

The Illegal Immigrant is the 2007 Dallas Morning News Texan of the Year

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He breaks the law by his very presence. He hustles to do hard work many Americans won't, at least not at the low wages he accepts. The American consumer economy depends on him. America as we have known it for generations may not survive him.

We can't seem to live with him and his family, and if we can live without him, nobody's figured out how.

He's the Illegal Immigrant, and he's the 2007 Dallas Morning News Texan of the Year – for better or for worse. Given the public mood, there seems to be little middle ground in debate over illegal immigrants. Spectacular fights over their presence broke out across Texas this year, adding to the national pressure cooker as only Texas can.

To their champions, illegal immigrants are decent, hardworking people who, like generations of European immigrants before them, just want to do better for their families and who contribute to America's prosperity. They must endure hatred and abuse by those of us who want the benefits of cheap labor but not the presence of illegal immigrants.

Especially here in Texas, his strong back and willing heart help form the cornerstone of our daily lives, in ways that many of us do not, or will not, see. The illegal immigrant is the waiter serving margaritas at our restaurant table, the cook preparing our enchiladas. He works grueling hours at a meatpacking plant, carving up carcasses of cattle for our barbecue (he also picks the lettuce for our burgers). He builds our houses and cuts our grass. She cleans our homes and takes care of our children.

Yet to those who want them sent home, illegal immigrants are essentially lawbreakers who violate the nation's borders. They use public resources – schools, hospitals – to which they aren't entitled and expect to be served in a foreign language. They're rapidly changing Texas neighborhoods, cities and culture, and not always for the better. Those who object get tagged as racists.

Whatever and whoever else the illegal immigrant is, everybody has felt the tidal wave of his presence. According to an analysis of government data by the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies, Texas' immigrant population has jumped a whopping 32.7 percent since 2000, a period in which immigration to the United States has exceeded, in sheer numbers, all previous historical eras. Half the immigrants in the state – 7 percent of all Texans – are estimated to be here illegally.

Though many would agree that the status quo cannot be sustained – more illegal immigrants arrive each year than legal ones, a sure sign that the system is a joke – neither

Texas nor the nation seemed nearer in 2007 to resolving this complex crisis. We can't deport 12 million people who already live here, but we can't leave our back door open indefinitely. Compromise comes hard because the issue is tangled up with the most basic aspects of everyday life, down to the core of what it means to be American.

This essay cannot put a name or a face to an illegal immigrant, because that would subject him to possible deportation. Because he lives underground, the illegal immigrant becomes, in our rancorous debate, less a complex human being and more a blank screen upon which both sides can project their hopes and fears.

If illegal immigration were an easy problem to fix, the nation wouldn't be at an impasse. In the current atmosphere, it seems, reason doesn't stand a chance of digging us out. Ask Irving Mayor Herb Gears, a man once denounced by anti-immigration activists for running what they called a "sanctuary city." He then found himself targeted by Hispanics because of the city's participation in a federal deportation program.

"One week I'm a traitor, the next week I'm a patriot," laments Mr. Gears. The mayor says he just wants to respect both people, and the law. His exasperated manner seems to ask, Why can't you do both? Good question.

The economy

If there are jobs in America, Latino immigrants will come, no matter the risk. And why not? They may be at the bottom of the economic ladder here, but they're making about four times, on average, what they could back home.

Antonio, a waiter at a North Texas restaurant, was an accountant in Mexico. He and his wife thought they could make more money in Texas, so they came illegally.

"In the time I've been here, this country has been very good to me. I am a responsible person. I pay my taxes. I pay my bills on time – utilities, mortgage. I pay federal taxes, too," he says.

Antonio resented any suggestion that he should consider returning home or that illegal immigrants don't belong here. He seemed to regard his presence here as exercising a right.

Workers like him find support among business owners – especially in Texas industries dependent on unskilled immigrants, like agriculture and construction. They say that without those workers, they couldn't survive.

Marty owns a North Texas construction company. He has come to view American workers as undependable, lazy and arrogant, while he finds illegal immigrants motivated and reliable.

"I'd rather employ them than Americans," he confides. "In my line of work, I need the Mexicans, and I am for them being here. I need them because I can't find anybody else to do the work."

(Both Antonio and Marty asked that their last names not be disclosed to prevent repercussions.)

The importance of immigrant labor to Texas was underscored this year with formation of a new political alliance – big business and the Legislature's Mexican-American caucus. They threatened to cripple the lawmaking machinery if legislative leaders allowed a slate of "anti-immigrant" bills to advance. The tactic worked.

It's unclear from the data whether illegal immigration is a plus or minus for the nation's economy overall. Harvard economist George Borjas reports that it's more or less a wash. On close inspection, Dr. Borjas, a leading expert in the field, found that immigration's financial benefits accrue to those at the upper end of the economic scale, who can buy labor and its fruits at a lower cost, at the expense of those Americans at the lower end, whose wages go down.

