

If Mexicans and Americans Could Cross the Border Freely



JACQUES DELACROIX AND SERGEY NIKIFOROV

María serves me my coffee nearly every morning. She works fast and precisely. Although she has been up for hours, she does not have a hair out of place; her discreet makeup is unsmudged; her clothing is neat and in good taste. She is one of the most steadfastly middle-class persons in this sloppy college town.

I don't know if María is a legal immigrant. I would be surprised if she were. Few Spanish speakers in my area are "documented." In any event, she has become a part of my life in her tiny yet important way. I have grown to like her a great deal. If the necessity arose, I would probably hide her in my basement for quite a while.

Of course, I also believe without reservation that for a country to recruit immigrants on the basis of their initial willingness to break its laws is utterly stupid and self-destructive. So here I am, split between my heart and my head. The best solution to this kind of dilemma is to do nothing, of course. Given responsibility for designing a policy with regard to future Mexican immigration into this country and illegal Mexican immigrants currently here, I (Delacroix) would be paralyzed.

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Our National Paralysis

The whole country is agitated yet paralyzed before the problem of its large and growing illegal immigration, most of it from Mexico. Unlike most political issues, the division may not run mostly between pro and con camps, but right down the middle of millions of individual citizens. A president reelected with a wide popular margin in 2004, whose party controlled both houses of Congress for two years as well as many governorships, did little more than propose a vague guest-worker program that would have unknown effects on further illegal immigration. The Democratic opposition, with a majority in both houses, subsequently managed to appear at once silent and fragmented. In short, the level of public vituperation about illegal immigration is not matched by an equally high level of action or even of planning for action. During the 2008 primaries, the candidates who made immigration a major issue quickly disappeared from view.

This essay is an attempt to appraise this issue coolly (but not coldly) and to examine boldly the likely consequences of the unthinkable: opening the southern border to Mexican nationals (and only to them). It is not a policy proposal and not a work of advocacy, but an exercise in thinking, with facts and with the help of precedents. It is a kind of sampler essay explicitly aimed at nonspecialists. Each of its parts deserves more rigorous treatment than we can give it here. The only merit we claim is to have brought together most of the policy issues associated with the bold idea of an open border between the United States and Mexico.

Both of us are politically conservative immigrants who have lived for a long time in northern California, where many illegal immigrants from Mexico also live (Camarota 2007). Delacroix has a doctorate in sociology; Nikiforov has a degree in electrical engineering and an MBA, and he works in Silicon Valley in close contact with many immigrants of different origins. One of us actively likes Mexicans and uses Spanish with ease. It is not probable that either of us competes with illegal immigrant Mexicans in the job market.

Illegal Immigration: Two Problems in One

The issue of illegal immigration from Mexico can be subdivided into two related but conceptually distinct parts: what to do about further illegal migration (including impeding it) and what to do about the illegal immigrants who are already here. It would be good to find solutions—or better, a solution—to both problems.

Almost everyone agrees that recruiting immigrants selectively on the basis of their willingness to begin their relationship with the nation by breaking its laws is bad policy. There the consensus ends without generating real debate. There is no genuine liberal program about what to do. Liberals usually limit themselves to deploring the immigrants' sufferings. They criticized the Republican administration for its passivity.

They make vague representations about more vigorously punishing employers who consciously employ illegal immigrants. Yet in 2005 and again in 2006 and 2007 the sanctions already on the books were applied to employers on fewer than fifty occasions (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS] 2008). Neither Democratic nor Republican spokespersons loudly deplored those low numbers. This passivity tells us that repression of employers is another solution for which the American body politic has no enthusiasm.

In early 2008, Arizona announced unilateral measures to punish those who “knowingly” employ undocumented workers. The qualifier makes implementation impractical, and it is doubtful that states have jurisdiction over this matter anyway. Hence, we are tempted to view this state initiative as only another collective gesture of irritation.

Inaction with respect to the enforcement of laws already on the books may well express a wider problem of generalized political irresolution. A case in point is that, as of this writing, entering the country illegally is still only a federal misdemeanor, automatically relegating this infraction to a low police and judicial priority. Either the Republican majority of three years ago or the Democratic majority that replaced it could have dared the president to pay the political cost of changing this legal sanction. This issue was conspicuously absent from Barack Obama’s campaign.

Conservative Positions on Immigration

Conservatives take two stances on immigration, reflecting the uneasy alliance that is the Republican Party at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Radio talk show host Bill O’Reilly and former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan articulate the positions of conservatives whose cultural frame of reference is the 1950s and who are often serious Christians and self-defined patriots. The sputtering libertarian wing of the Republican Party also has a position on illegal immigration, although it is hard to discern.

