

The New York Times
December 5, 2005
Editorial

Real Border Security

President Bush went to the nation's Southwest border states recently to talk tough about keeping out illegal immigrants. His rhetoric was hard as he warned of murderers, child molesters and other criminals slipping onto American soil. Gone was the gentler voice of the former Texas governor who talked about how people were coming to America to feed their children, about how "Family Values Don't Stop at the Rio Grande." As a result, many who listened figured that he'd "tacked right," as some Democrats complained, or that he had simply deserted his five-year-old plan for a comprehensive immigration program. A careful reading of the president's comments raises hopes that Mr. Bush is staying his course but selling it a little differently.

The president's timing in pushing for immigration reform is crucial. After five years of delay, Congress is finally poised to deal with the growing immigration mess in this country. Some powerful House members have been looking at the problem in less than helpful ways, including draconian - and impractical - proposals to build a fence around America or to round up the 11 million illegal immigrants and forcibly send them back where they came from. The best hope so far comes from the Senate, where thoughtful members are looking at variations on Mr. Bush's comprehensive immigration reform. And the best of those so far is a bipartisan package from Senators John McCain and Edward Kennedy that promises security at the borders and a guest worker program that gives the worker some hope of eventual citizenship.

The president was not clear last week, but he apparently wants some variation on the McCain-Kennedy proposal - perhaps with more emphasis on border security and a stronger crackdown on employers using illegal immigrant workers. In Arizona, Mr. Bush said he wanted a guest worker program that would "bring workers from out of the shadows," but he also wanted to "reject amnesty." That reflects one of the least practical parts of the present White House proposal, which calls for all these guest workers to go home after six years. Getting illegal immigrants to sign up for a guest worker program that forces a return home in six years will be one tough sell. It would be far better to offer a path - even a difficult path - to full citizenship.

Not long ago, the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, got a surprise when it polled a number of likely Republican voters on this emotional issue. Most of those polled said they wanted immigration reform that would work. They did not favor an approach that focused on enforcement only, perhaps recognizing that a string of enforcement provisions over the last few years has done little to stop the flood of illegal immigrants. In short, some three-quarters of these likely Republican voters favored a comprehensive immigration plan much like the McCain-Kennedy package. If that many Republicans want genuine reform instead of a few stunts by anti-immigrant legislators, the time has come for President Bush and Congress to help them get it.