"There is no such thing as a job that natives won't do," Dr. Borjas, an immigrant from Cuba, wrote last year. "Instead, there are jobs that natives aren't willing to do at the going wage."

The state comptroller's office had a different take on Texas, reporting in 2005 that illegal immigrants provided a net economic boost of nearly \$18 billion that year. While state government took in more taxes from illegal immigrants than it paid out in services for them, the comptroller said, the opposite was true for Texas' local governments.

Nationally, a Congressional Budget Office report released this month said illegal immigrants cost more in tax dollars than they provide, especially in the areas of education, law enforcement and health. Indeed, 70 percent of babies born in Dallas' Parkland Hospital in the first three months of 2006 were to illegal immigrant mothers. Taxpayers spend tens of millions of dollars annually subsidizing births in that one hospital.

Texas schools are filling up with students classified as of limited-English proficiency, many of whose parents came here illegally. The number has reached more than 30 percent of Dallas students, 36 percent in Irving and 16 percent statewide.

Hispanic immigrants are more likely to be poor, but they don't stay that way. The Hispanic poverty rate has dropped 30 percent since 1994, census data show. At 20.6 percent, that's significantly above the national average of 12.8 percent. But Latinos are undeniably upwardly mobile. Besides, if you want to see what happens when Latinos leave, look at the business losses in Irving since the city's role in the federal deportation program sent a chill through the Hispanic community.

Politics

Earlier this year, U.S. Rep. Jeb Hensarling of Dallas, when asked what his constituents were talking about, said, "Immigration, immigration, immigration." GOP presidential

contender Mike Huckabee, born again as an immigration hard-liner, told The New Yorker this month that wherever he campaigns, immigration is the first thing voters ask about. "It's just red hot," he says, "and I don't fully understand it."

John McCain does. Voters are worried, he told the magazine, that illegal immigrants make a mockery of law and the idea of sovereign borders, as well as upset social norms. "They see this as an assault on their culture, what they view as an impact on what have been their traditions," Mr. McCain says. "It's become larger than just the fact that we need to enforce our borders."

Once the GOP favorite to win the nomination, the Arizona senator set back his campaign this summer by supporting President Bush's call for comprehensive immigration reform. A revolt at the grassroots scuttled that plan in Congress.

Democrats have felt the political whiplash, too. Hillary Clinton, for one, abandoned her support of a New York proposal to issue driver's licenses to illegal immigrants. Most other Democratic presidential candidates fell in line with her.

The political tap dance is trickier in Texas, owing to the 1,300-mile border with Mexico and community ties across the divide. Many local officials bitterly objected to Congress' plan to fence off long stretches of the Rio Grande. Gov. Rick Perry ultimately said "boots on the ground" and not a hard barrier was the answer to keeping out illegal immigrants. Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison and John Cornyn put forth a measure to ease up on mandatory double fencing if locals have better options.

At the local level, Farmers Branch voters this year approved a local ban on renting to illegal aliens, a move later blocked in court. Despite accusations of racism ("They are so prejudiced, but they don't want to face it," local business owner Elizabeth Villafranca says), and despite the judge's order, City Council member Tim O'Hare was defiant at year's end. Says Mr. O'Hare, "I only wish we had done this earlier."

Culture

It's easy to say, as many immigrant advocates do, that opposition to illegal immigration derives from racist sentiment, because that's undeniably part of the mix. But the culture clash is a lot more complicated.

Illegal Hispanic immigrants are usually Third World peasants who have moved to the First World. They go from a country with sharp class divisions to a middle-class society. In earlier waves of immigrants, millions of new arrivals left processing at New York's Ellis Island with the expectation that they would adapt fully and deliberately to American norms – the melting pot, rather than the salad bowl. The post-1960s movement toward multiculturalism has made the nation more tolerant of ethnic and cultural differences, but it has also lessened the impetus for immigrants to conform.

"Mexico is radically, substantively, ferociously different from the United States," Jorge

Castañeda, formerly Mexico's foreign minister, observed in 1995. It was a period of turmoil, with NAFTA newly inaugurated, a rural uprising in Chiapas and a growing gulf between social classes.

He described Mexicans trying to embrace an American-style work ethic, while others remained glued to a "mañana" view of life, reinforced by low pay, low self-esteem and an inability to penetrate Mexico's rigid class system. Many Mexicans lost hope and sought a better life in America.

Rural Mexicans have dominated the migrant wave, bringing a country-style sense of time and priorities. For Americans, a transfer of Mexican rural culture to our neighborhoods leaves many feeling overwhelmed. The fear of cultural overload is manifested in sights like Spanish-language billboards or large quinceañera parties in public parks. Schoolteachers find it incomprehensible that, for some reason, immigrant students often disappear for days and suddenly return with the expectation that the teacher should catch them up.

"Certain Mexicans can subscribe to a series of rules, from traffic regulations to work discipline and punctuality; others can decide, consciously or otherwise, that they prefer not to," Dr. Castañeda wrote.

