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Refocus on immigration

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Last year, I joined hundreds of thousands of Hispanic immigrants who marched in cities across the country under the generic banner of "immigration reform." However, their faces told a more profound story: America's newest immigrants also yearn for America's promise.

Unfortunately, today's immigration debate has been led--or better, misled--by extremists on both sides of the political spectrum. Immigrants are depicted as vulnerable victims who suffer from American greed and abuse, or as foreign opportunists who demand and take America's generosity and benefits, but refuse to commit to her future.

Both sides have it wrong.

Immigrants, legal or not, seek a shot at economic prosperity--they always have. And today's illegal immigrants, mostly Mexican, are no different.

They replenish America's workforce with an unparalleled work ethic. They follow job opportunity to every corner of the United States, whether it's Chicago's factories, Nebraska's farmland, Los Angeles' restaurants, New York's hotels or even New Orleans' rebuilding effort. No job is ever considered too low--it's the next step up.

They breathe life into our economy with entrepreneurial vigor, building thriving businesses in every community they live in. As consumers, their brand loyalty and growing purchasing power have big business catering to their every want and need.

They rejuvenate aging neighborhoods by purchasing homes at a record pace. They repopulate great American cities that have lost families to suburbia. They celebrate traditional family and religious values and are optimistic about their economic future.

Like their European predecessors, their optimism leads them to embrace assimilation.

In myriad ways, they live and bolster the classic American dream: get better jobs, buy bigger homes, drive the newest sport-utility vehicles and watch satellite TV. What a country! What a people!

Yet, if their faces told this story at those massive marches last year, their hopeful voices have been drowned out by the angry rhetoric from leftist activists who have taken up the immigrant cause.

Worse, the left has taken a topic that most Americans, including a Republican president, can build consensus on and have turned it into a wedge issue that divides even the most centrist of middle America.

What has emerged are the demands for rights, charges of American discrimination and the ever-vague "fight for justice." The inspiring story of immigrant aspirations has morphed into the usual chant for entitlements and social services.

The left seized the moment with nationalist displays of Mexican flag waving, protesting teenagers staging school walkouts and foreign music stars bastardizing our national anthem in Spanish. Could the claim of "reconquering our stolen land for Aztlan" be far behind?

White liberals, who thrive on minority "struggles," create symbolic victims who seek sanctuary, while the newest "poverty pimps" demand government/philanthropic funds for a newfound constituency.

Not to be outdone, the extreme Republican right, which in essence has been organized and motivated by the left, espouses its equally hollow rhetoric, seducing the pragmatic center into this melee.

The "minutemen," a small inconsequential volunteer border group, demands the erection of a useless wall along our southern border to stop this "invasion." Local officials have turned their police into quasi-immigration agents. Others contemplate denying education services to undocumented children. Fearing a Spanish version of French Canada, English-only laws are being proposed across the U.S. Alarmists demand the immediate deportation of the "12 million criminals," disregarding its impact to our economy, or more simply, its logistical impracticality.

And of course, politicians, who never miss an opportunity to pander, respond in typical knee-jerk fashion to each side.

Extremists have succeeded at creating a vigorously do-nothing environment, which serves them just fine. In fact, their survival and relevance depends on it.

Again, they are both wrong!

To be sure, immigration reform is not easy to address. The undocumented or illegals, whichever term you prefer, bring new opportunities as well as additional burdens to our nation. Rather than allow fringe groups to distort the debate, we

need an earnest discussion on how best to continue integrating immigrants into America's future.

It's time for a pragmatic and centrist leadership to recognize the contribution of the undocumented by creating a legal process that regulates their status and satisfies our nation's economic self-interest. To focus on anything else diminishes immigrant success, past and present, and threatens our potential, as well as our legacy, as a nation.

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