O’Reilly, the millions of ordinary people who agree with him on other issues, and some members of Congress say that they would have the armed forces plug all the holes in our southern border. Then the armed forces and sundry police forces would forcibly expel most illegal immigrants, beginning with criminals, but with some humanitarian allowances. (We are trying to be fair, not to caricature, while distilling a position implicit in hundreds of statements made on television, in radio talk shows, and, more rarely, in the print news media.)

On the other side of the conservative camp, the *Wall Street Journal* often publishes editorials that appear to call for a fully open border with Mexico. Its position comports with its libertarian leanings in other areas. In our view, however, these editorials are overly coy. They are never followed by or developed into serious critical examinations of the likely consequences of an open southern border. The abundant

open-borders sentiment among the *Wall Street Journal* audience, however, surfaces frequently in the paper's letters to the editor (2008). Yet the paper seldom delves into the political practicalities of implementing an open-border plan. It is difficult to discuss or criticize this second conservative position because it has so little tangible substance.

The Armed Forces as Deterrent

Supporters of firm, decisive, manly border closure through military means are only making brave noises. They have not thought through the policy they advocate, nor have they really contemplated it in their mind's eye. There are 106 million Mexicans (going on 120 millions) (CountryWatch 2008a). Although Mexico usually has a moderate unemployment rate, some Mexicans stand to earn five or six times more (including overtime) by performing on this side of the border the same services they are performing on the other side or similar ones (CountryWatch 2008b). Many of these Mexicans are young, healthy, capable, and correspondingly willing to take risks. With a little luck, a motivated, frugal, young Mexican man can work in the United States, legally or illegally, and save \$20,000 in little more than two years. In much of Mexico, including some of the most pleasant and scenic parts, that is enough money to start a small business or build a modest house.

As long as the disparity between North American incomes is so large, and even if it should shrink by half, some Mexicans will try to enter the United States—unless military personnel stand elbow to elbow at the border like a human chain, the ports of entry are tightly policed, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's human resources are enormously augmented to develop several-fold its capacity for internal policing.

This approach is not what supporters of National Guard intervention have in mind, of course; the military is not nearly large enough to form a human dam, and Congress has already shown that it will not provide the financing necessary for greatly amplified internal policing, even against the more serious threat of terrorism. Thus, proponents of this view, whether they realize it or not, implicitly count on the armed forces' use of their weapons to keep would-be illegal immigrants from crossing the border. It is not surprising that they have trouble completing their thought, indulging instead in quasi-magical thinking.

Expressed in a realistically stark manner, this solution painfully contradicts our whole history. The army, the Marine Corps, the various military reserves, the National Guard, the Coast Guard, the navy, and even fed-up border county sheriffs are not going to machine-gun twenty-year-old Felipe in cold blood because he wants to come over and bus our tables. If they did it even once, it would be the last time ever. Americans are not inhumane, especially at close range.

For similar and parallel reasons, it is nearly impossible to envision the forcible mass expulsion of resident illegal Mexican immigrants, many of whom have small children who as U.S. citizens are nonexpellable.

The So-Called Fence

A recurrently espoused centrist position, seemingly held by both conservative Democrats and moderate Republicans, favors a physical barrier separating the United States from Mexico along their two thousand miles of common border. Once in a while a hopeful contractor appears on television to tout the affordability of a solid, physical expression of such a scheme. The U.S. House of Representatives (2006) voted in favor of a partial realization (seven hundred miles) of such a project in early 2006, while the Senate sat on its hands. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, typical of many serious liberal groups, opposes such a barrier. It is easy to suspect that many other Americans, not necessarily all liberals, are also repelled by the idea.

Aside from opposition on moral grounds, it is fairly clear that the lure of the U.S. economy is great enough to induce Mexican entrepreneurs to set up transportation inside Mexico to circumvent any incomplete wall. Yet many Americans believe that a wall along the whole southern border, from the Pacific to the Gulf, would be “too expensive.” Too expensive as compared to what is seldom specified. The most expensive wall would surely be cheaper than World War II or the Cold War, for example—more expensive than even almost any minor war. Supposedly excessive cost provides the rational cloak under which many thinking Americans hide their unexamined and visceral distaste for this solution. At any rate, were such a “wall” erected, perhaps as a combination of solid and electronic fencing, entry by sea and air would remain, as would the overstaying of tourist visas.

The best conceivable fence would probably reduce illegal immigration from Mexico, but no one hazards to guess by how much. Politicians are astute enough to imagine that we might end up with the worst of all possible worlds: not much reduction in illegal immigration, the cost of the wall itself, plus increased costs, direct and indirect, in enforcing regulations at ports of entry and inside the country proper. One of the predictable indirect costs would be still worse security delays at airports.

