

## The Welcome Mat by Dan Jacoby

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles.  
From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

– "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus

This poem graces the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. For decades, this poem symbolized the American attitude toward immigrants. Our expanding country needed people to fill the jobs that were being created by the millions; immigrants filled those jobs, and built a life for themselves and their children.

Paradoxically, by the time the Statue was dedicated in 1886, the first laws limiting immigration had already been passed. Over the next century, restrictions on immigration were tightened numerous times, as America's geographical expansion slowed to a halt and our ability to absorb millions of new people virtually disappeared.

In 1986, a century after the Statue of Liberty was dedicated, the debate over "illegal immigrants" came to a head. An attempt was made to deal with the "problem" by granting legal status to hundreds of thousands of immigrants and employers were required to see proof of legal residency for all new employees. The hope was that by cracking down on employers who hire illegal immigrants, the motivation to sneak into the country would disappear.

It didn't work.

The reason it didn't work, however, had less to do with the quality of the law than with basic economics. In 1986, the macro-economy of the United States was booming, but the middle class wasn't feeling the benefits. Meanwhile, the promise of a booming economy, and the jobs that atmosphere usually creates, induced many people to come.

At the time, the jobs they took were jobs many Americans wanted, but the illegal immigrants could be persuaded to work for far less than the minimum wage, without benefits or the security that comes with legitimacy. Employers who hired illegal immigrants saved a lot of money, but Americans were left jobless.

Something had to be done. But what was done was ineffective, primarily because the Reagan administration had no interest in stopping businesses from hiring cheap labor. As long as profit margins rose, it didn't matter to them that middle class and working class Americans couldn't share in the benefits.

In the 1990s the flow of illegal immigrants became a flood, and very few people made a fuss. The fiscal and economic policies of the new administration, combined with world events, created 23 million new jobs in eight years. More importantly, the new prosperity actually “trickled down” to the lower economic strata of our country. A revamped tax structure, along with a truly booming economy, gave us a balanced budget for the first time in decades. The unemployment rate fell to 4%; in that atmosphere, illegal immigrants filled a need for which there simply weren’t enough Americans available.

A claim could be made that the Clinton administration didn’t care to crack down on employers either. The major difference is that cracking down on employers during times of real, broad-based prosperity would have pulled the bottom out of the economic boom.

Then along came a reversal of fortune.

The Bush administration’s tax cuts for the wealthiest among us, added to economic policies that hurt workers while benefiting only the very few, have brought back an economic divide. Big businesses are reaping huge profits, but middle class and working class Americans are losing out. Although the “big picture” numbers look good at first, the new prosperity is limited to those at the top.

Jobs are being outsourced in record numbers. The new jobs being created are mostly low-pay, low-benefit retail jobs. The overall job creation rate, even in the best of these times, isn’t enough to keep up with population growth. Millions of Americans have dropped out of the job market, becoming “discouraged workers” or, in the eyes of the Bush administration, “unpersons.” Since they don’t show up in the numbers generally reported in the mass media, they don’t count.

But they do count.

The Bush administration’s problem is that they don’t want to crack down on employers, forcing them to hire Americans or legal residents at legitimate wages. George W. Bush doesn’t care about workers; he only cares about corporations’ bottom line, short-term profits. He can’t – or won’t – look deeply enough to understand that helping lower- and middle-class Americans helps everyone. Bush and the Republicans refuse to notice that every time we raise the minimum wage the result is an expanded economy.

So George W. Bush wants to let illegal immigrants stay at continued illegally low wages, and the rest of the Republicans want to build a new “Great Wall of Chi- ... of America.”

Meanwhile, Democrats are concerned that their current hold on the majority of Hispanic Americans may not last. More importantly, the current Democratic leadership seems incapable of leading. So rather than simply come out and tell the truth – that the real problem is that businesses hire illegal immigrants at substandard wages and conditions rather than hiring Americans – they waffle.

Democrats will work with Bush on his amnesty program because they believe that as long as most Republicans are against it Democrats will keep the “Hispanic vote.” But if any Democrat has a real alternative, which is highly doubtful, party leaders won’t let that alternative come to light.

Perhaps our political leaders should be deported.