disguise for an anti-immigrant sentiment based on something else. By the way, when you hear someone say that earlier

immigrants obeyed the rules you are hearing someone engaged in demagoguery. During the height of U.S. immigration in the 19th century, the rules let virtually everyone in.

A popular reason for fearing an inflow of low-skilled laborers from, say, Mexico is that they will take jobs from Americans and drive down wages. A little economic understanding is enough to dismantle this objection. First, why is unskilled labor from south of the border the only concern? One could just as easily fear that internal migration between the states will adversely affect jobs and wages. But we have yet to hear calls for immigration controls between states. (The danger in saying such a thing is that it will give some people ideas.)

The division of labor

What the “economic” case against immigration misses is that there is always more work to be done than workers to do it. In a world of scarcity, our wants are limitless. At any given moment we can’t have everything we want. So whenever we can obtain things cheaper than before, we free up labor and resources for more and better things. If migrants are willing to work for less and competition drives down the prices of their products to consumers, more resources and labor will be available for new production. This is how economies grow and living standards rise.

The anti-immigrationists see the productive side of the newcomers (as though that were a bad thing), but they miss the consumption side. Immigrants buy things. New demand requires new supplies. That in turn creates new opportunities for entrepreneurs and workers.

If lower-wage workers coming to the country are a threat to the American people, then so are such workers who stay in their home countries and export their products to the United States. In other words, the anti-immigrant logic leads to economic autarky. But if anything is well established in economics and common sense, it’s that autarky is the road to poverty. The division of labor is the key to ever-increasing prosperity, but as Adam Smith famously wrote, the division of labor is limited by the extent of the market. If, as most people believe, a U.S.-wide division of labor (including free movement and free trade) is good, then a hemispheric division of labor is even better — and a global division of labor is best of all (until we discover other planets with productive beings).

One caveat: the American economy is not a true free market but a government-saturated corporatist system. In part that means taxes and regulations restrict competition, inhibiting new entrepreneurs from challenging incumbent firms. In such circumstances, the ability of the market process to create new opportunities for workers is constrained and the adjustment to new conditions is slower and more difficult. This is what gives surface credence to the anti-immigrationists’ economic arguments. But as we’ve seen, the fault lies not with migrants but with government intervention in the economy. What needs cracking down on is not poor people who freely move to where capital and opportunity are more abundant but politicians who think they can run an economy.

Welfare and immigrants

What about the claim that migrants will take welfare benefits? If the statist-left favors the job-loss argument against immigration, then the statist-right favors the welfare argument (although it uses the job-loss argument too). You'd think that the worst thing that could befall the republic is for foreign-born folks to come into the country without government permission to get taxpayer-financed food stamps, schooling, medical care, and the rest.

I don't understand this. If you already have a welfare state, what's the difference who gets the benefits? It's not as if illegals don't pay taxes. (If they are to be exempted from benefits, shouldn't they also be exempted from taxes?) If the welfare state is immoral — which it is — then it's just as immoral if the only beneficiaries are native-born Americans. Immorality becomes no worse if immigrants get in on the action.

Libertarians should realize that the chief evil of the welfare state lies not in the dispensing of benefits but in how the benefits are obtained. The root of welfare-state immorality is that politicians authorize their troops of tax collectors to confiscate productive people's money under threat of force, and even death if the rightful owners resist. What happens after this is secondary. There would be no welfare recipients — native or immigrant, legal or illegal — if this confiscation did not occur. What would we have gained if welfare were abolished, but the state continued to steal as much as it does today? (At least money going into food stamps isn't being used to buy bombs.)

Thus the emphasis on immigrants' receiving benefits is misplaced. It almost implies that the welfare state is fine for those born here or those who came here under the politicians' rules and satisfied citizenship criteria.

The upshot is that if you don't want immigrants receiving booty delivered by politicians, work to abolish the booty system. Don't push for violations of people's right to move about as they wish.

I can think of several things that are far more offensive than illegals' taking welfare. In the grand scheme of things, native-born Americans on welfare is worse. Having been born here, they might be expected to be more attuned to the original American heritage of independence and entrepreneurship.

Even more offensive are the police-state tactics used and advocated to keep people out and to catch those who are already here. The image of government thugs bursting into living quarters and factories to round up people who are simply working and minding their own business should nauseate every decent person. Moreover, the government's threat to punish business owners for hiring unapproved persons should appall every advocate of free enterprise. Finally, the proposals for government databases and Orwellian ID cards should move any American with a scintilla of appreciation for the Declaration of Independence to rage.

I submit that next to these things an illegal immigrant on welfare is insignificant.

Some day, when Americans rediscover their libertarian roots, they will be ashamed of what was done in their name.

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