And even the best wall ever constructed would contribute nothing to the solution of the issue of the millions of illegal immigrants already inside the country, besides making their lives more unpleasant and inducing them to stay put.

Our Familiar Neighbors

We suspect that one of the major unspoken obstacles to vigorous interdiction and mass expulsion of illegal immigrants already in the country lies in Americans’ national psyche. The media seldom discuss this obstacle.

In spite of frequent tensions and occasional bouts of thinly disguised racism, Mexicans are by and large our friends. Millions of Americans have gone to Mexico on vacation—some repeatedly—and brought back warm memories. Many Anglo citizens have Mexican neighbors. Others share their churches with Mexicans or sweat in the same gyms as Mexican-born adults. Children of Mexican immigrants, including illegal immigrants, go to school with Anglo and African American kids (notwithstanding the defeatist liberal opinion that such children are badly neglected). Some of them inevitably date across ethnic lines, with predictable results.

In short, Mexicans are not like the Russians of the Soviet era; they are not people one hears about only in the worst possible terms, seldom meets face to face, and never visits in their homes. The general American population knows Mexicans and their children too well to endow them with horns and split hooves. There is thus zero chance the United States has the stomach to seal its southern border at the cost of a blood bath or even the risk of one. For the same sentimental reasons, mixed with genuine financial concerns, an effective fence probably never will be built.

The Open Border as a Double Solution

If Americans will not build a wall or repress employers of illegal immigrants, if they have no stomach for stopping illegal entrants by force of arms and even less for expelling the millions already living here peaceably, perhaps the time has come to consider coolly a bolder solution. This solution has the significant political and ethical merit of being generally in line with our generous history. It would consist in allowing Mexican nationals to come and go across our southern border, subject to ordinary law enforcement controls. The open border would be a neighborly solution, not a privileged path to citizenship.¹ This bold solution would deal at once with the issue of further immigration and the issue of illegal immigrants already in the country.

The relevant precedent seems to us to be explicitly the situation that exists today throughout most of the European Union. Subject to conventional police checks, Dutch citizens may enter Italy at will and remain there indefinitely—and even open a sandwich shop in Palermo. More to the point, citizens of comparatively poor Greece may work in comparatively wealthy Germany as long as they wish and send all their money home. These Greek immigrants to Germany will likely never receive formal German citizenship, but they will enjoy most of the nonpolitical rights associated with citizenship.

1. As for the French and Belgians for a hundred years before the formation of the European Union's antecedents, visiting and even living in each other's country would not entail a formal, preferential access to citizenship.

The European Union Experience

The bold open-border solution is not the subject of serious debate because Americans lack reference points from which to consider even its most predictable implications. In regard to open borders, the collective American imagination may be dealing mostly in nightmarish caricatures. Yet a concrete precedent exists in the European Union, which for more than forty years has been progressively eliminating all internal barriers, including those that pertain to the free movement of persons. (We emphasize, though, that we do not propose that the European Union constitutes a general model of behavior for the United States. It should also be obvious that a study of the union's experience with internal migrations does not imply admiration for its bureaucratic proclivities.)

Between 1986 and 1992, ten countries of the European Union, some formerly vengefully nationalistic states, reached a situation in which practically any citizen of a union country may pull up stakes and go to live anywhere else in the union.² The European Union grants citizens of newer members states the same privileges gradually, after a more or less extensive waiting period, thereafter withholding only the right of suffrage in national elections.

Anecdotal evidence of this policy's effectiveness is all over the map of Europe. An English couple—of all people—runs their own café in deepest France. Paris apartment house concierges—at all times, a central cultural role in French society—today normally speak French with a Portuguese accent. Irishmen shoe horses in Seville. Real Italian restaurants run by real natives of Italy are everywhere.³

This kind of smooth integration is remarkable given that several of the member countries suffered grievously at the hands of other member countries within living memory. (In fact, the architects of this success belong to the very generation that experienced most of this intra-European aggression.) Nothing approaching such a legacy of hostility exists between the United States and Mexico. If it did, the resentment would belong on the Mexican side because of the 160-year-old Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo by which Mexico lost half of its territory.

Citizenship Issues

Migrations and a path to citizenship are historically associated in the American experience. Though an open-border policy might expressly exclude privileged access to American citizenship, such a policy would probably still increase conventional, citizenship-bound immigration from Mexico for two reasons. First, improved familiarity with the country, its customs, and its language as well as the predictable growth

2. Citizens of newly accepted states often cannot move freely inside the European Union for a few years. This detail matters little to our general argument.

