

Commentary: Immigration debate between wall and wallet

By Ruben Navarrette Jr.
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SAN DIEGO, California (CNN) -- This week, Congress will return to the immigration debate when it hears testimony from U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez.

I love the pairing. It illustrates America's schizophrenia on the issue and the built-in tension between the need to control our borders and the profits we reap from keeping it open, between the wall and wallet.

Hopefully, at the end of it all, we'll have comprehensive immigration reform that gives illegal immigrants a path to legal residency. Until that happens, the popular view is that towns, cities, and states will take it upon themselves to try to end illegal immigration -- for better or worse.

I'm ready for some better. I've seen plenty of the worse.

- Texas State Rep. Leo Berman has written a bill that would deny U.S.-born children of illegal immigrants access to state programs. The Republican is targeting what he tactlessly calls "anchor babies."
- Some state legislatures are considering leveling taxes on the billions of dollars that illegal immigrants send home annually to other countries (read: Mexico).
- States such as Utah and Virginia are threatening to eliminate in-state tuition rates for illegal immigrant students who attend public colleges and universities.
- In Maryland, State Delegate Ronald A. George and Sen. Janet Greenip, both Republicans, have filed bills that would require anyone applying for a state driver's license to show proof that they're in the country legally.
- Last year, the Colorado Legislature approved legislation that requires that those who apply for state-funded programs must prove they are legal U.S. residents and sign an affidavit to that effect.
- And city councils in Escondido, California, Hazelton, Pennsylvania and Farmers Branch, Texas, last year passed ordinances fining landlords that rent to illegal immigrants and declaring English their towns' official language.

More than 60 localities across the country are resorting to do-it-yourself law enforcement measures to curb illegal immigration. Some Americans see these endeavors as a form of self-help. But they're more like outbursts of vigilantism. After all, that's when one takes the law into one's own hands after deciding that existing law enforcement is inadequate.

Here, towns, cities, and states are taking into their own hands the enforcement of immigration law because, they insist, the federal government is doing an inadequate job of it.

Not so fast. This is one time when the folks in Washington may be getting a bum rap as states and localities try to dodge responsibility for a problem they helped create and from which they have benefited.

It wasn't Congress that profited from the robust economies that come from having cheap labor, or collected property taxes from illegal immigrants and the companies that hire them, or used cheap labor to fuel growth by building homes and streets and schools. That is the modus operandi of states and localities, the same entities that are now shocked -- shocked! - that they are being overrun with illegal immigrants and devising ways to get rid of them.

What do you know? That's just more schizophrenia.

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