

# Center for American Progress



## TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

### *President Fails to Offer Meaningful Reforms to Secure Nation's Border*

President Bush re-engaged the immigration debate after a long and conspicuous absence, giving a speech on border security in Tuscon, Arizona. Unfortunately his speech fell far short of outlining a comprehensive immigration reform plan that will actually solve the crisis on our southern border and fix a broken immigration system. By focusing almost exclusively on enforcement policies that have failed in the past, and by paying lip service to an unrealistic and incomplete guestworker program, the president missed a critical opportunity to promote a comprehensive solution that would make our country physically and economically secure.

A careful look at his speech reveals how the White House's attempt to focus the nation's attention on immigration reform is too little, too late.

- **The President boasted of increasing manpower at the border, yet he failed to heed Congress' own mandate to hire 2,000 additional border patrol agents, authorizing just 200 in his budget.<sup>i</sup>** Under his administration, illegal border crossings have soared to an all-time high. While increasing the number of agents is important, it alone won't solve the problem. In the last decade, the U.S. has tripled the number of Border Patrol agents, and they have spent eight times as many hours patrolling the border. During that same time, the undocumented population has doubled in size, the death rate has tripled and the per-apprehension cost has increased by nearly 500%.<sup>ii</sup> We need comprehensive reform, not enforcement-only.
- **The President based his claim to return every illegal entrant caught crossing the border on an ineffective program has done little to deter illegal immigration.** The interior repatriation program, whereby migrants are flown to locations within Mexico rather than released near border towns, did not reduce re-entry rates significantly and was so expensive that government officials acknowledged the need to cut costs by at least 60% before continuing it.<sup>iii</sup>
- **The President promised to end the practice of "catch and release" by increasing the number of beds in detention facilities by 10 percent. Unfortunately, this increase will not even begin to address the lack of detention space.** The U.S. currently has the capacity to hold 19,400 immigrants, less than 2% of the total who attempt to cross the border annually.<sup>iv</sup>

A recent Center for American Progress study noted that increasing the space to detain more illegal immigrants would cost at least \$14,000 per bed, meaning that the federal government would have to spend more than \$2 billion up front just to accommodate the immigrants crossing illegally each year.<sup>v</sup>

- **The President credited the “Texas Hold ‘Em” program for reducing Brazilian illegal immigration by 90% in the Rio Grande Valley, but failed to note that Brazilian immigrants make up less than 3 percent of the overall foreign-born population in the United States.**<sup>vi</sup> Stemming the tide of immigration from Brazil says next to nothing about the real test for “Texas Hold ‘Em”—how well it slowed border crossers from Mexico.
- **The President has vowed to work with Congress to reform immigration laws, yet his administration has been conspicuously absent from the debate for nearly four years.** Aside from providing the bare outlines of a guestworker program in January 2004,<sup>vii</sup> the White House has done little to advance immigration reform on Capitol Hill.<sup>viii</sup> In July 2005, the administration was in such disarray it pulled two cabinet secretaries from testifying before the Senate at the last minute.<sup>ix</sup> Despite the emergence of several immigration proposals in the House and Senate, the White House has failed to provide critical leadership sorely needed.
- **The President has promised to construct “physical barriers to entry” to keep illegal immigrants out, yet this rhetoric is just fodder for the right-wing proponents of an impractical plan.** While the recently-constructed 14-mile fence near San Diego has contributed to a drop in illegal immigration there, illegal immigration in the perilous deserts of nearby Arizona has tripled at the same time,<sup>x</sup> suggesting that such fences merely shift immigration to more dangerous areas rather than slow it down.
- **The President claims that the federal government is improving worksite enforcement, but this is simply not true.** In 2003, just 443 illegal immigrants were arrested at their worksites,<sup>xi</sup> out of a working population of more than 6 million. Apprehending all illegal workers would cost well over \$100 billion.<sup>xii</sup>
- **The President’s temporary worker program is unrealistic in practice.** The President wants to return all undocumented immigrants to their home country before they can qualify for a path to legal residence. Believing that current undocumented immigrants will “report to deport” is illogical, and it will incur the unnecessary cost of returning millions of immigrants to their home countries.<sup>xiii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> United States Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs. “Summary of Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004.” December 6, 2004. Available online at: <http://hsgac.senate.gov/files/ConferenceReportSummary.doc>; Hedges, Michael. “Bush budget scraps

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- 9790 border patrol agents.” The San Francisco Chronicle. February 9, 2005. Available online at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2005/02/09/MNGOKB837T1.DTL>
- <sup>ii</sup> Massey, Douglas. “Backfire at the Border.” The Center for Trade Policy Studies. June 13, 2005. Available online at: <http://www.freetrade.org/pubs/pas/tpa-029.pdf> ; <http://www.aifl.org/ipc/ipf112204.asp>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Gelatt, Julia, and Jennifer You. “Free Flights and New Enforcement Proposals Address Unauthorized Migrants.” Migration Information Source. July 1, 2005. Available online at: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=322>
- <sup>iv</sup> Testimony of Victor Cerda, Acting Director of Detention and Removal, United States Department of Homeland Security, before a Joint Hearing of the Immigration, Border Security, and Citizenship Subcommittee and the Terrorism, Technology, and Homeland Security Subcommittee. April 14, 2005.
- <sup>v</sup> Goyle, Rajeev, and David Jaeger. “Deporting the Undocumented.” The Center for American Progress. July, 2005. p. 6. Available online at: [www.americanprogress.org/immigration](http://www.americanprogress.org/immigration).
- <sup>vi</sup> The David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. “Giving Voice to a Nascent Community: Exploring the Brazilian Immigration to the U.S. through Research and Practice.” Available online at <http://drclas.fas.harvard.edu/uploads/images/103/GivingVoiceFINAL.pdf>; <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/46.pdf>.
- <sup>vii</sup> “President Bush Proposes New Temporary Worker Program.” The White House. January 7, 2004. Available online at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040107-3.html>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Sandler, Michael. “House GOP’s Focus on Immigration at Odds With Senate, White House Plans.” Congressional Quarterly, November 7, 2005.
- <sup>ix</sup> “Mute on Immigration.” Washington Post, July 26, 2005.
- <sup>x</sup> [http://www.aifl.org/ipc/policy\\_reports\\_2005\\_fencinginfailure.asp](http://www.aifl.org/ipc/policy_reports_2005_fencinginfailure.asp).
- <sup>xi</sup> <http://judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/stana062105.pdf>.
- <sup>xii</sup> [www.americanprogress.org/immigration](http://www.americanprogress.org/immigration).
- <sup>xiii</sup> House, Billy. “Migrants to return voluntarily under bill.” Arizona Republic, July 20, 2005.