3. The United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark joined the European Community in 1973, Greece in 1981, Spain and Portugal in 1986.

of local social links would facilitate the implantation of Mexican residents and visitors alike, which would likely induce them to apply for citizenship by conventional means at a faster pace than would otherwise be the case. (No absolute numerical limits are presently in effect on the number of immigrants from the Western Hemisphere admitted to the United States.) Second, immigrants tend to be young. An enhanced legal status would promote marriage in that young population. Hence, the number of children of Mexicans who would be citizens by right of birth on U.S. soil might increase. We recognize that the *jus soli* is a constitutional disposition and, as such, unlikely to change soon or easily—a factor that may prove to be a fatal weakness of the open-borders idea for reasons mostly tacit and vaguely cultural.

The North American Free Trade Agreement and Migrations

Less than fifteen years after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, most merchandise moves freely between the United States and Mexico, as ordinary consumers and casual tourists can attest: Mexican beer is available everywhere in North America, and almost all guacamole served in U.S. restaurants is apparently made in northern Mexico (Millman 2000). Thousands of Mexicans cross the borders daily to buy such ordinary products as laundry soap (Chozick 2006). A curious tourist who would sample Mexican range beef would have to search a bit because Mexican resort restaurants serve mostly thawed Kansas meat.

Despite this free movement, the economic integration of NAFTA has significant abnormalities: because of an obscure trade dispute (Carlton 2005), cement from Mexico, the world's largest producer of this product ("Cemex SA" 2007), is prohibited entry into the United States, where it is in great demand. Economic integration with respect to services is somewhat less advanced. Mexican truckers are still fighting for the right to carry freight unrestricted throughout the United States (Merritt 2008). Individual Americans who seek gainful employment in Mexico report bureaucratic difficulties (perhaps a form of petty retaliation for what Mexicans widely perceive as persecution of their emigrants). Yet the border is undeniably more open than it was twenty years ago. In growing numbers, Americans seek even dental and medical services (some quite sophisticated) in Mexico.

That the U.S. rate of unemployment has been lower since NAFTA was signed is not necessarily incompatible with the claim that NAFTA caused jobs to be lost, but on its face it certainly does not support this allegation.

The General Shape of Predictable Objections to an Open Border

The attentive *Wall Street Journal* reader will notice that one Mexican service sector after another opens up to American investment in spite of numerous

rear-guard actions by an ossified and probably corrupt Mexican government bureaucracy (Bottorff 1997). More important, we rarely see regression toward the bad old days of tightly closed borders. Thus, the United States and Mexico (and Canada) are in the law books and also on the ground more or less in the same free-trade-zone-plus situation that the European Community (the European Union's predecessor organization) had circa 1980. The opening of borders to human migration seems the next logical—if admittedly giant—step. The visceral opposition to NAFTA voiced widely in the years preceding the agreement has little traction left, except for electoral campaigning in places such as Ohio and Pennsylvania (Chozick and Timiraos 2008); that is, it remains only in areas that were already quickly losing manufacturing jobs long before NAFTA was signed.

Although opposition to NAFTA is regularly—and, one suspects, ritually—invoked at electioneering time, it has failed to sustain a structured movement. The three-way election—inspired almost entirely by fear of NAFTA and leading to Bill Clinton's first election as president—is a distant memory. In the 2008 campaign, NAFTA was hardly an issue, except briefly during the primaries.

Americans seem to have trouble examining coolly the likely consequences of allowing essentially unrestricted legal movement between Mexico and the United States. Nevertheless, it is possible to construct from newspaper, television, and especially talk-show commentaries the nature of the main objections a proposal to open the southern border would encounter.

The free movement of persons between Mexico and the United States would have demographic, economic, and cultural implications and possibly security consequences. We deal with these matters in turn and try to consider predictable objections as we go along.

We can disentangle three major unspoken presuppositions that form the bases for major objections to the idea of allowing Mexicans to come and go across the southern border: Mexicans would move in very large numbers into the United States, forming a tsunami that would flood the country in various ways; this greatly increased Mexican migration into the United States would be of the same quality as the current immigration; and the increased movement of population would be unidirectional (only Mexicans into the United States) (Smith 2007). Each of these presuppositions is dubious.

How Big a Tsunami? Emigration Is Not for Everyone

The image of a massive, continuing, one-way exodus of Mexicans flooding the United States in all circumstances is probably unrealistic because it is a simple projection of what is going on under current conditions of legally restricted immigration. In all likelihood, legalizing immigration from Mexico would alter the movement of persons in more complex ways.

Discussions of open or more-open borders nearly always assume a one-way migration of one kind of population. They presume that, given a chance, some unknown but probably large fraction of the poorer segments Mexico's population would move permanently to the United States. They also implicitly assume no movement of population from the United States into Mexico. Both assumptions are probably wrong on several grounds.

