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In Immigration Remarks, Bush Hints He Favors Senate Plan

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

IRVINE, Calif., April 24 — President Bush reinserted himself into the divisive debate over immigration on Monday, speaking favorably of a stalled Senate compromise that would put a vast majority of the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants on a path to citizenship.

In remarks to about 300 Orange County business leaders here, Mr. Bush said the bipartisan Senate compromise, which fell apart this month as Republicans and Democrats maneuvered for political advantage, was "an interesting approach."

His words fell short of endorsing the plan, but they signaled that he preferred the Senate approach over a House bill that focuses on border security and would turn illegal immigrants into felons. The president's position put him to the left of many conservative Republicans who say the Senate plan's citizenship provisions amount to amnesty.

"I know this is an emotional debate, and I can understand it's emotional, but one thing we cannot lose sight of is that we're talking about human beings, decent human beings," Mr. Bush said.

He added: "Massive deportation of the people here is unrealistic. It's just not going to work. You can hear people out there hollering it's going to work. It's not going to work."

Mr. Bush's remarks seemed intended to encourage the Senate, which returned to work on Monday after a two-week recess, to try again to pass legislation in coming months and then to work out its differences with the House.

While Mr. Bush spoke positively about the approach being debated in the Senate, he left himself enough room to try to work out a deal between the Senate and House Republicans, who have strongly opposed any bill that would provide legal status to workers who have entered the United States illegally.

Under the Senate plan, illegal immigrants who have lived in the United States for five years or more would eventually be granted citizenship if they remained employed, had background checks, paid fines and back taxes, and learned English.

Illegal immigrants who have lived here two to five years would have to travel to a United States border crossing and apply for a temporary work visa, but they would be eligible for permanent residency and citizenship over time. Illegal immigrants who have been here less than two years would have to leave the country, though they could apply to be in a temporary worker program.

"I thought the Senate had an interesting approach by saying that if you've been here for five years or less, you're treated one way, and five years or more, you're treated another," Mr. Bush said. "It's just an interesting concept that people need to think through about what to do with people that have been here for quite a period of time."

Mr. Bush said that although an illegal immigrant "should never be granted automatic citizenship," there should be an opportunity for citizenship over time.

"What I do think makes sense is that a person ought to be allowed to get in line," Mr. Bush said. "In other words, pay a penalty for being here illegally, commit him or herself to learn English, which is part of the American system, and get in the back of the line."

Mr. Bush said he would leave it to Congress to determine how long that line would be for each nationality. "If Congress wants a shorter line for a particular nationality, they increase the number of green cards," Mr. Bush said. "If they want a longer line, they shrink the number of green cards per nationality."

He also promoted his idea of a guest worker program, which would grant temporary visas to foreigners inside and outside the United States who want to work in the country for a certain period. The White House has suggested that it would limit to six years the time that workers in the program could remain in the United States, but on Monday, Mr. Bush said he would leave the specific time period up to Capitol Hill.

"The definition of 'temporary' will be decided in the halls of Congress," he said.

Mr. Bush spoke in a border state that is a central front in the immigration debate. He addressed his remarks to the business owners in the audience, an important Republican constituency, and told them that it was unfair that they should be penalized for hiring workers who might have false documentation.

"They show up and they put a Social Security card out there and it looks real," Mr. Bush said. "You know, our small-business owners are not document checkers. These are people trying to get ahead, and it's impossible to really effect the enforcement of our laws if people are able to use forged documents."

Later in the day, Mr. Bush traveled to Las Vegas for an event that raised \$400,000 for Representative Jon Porter, Republican of Nevada, before returning to Washington.

Scores of people protested on Capital Hill on Monday, demonstrating against provisions in House and Senate immigration bills that call for expanded detention and deportation of illegal immigrants. The demonstrators, who included people with relatives who had been deported, said that deportations often devastated the families left behind.

"We're concerned because a lot of these issues have not been debated or discussed," said Will Coley, a spokesman for Homies Unidos, a nonprofit group that works with former gang members in Los Angeles. "No one is raising the issue about how deportation is affecting families."

183 Immigrants Arrested

MIAMI, April 24 (AP) — Federal immigration authorities arrested 183 fugitives and other illegal immigrants in Florida alone last week, the state's largest roundup in a single week, officials said Monday.

Of the 183 arrested, 130 were fugitives who had already been ordered deported by an immigration judge. The remaining 53 were illegal immigrants who happened to be present when the fugitives were arrested, said Michael Rozos, a Miami field director for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

The authorities said the arrests included people from 26 countries who had been convicted of sex offenses, cocaine trafficking and other violations. Most will eventually be deported.

Rachel L. Swarns contributed reporting from Washington for this article.