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Administration needs to trumpet immigration success

By Edward Schumacher-Matos

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How do you sell success when its human face is one of innocent people being punished?

The Obama administration is doing a miserable job of selling its successes in immigration enforcement to the American people, and a central reason is because it can't answer that question.

The number of unauthorized immigrants in this country is dropping. The number crossing the border is lower than it has been in nearly 40 years. Federal, state and local police are cracking down on the very small number of immigrants who commit violent and other crimes.

Yet: Where are the telegenic Border Patrol leaders looking heroic on the cable television shows? Where are the Pentagon-like charts that capture the trend lines in a single, clear image? Where, above all, is the president, standing on the border, giving Americans confidence that the government is in control?

Nowhere. In just the past two weeks, what we have witnessed is the president verbally knifing Republicans in a tepid speech, an otherwise competent secretary of homeland security giving one more ponderous talk to wonks in Washington, and the nation's Democratic governors crying that not even they understand what the administration is doing on immigration, other than suing to overturn a popular Arizona law.

A big part of leadership is showmanship, and President Obama legitimately has something to show. But I have asked administration officials why they don't and, after much squirming, it comes down to the human face of those who are being punished. Those being jailed and deported are mostly honest, well-meaning people, many of them poor, who sneaked across the border or overstayed their visas because they wanted to work. Some have children, adding to the drama.

Such images don't sit well with administration officials personally or politically, many of them having previously worked on immigration issues. The images raise the hackles of the religious groups, immigrant activists, and Latino and other ethnic groups that are part of Obama's base.

And so the administration politically muddles. It somehow hopes to persuade the American public to support a total overhaul of the immigration system by proving that the government can be trusted to enforce the law, but without campaigning on its enforcement effectiveness so as not to offend the president's base constituencies. It blames Republicans for the failure to pass comprehensive immigration reform. For good measure, it blames Republicans for the plight of the poor immigrants, even though it is Democrats who are carrying out the enforcement.

If you think that all makes little sense, you're right. The administration doesn't know what it is doing -- for itself, for the Democrats running in November or for the country. The Republicans don't help, as they pander to the vocal extremists in their base, who want to hear only of enforcement.

The time has come for the president to find his courage, look past his base and take the campaign to the American people. Polls show again and again that Americans support earned legalization for the 11 million unauthorized immigrants now living and working here, but they want to feel confident that the government is committed to stopping more from coming illegally.

As Stewart Verdery, an assistant secretary of homeland security under President George W. Bush, wrote in a report two weeks ago, the Obama administration has met or is meeting the enforcement benchmarks that immigration restrictionists in the Senate had set in 2007 as part of a comprehensive reform bargain (which later failed).

If Obama doesn't embrace his enforcement successes and go to the country on immigration, he has the worst of all worlds: an unconvinced public, a resentful base and Republicans rising to take advantage of it all in November. The overhaul, meanwhile, is needed for the economy, for our sense of fairness and, ironically, for enforcement itself to fully work.

What good is meeting benchmarks if no one knows?

To be fair, Obama has competing priorities, beginning with the recession. But immigration has become such a toxic issue that the country is being pulled apart. There was a sad image recently for that, too. In the small town of Milford, Mass., Ecuadorean immigrants planted a heart-shaped flower bed as a sign of appreciation to their adopted home, the Boston Globe reported this week. It was torn out soon after.