First, on the whole, Mexicans do not want to live in the United States. Although real, don't-look-back immigrants (such as ourselves) exist, people who leave their countries usually do so in search of a better standard of living. Most simply want to earn more money. In many cases, they wish they could have their cake and eat it too: obtaining superior earnings in a foreign country, but spending them at home, where relatives live, grandmothers can be drafted as baby-sitters, and the customs and especially the language are well understood. For Mexicans, home also happens to be where their money goes further. Finally, without a doubt, some Mexican immigrants would rather raise their children in Mexico for moral and personal reasons.

A rich American literature of personal experience suggests that immigrants usually find their adaptation to a new land excruciatingly painful as well as extremely difficult (McCourt 1996). The United States, far from the heaven that the native-born often imagine it to be, is for many immigrants a kind of purgatory they hope will eventually lead to salvation in their home country. Furthermore, numerous immigrants of all origins spend their adult lifetime in a state of minimally functional adaptation. A surprisingly high number master only a pidgin form of the local language. They can say "a quart of antifreeze" but not "Believe me, if I had known my daughter would turn out this way, I would have brought her up differently." In consequence, individuals who are well educated and sometimes appreciably cultured in their country of origin operate during their entire adult lifetime at the self-expressive level of a six-year-old. Or they take refuge in the exiguous, mind-numbing, limiting social space of their own ghettos, which are always psychologically much impoverished versions of their home societies.

The considerable efforts that Mexican immigrants' own philanthropic organizations exert to make their hometowns more livable attest indirectly to the emotional undesirability of emigration (Hendricks 2008). Such endeavors are not specific to Mexican emigrants. The French daily *Le Figaro* tells a similar story about illegal Egyptian immigrants to France (Salaün 2008).

International Earning Gaps and Migrations

Many observers assume that the large earning gap between the United States and Mexico constitutes an irresistible motivator for undifferentiated mass emigration from that country. From the observation that most immigrants move away from

comparative poverty, one deduces fallaciously that all poor people of the same place wish to do the same.

We look at precedents in which mass migration across a significant earnings potential gap was made possible by regulatory changes. We can make such comparisons quantitatively in several ways, none of them perfect, yet they converge to show that few of those who can emigrate ever do so.

In 2007, the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita multiplier at purchasing power parity (PPP) between the United States and Mexico was about 3.7.

In 1985, the year before Portugal's accession to the European Community, Portugal's GDP per capita (PPP) was about half of France's—a little more than half of today's relative gap between the United States and Mexico.

In 2007, the GDP per capita (PPP) multiplier between France and Romania, which had been admitted to the union about one year earlier, was 3.0. Looking at nominal GDP per capita gives larger gaps for the European countries, making their situation look more like the relationship between the United States and Mexico in 2007 (Euromonitor International 2008).

In 2002, the legally mandated minimum monthly wage in Portugal was still one-fifth of the legal minimum in France, where Portuguese citizens could move without restriction. In 2005, the minimum legal monthly wage differential between France and new member Romania was a stunning sixteen to one (Eurostat 2008).

We focus on the France-Portugal and France-Romania pairs with a purpose. First, all of France is easily accessible from all of Portugal and all of Romania, with respect to both distance and geography. Second, Portuguese and Romanian are, like French, Romance languages. Portuguese speakers and Romanian speakers find learning French much easier than do Mexicans learning English. Hence, it is fair to assume that Portuguese nationals and Romanian nationals must at all times find it easier to move to France and to adapt there. France should be at least as tempting to Portuguese and Romanians as the United States is to Mexicans. Yet in spite of roughly comparable economic attraction and in spite of the relative ease with which people can relocate in the absence of legal obstacles, Portugal has not emptied itself into France, and Romania shows no sign of doing so either.

Discursive Comments on Intra-European Migrations

What do Europeans themselves say about the consequences for employment of removing internal obstacles to migration within the European Union? The union does not seem to collect systematic data about such movements of population, yet it deals with the topic indirectly. In 2001, while preparing the admissions of new countries⁴ from eastern and southern Europe, the union's executive commissioned

4. The Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

several papers to look back at its demographic experience. One of the studies asserts several times that “past immigration has had little effect on native unemployment” twenty years after the admission of comparatively poor Greece and fifteen years after the admission of poor Spain and Portugal (qtd. in European Commission 2001, 10).

Observing the patterns of internal immigration in Russia adds support to the notion that most people do not want to move even if all restrictions are lifted, regardless of the potential economic gain. For a period of its Soviet history, Russia practiced a form of internal immigration restriction, tightly controlling who was permitted to move from impoverished provincial towns and small villages to relatively prosperous urban administrative centers. Since the elimination of this *politika limitov* practice, most rural dwellers still choose to remain where they were born, despite the possibility of achieving much better living standards in a large city and although the difficulties of adaptation are no doubt less severe than those associated with moving from one country to another.

