

November 29, 2005

Bush Renews Push to Overhaul Immigration

By [RICHARD W. STEVENSON](#)

TUCSON, Nov. 28 - President Bush kicked off a new effort on Monday to unite Republicans behind an overhaul of immigration laws. He emphasized the need to choke off the flow of illegal immigrants while trying to address conservatives' concerns about his plan to grant temporary legal status to millions of illegal workers already in the United States.

On the first of two days of appearances in two border states, Arizona and Texas, Mr. Bush tried to stake out a middle ground on an issue that has divided Republicans, saying the nation did not have to choose between upholding its immigration laws and being compassionate to the millions of workers who travel here desperate to make a living.

His emphasis was unmistakably on the elements that most concern conservatives in his party. They are demanding more forceful steps to hold back the waves of people who flow across the Mexican border and are deeply opposed to anything that smacks of amnesty for people who have entered illegally.

"Illegal immigration's a serious challenge," Mr. Bush said, flanked by two black Border Patrol helicopters in a hangar at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base here. "And our responsibility is clear. We are going to protect the border."

Mr. Bush listed initiatives that he said were helping, including returning illegal immigrants from Mexico to their hometowns rather than simply sending them back across the border and moving to end the practice of releasing illegal immigrants in the United States in the expectation, usually dashed, that they will appear for court hearings.

He approvingly cited programs to build walls and fences in some areas, spoke of how technology was helping catch people sneaking across the border and pushed budget increases he has supported.

The president cast his original proposal for a temporary guest worker program as a safety valve that would reduce illegal immigration and sought to ease concerns among some conservatives that it would amount to amnesty for lawbreakers. His plan would let millions of illegal immigrants obtain legal status for a fixed but as yet undetermined period, but would then require them to return to their home countries, a provision that many immigration experts say is unworkable and unrealistic.

"We're going to secure the border by catching those who enter illegally and hardening the border to prevent illegal crossings," Mr. Bush said. "We're going to strengthen enforcement of our immigration laws within our country. And together with Congress, we're going to create a temporary worker program that'll take pressure off the border, bring workers from out of the shadows and reject amnesty."

He signaled that he would oppose any effort to limit changes in immigration policy to an increase in border security. In doing so, he suggested that the White House preferred the approach being taken by Senate Republican leaders who have promised to develop a broad approach to immigration and border security to that being taken by House Republican leaders who plan to bring up a bill just on border security.

In the audience were the two Arizona senators, both Republicans: [John McCain](#), who has co-sponsored a plan to give participants in the guest worker program a path to citizenship, and Jon Kyl, who has co-sponsored a bill to deny temporary workers a path to citizenship.

Their bills are among proposals on Capitol Hill that include building a wall along the entire Mexican border, using military forces to patrol the border, creating a volunteer marshal program to help patrols and increasing fines for employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants.

"Listen, there's a lot of opinions on this proposal," Mr. Bush said. "I understand that. But people in this debate must recognize that we will not be able to effectively enforce our immigration laws until we create a temporary worker program."

In taking on the issue, Mr. Bush has found himself caught between two powerful forces. On one side is business, which pleads for a system that will ensure employers' access to workers who are willing to take jobs that they say they cannot fill with Americans or legal immigrants.

On the other side are conservatives who say the big problem is a porous border that is creating huge law enforcement problems and adding to the costs of social welfare, education and other programs.

Democrats are highlighting the Republicans' divisions, pressing Mr. Bush not to acquiesce to conservatives and asking him to address the full range of immigration issues.

"As Congress finally begins to address this problem, I hope that you will stand up to the right wing of your party and stand up for what is right," Senator Harry Reid, the Nevada Democrat who is minority leader, said in a letter sent on Monday to Mr. Bush.

Mr. Reid continued, "Democrats support immigration policies that will reunite families, provide for continued American economic growth, protect the rights of American workers, secure economic stability for our neighbors to the south and honor the values of the United States of America as a nation of immigrants."

Immigration is among the trickiest issues on Mr. Bush's domestic agenda, and it is in some ways similar to what President [Bill Clinton](#) faced in pushing for an overhaul of the welfare system a decade ago.

As Mr. Clinton did with welfare, Mr. Bush became immersed in immigration as governor. Just as Mr. Clinton wanted to use toughening the welfare system as a way to break with liberal orthodoxy and lay claim to the political center, Mr. Bush and his advisers have always viewed addressing immigration in a way sensitive to immigrants as an opportunity to strengthen his party's appeal to Hispanics, a fast-growing segment of the population.

Just as Mr. Clinton had to risk outrage among Democrats in signing a Republican welfare bill just months before he faced re-election in 1996, Mr. Bush finds himself navigating between factions of his party and at risk of having opened a debate that he can no longer control at a time his political fortunes have been sinking and he is increasingly reliant on his conservative base for support.