Illegal immigration exacerbates the natural tension in American society by injecting more change than can be absorbed – and by defying laws designed to control the rate of change. When immigration restrictionists protest defiance of "law and order," they reveal anger at the cultural revolution Latino immigrants bring – a revolution many U.S. citizens feel powerless to stop.

Identity

Harvard's Samuel Huntington, one of America's most eminent political scientists – and a liberal one – has argued that the immigration wave stands as "the single most immediate and most serious challenge to America's traditional identity."

In his 2004 book *Who Are We?*, Dr. Huntington identified several factors that set current Hispanic immigration apart from previous episodes in U.S. history.

Most immigrants are Latino and come over a border, not an ocean. Roughly half of these are illegal. Assimilation is slower, writes Dr. Huntington, because the immigrants "remain in intimate contact with their families, friends and home localities in Mexico as no other immigrants have been able to do."

The scale is unmatched, he argues. Since 2000, more immigrants (10.3 million) have arrived in America than in any other seven-year period, according to the Center for Immigration Studies' recent analysis of census data. And in contrast to previous waves of immigration, this one shows no signs of letting up, according to Dr. Huntington.

Not everyone agrees with this assessment. Some of Dr. Huntington's critics point out that

the rate of immigration (as distinct from sheer numbers) is not as high now as in previous eras, which ended with successful assimilation of foreign-born populations. Besides, though the current immigration flow shows no signs of abating, the Mexican GDP is growing and the national fertility rate has plummeted by almost two-thirds since 1970. That birth rate is nearing the level at which Mexico would need to retain workers for its own economy, thereby shutting off the spigot of immigration into the U.S.

As for assimilation, Roberto Suro, director of the Pew Hispanic Center, points to social-science data indicating that Hispanic immigrants are, in fact, assimilating as fast as immigrants of previous generations. They learn English quickly, and, once they acquire proficiency, they adopt American cultural attitudes.

One other observation of Dr. Huntington's has particular resonance in Texas: The current wave of immigrants has had disproportionate impact on the Southwest. And as the majority of them are from Mexico, they are now settled in areas that used to belong to their ancestors.

Attempts to draw a sharp line between mainstream "Anglo" (for lack of a better term) culture and Hispanic culture is a distortion of the reality we live with in much of Texas, and always have. The border between the two Texan cultures is as porous as the border between Texas and Mexico, which is one reason why our experience with immigration differs from much of America's.

Texas culture reflects the long list of towns with Spanish names. What's more, in a great swath along the border, most cities are run by those with Spanish surnames, too. Today's immigration wave has carried a different version of Hispanic culture to Dallas and other major population centers. And in this increasingly urbanized state, the dominant Anglo culture has felt a rub like never before.

Though towns and cities nationwide have felt the rub, too, it hasn't been on the Texas scale. Leaders in Farmers Branch and Irving were reacting to complaints of runaway community transformation brought on by illegal arrivals.

As 2007 began, the isolated Texas Panhandle town of Cactus was still reeling from the arrests of nearly 300 people at the local Swift & Co. meat-processing plant, the community's economic lifeblood. Dozens of Mexicans and Guatemalans were prosecuted this year for using stolen Social Security numbers to work at the plant.

The town had come to resemble a kind of renegade outpost of illegal immigrants that wouldn't exist in non-border states.

The future

Everything's bigger in Texas, and history and geography guarantee that the immigration problem is no different. And many issues are flaring sooner here. What Cactus, Irving and Farmers Branch are dealing with today, the rest of America may be dealing with tomorrow. Texas, which will be majority Hispanic by 2020, and the nation face an

unprecedented challenge that we can't dismiss with gauzy platitudes, nor defer meeting indefinitely.

How Texas – and, by extension, the rest of America – reacts will be unlike how previous generations handled immigration, given how the nation has changed since the 1960s. Fair or not, core American culture and values have become a popular punching bag. Some have cheered that as refining the American character by embracing diversity, inclusiveness and empowerment of ethnic and other minorities. Others worry that America risks losing itself in the process, especially if it gives up on securing the borders.

Historians say that the distinctly American democratic and middle-class ideals grew out of a specific cultural tradition – the Anglo-Protestant. Changed slowly over time by immigrants from the world over, it's now challenged by a strong competing culture.

If critics are correct, we could be seeing the advent of the kind of fractiousness that bedevils public life in Canada and other nations where peoples who speak different languages, and come from different cultural backgrounds, live together only with mutual suspicion and unease.

On the other hand, perhaps the alarmists are wrong. Maybe these ambitious, hard-working immigrants, whatever their documentation, will write the next great chapter of a story that's still deeply American, though with a different accent. If the optimists are right, much work remains to be done to incorporate all immigrants fully into new cultural traditions.

We end 2007 no closer to compromise on the issue than when the year began. People waging a culture war – and that's what the struggle over illegal immigration is – don't give up easily. What you think of the illegal immigrant says a lot about what you think of America, and what vision of her you are willing to defend. How we deal with the stranger among us says not only who we Americans are today but determines who we will become tomorrow.