The experiences of the European Union and Russia confirm what the analysis of individual psychological factors suggests: removing legal impediments to the free access of Mexicans to the United States is unlikely to create the human tsunami that is many Americans’ unspoken but real fear. (We argue later that such a reform might result in a *smaller* permanent emigration from Mexico.)

We caution that the preceding comparison may be partially invalidated by a significant difference in economic dynamics between the United States and the European Union as a whole. Perhaps the chronically high European unemployment rate acts as a partial brake on emigration from the poorer countries of Europe. General unemployment is about 10 percent for Germany, including a large fraction of long-term unemployed, compared to about 4–5 percent for the United States in 2007, with a much smaller percentage of long-term unemployed (Delacroix 2007). Yet intra-European migrations in general do not track variations in unemployment (Blanchflower 2007). Moreover, European welfare benefits—notably more generous than those in the United States—might arguably have counterbalanced the push-back of high unemployment.

The Perverse Effects of Current Immigration Regulations

The Mexican birth rate has been declining steadily for fifteen years, as expected under demographic transition theory (Barone 2006). In the future, the Mexican population will grow at a slower pace or even shrink. Thus, even if economic conditions never improved in Mexico, the pool of potential emigrants would either grow less than we are used to or it might even dry up. Other factors will also limit increases in emigration.

Most of Mexico is accessible from the United States by car. With more movement in both directions, other means of surface transportation would develop on a commercial basis. The cost of flying should also decrease. It is reasonable to assume that given a choice, many of the Mexicans who wish to work in the United States

would go back and forth, keeping their permanent residence in Mexico. By contrast, the current situation not only makes it dangerous and risky for illegal Mexican immigrants to cross the border into the United States, but also makes them reluctant to go back home casually. They realistically fear being unable to return to their lucrative American jobs, their American personal support systems, and even their America-based families. Their fear of becoming trapped back in Mexico paradoxically traps them inside the United States. At the very least, their illegal status makes going back and forth more costly than it need be.

Current immigration rules, dictated in part by concern over illegal migrants, also make going home inconvenient for legal immigrants. (Wise legal immigrants do not leave the country at all for the several years it may take them to obtain permanent resident status, the famous “green card.”) In a family situation, a single member awaiting permanent resident status may thus immobilize for several years five, six, or more additional people who do not wish to be on this side of the border. Current restrictions thus have likely multiplier effects on the number of immigrants, including illegal ones, in residence.

If all Mexican citizens enjoyed an unrestricted legal right (except for ordinary law enforcement reasons) to cross the U.S.–Mexico border, many would not use that right. Others would probably work in the United States for part of their life but reside in Mexico for most of it. Many of the latter would rear their children there. A third group would undoubtedly elect to move permanently to the United States. At least, they would then all be volunteers, people who had consciously and knowingly chosen this country, its culture, and, more important, its political institutions. They would constitute a qualitatively better class of immigrants than the current medley of motivations can ever supply. The size of this third group is difficult to guess. The European Union’s experience, however, does not suggest an exodus.

The vague American impression that European countries experience serious, chronic problems with their immigrants is barely relevant to this discussion. In fact, the immigrants viewed as problem immigrants (and their children, as the 2006–2007 riots in France indicate) seldom originate in other member countries of the European Union, the only ones awarded automatic rights of entry.

Structural Demographic Implications and Economic Consequences of Increased Mexican Immigration

Supposing that opening the southern border nevertheless leads to increased immigration into the United States from Mexico, this increase would have not one but two likely demographic consequences for the United States: faster population growth and a rapid change in the age composition of the resident population because immigrants are usually young (the base Mexican population is younger than the American population, and it is also more fertile, keeping age constant).

Thus, the proportion of children and young people in the U.S. resident population would rise in short order. This change in composition would occasion an instantaneous rise in outlays for common social services, such as schools, hospitals, and, to a lesser extent, jails and prisons. In the middle run, however, this same change in age composition would alleviate to an unknown extent the structural problems of Social Security and Medicare because there would be more active workers for each retired person. Moreover, workers in proper legal status are more likely to pay taxes, especially payroll taxes, than workers who are trying to remain anonymous. According to a study by the Center for Immigration Studies, illegal immigrants currently pay only about 40 percent as much in payroll taxes as legal residents and nearly no federal or state income tax (cited in Bartlett 2006).

One might argue that the current situation gives us the worst of two worlds: large numbers of immigrants obtaining social services without a concomitant contribution to social services now or in their future. The clandestine aspect of the presence of illegal immigrants also undermines the calculability of future demand for social services. Thus, it interferes with planning and contributes to the local feeling of impending crisis in areas of heavy immigration.

Of course, neo-Malthusian environmentalists can use these points to argue against an open border. Yet the well-verified theory of demographic transition predicts unambiguously that the same Mexicans are likely to have fewer children if they are mildly prosperous in the United States than if they remain poor in Mexico.

A Different Kind of Mexican Immigration

Commentators generally assume that future immigration from Mexico must be of the same kind as the current immigration. This assumption ignores the possibility that illegality itself influences the self-selection of immigrants to the United States. Accordingly, the mention of an open border, *de facto* or *de jure*, evokes the specter of ever-growing numbers of very poor, semiliterate, non-English-speaking immigrants almost exclusively of rural origin. This scenario is naturally objectionable on both economic and cultural grounds. First, such a population tends everywhere to consume a disproportionate share of social services. Second, the poor and uneducated—who may be illiterate even in their mother tongue—may be more difficult to assimilate than middle-class immigrants. Both objections need be taken seriously, but the assumption of unchanged quality of immigration does not stand up well to examination.

Illegality itself must dissuade potential middle-class immigrants disproportionately. Middle-class people are much the same everywhere. They tend to lack the skills, the stamina, and the inclination to trudge through the desert to elude the Border Patrol at real risk to their lives. If moving to the United States becomes legal for Mexicans, the character of Mexican immigration ought to change immediately toward more skilled and better-educated people.

More Skilled Immigrants

Unemployment in Mexico is typically low, rather lower than it is in the United States (and, incidentally, lower than it was in the poor countries that joined the European Community and the European Union). By and large, Mexicans move to the United States less for jobs than for better jobs. Their labor resources are better employed in the advanced U.S. economy than in the underdeveloped, institutionally crippled Mexican economy. Accordingly, their labor is better rewarded here than there because it is more productive here. This general idea should hold as well for skilled and well-educated potential immigrants as it does for the unskilled and the poorly educated.

Removing legal obstacles to immigration should encourage better-educated and more-skilled immigrants to enter the United States. Such higher-quality immigrants would earn more than do current Mexican immigrants, both legal and illegal. Because workers' wages signal their economic contribution to the overall economy, this improved quality of Mexican immigration should improve U.S. prosperity in general, at least in the long run. The short-term effects of an increase in immigration on U.S. unemployment remain an obstacle to opening the southern border.

A Possible Influx of Entrepreneurs and Capital

Opening the southern border would also increase the number of entrepreneurs migrating here. In Mexico, the distorted market conditions, overregulation, corrupt government practices, and the existence of large politically supported monopolies restrict the scope of entrepreneurial activity. Mexican entrepreneurs and potential entrepreneurs, who are usually avid students of American life, tend to be aware of the contrast between their own situation and that prevailing in the United States.

The history of immigration to the United States suggests that culturally different groups of immigrants tend to contribute different kinds of enterprises. Thus, political correctness notwithstanding, it is not foolhardy to suppose that the influx of Italian immigrants before World War I improved considerably the restaurant scene across the United States. Likewise, current Indian immigrants, coming originally as well-educated hired hands, have contributed greatly to the abundance of hi-tech engineering start-ups in Silicon Valley and elsewhere.

As strange as it may appear at first glance, some in this new breed of immigrants would also bring fresh capital. One of the constants of underdevelopment is not so much a lack of capital as the underemployment of the existing capital. The complex reasons behind this state of affairs are beyond this article (Dekle 2004), yet it should be obvious that as soon as bureaucratic and economically flash-frozen India began modestly to liberalize its economy, Indian capital appeared seemingly out of nowhere, as if by magic. (The source of this magic may be as simple as young

middle-class Indian women deciding to carry a little less gold hanging from their ears in order to invest in the stock market.) Although Mexico is now liberalizing its economy and might endeavor to do so more swiftly if it had an open border to its north, such an opening would initially probably coincide with an influx of capital into the United States. Such capital would be carried by hitherto frustrated Mexican entrepreneurs ready and willing to make their own specific contributions to the U.S. economy as generations of immigrants from other countries did in earlier times.

Economic Consequences of Open Immigration

Domestic Wages

In order to envisage adequately the likely popular economic responses to opening the southern border, we must dispose of the common but unhelpful belief that “(illegal) immigrants do the jobs Americans will not do.” This generalization is not sound. The actual relationship appears to be more complicated. In the middle and long runs, it is possible that immigration of all kinds has a “slight positive effect” even on unskilled workers’ wages (qtd. in “Jobs and Immigrants” 2007). In the politically essential short run, however, wage levels in any economic sector depend on the supply of qualified labor at the moment. As the supply increases, wages must temporarily fall or fail to rise as quickly. This result is essentially what George Borjas and Lawrence Katz (2005) report, using perhaps more sophisticated methods than most. In the longer run, however, the indirect effects of increased immigration may more than offset the temporary reduction in wage rates for unskilled laborers by widening and diversifying the U.S. market.

Broader Market Conditions

Opening the southern border would enlarge the market directly served by U.S. businesses. An increased influx of immigrants to the United States would enlarge the domestic market right away but also later because of the immigrants’ greater fertility. With or without an increase in numbers, however, opening the border would probably also marginally enlarge the potential market of most U.S. businesses in Mexico, for two reasons. First, a higher frequency of travel back and forth would spur faster adoption of American consumption habits in Mexico. Second, improvements in border relations would likely improve all relations with Mexico. The Mexican government bureaucracy might conceivably become less inclined to drag its feet in implementing NAFTA and subsequent economic agreements if relations between the two countries were warmer. One might envisage making better reception for U.S. corporations and products south of the border a condition of negotiations leading to the opening of that border to the free movement of people.

*Immigration as a Generalized Source of Wealth and Growth:
A Reminder*

As a final consideration of the likely economic consequences for American society of opening the southern border, we must also remind the reader that population growth in general is usually associated with economic growth. An influx of Mexicans would accelerate population growth in the United States for a while (but only for a while, as the theory of demographic transition informs us) and therefore would speed economic growth.

These beneficent effects are magnified when the incoming population comprises disproportionately younger people with the strong work habits Mexicans are generally recognized to possess. Even illegal immigrants take out mortgages (Said 2006).

The linkage between immigration and economic prosperity is neither a novel idea nor a particularly American one. In 2007, one of the first political acts of President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007) of France was to appoint a “Committee of Wise Men” to make recommendations about what macrochanges were needed to jump-start the long-stagnant French economy. A central part of the committee’s report was that France should open itself to more immigration, which, they argued, is a source of wealth and thus of growth (Tabet 2008). Of course, President Sarkozy heads a center-conservative coalition, and France has suffered its share of immigrant-linked social problems.

A Modest Exchange of Populations

Critics of Mexican immigration, legal or not, often seem to perceive the phenomenon as a one-way street, with immigrants obtaining most or all of the benefits. They often grant (wrongly, we think) that Mexicans do “jobs that Americans won’t do.” There seems to be a collective incapacity to envision the relationship as other than unidirectional, even though a veritable exchange of populations between the United States and Mexico has been taking place for many years. Any move toward greater symmetry would probably deflate hostility somewhat on this side of the border. An increase in the outflow of Americans toward Mexico would also make the relationship more nearly symmetrical and therefore psychologically easier to consider coolly.

American Expatriates in Mexico

About one million Americans are currently believed to live permanently in Mexico, most of them retirees, including youngish retirees (Dunham 2006). Although it is difficult to check the accuracy of this often-cited estimate, no doubt a large number of Americans reside more or less permanently in Mexico at any given time. The estimate may seem comparatively small, only about one American in three hundred. However, making the commonsense assumption that four-fifths of them are people

older than sixty-five, the proportion shoots up to one in forty-four Americans in that age range already residing in Mexico (U.S. Census Bureau 2008, Table 31). The percentage of the U.S. population now older than sixty-five will probably rise from the current 12 percent to 20 percent in 2030 (National Public Radio 2006). With the conservative assumption that the total population remains constant, this increase adds 2.2 million potential American candidates for Mexican residency within a dozen years under current conditions. Numbers would be higher if it were easier for Americans to reside in Mexico with a clear legal status. (It is impossible to obtain a straight answer from a Mexican consulate to the simple question, “What does a U.S. citizen have to do legally to reside permanently in Mexico?”) Numbers would be higher still if the elderly population could obtain there the services it requires.

Medicare Coverage and Country of Residence

American residents of Mexico, a population with large medical care needs that are sure to rise with time, are ineligible for Medicare benefits. If Medicare coverage were extended to current beneficiaries living in Mexico to match the current rules pertaining to Social Security, for example, the number of elderly American residents in Mexico probably would increase quickly. (American retirees may receive their monthly Social Security check in a number of countries, including Mexico.)

Such an increase would occur at a growing rate because equipment to serve such a mature population, including medical infrastructure, requires some critical weight. Larger numbers of American retirees expecting U.S. standards of health care would trigger entrepreneurship in the relevant Mexican economic sectors, and the health insurance benefits, including Medicare, they brought with them would fund development in the same sectors. With stepwise improvements in Mexican medical care, further increases in migration of elderly Americans to Mexico would eventually occur.⁵

Better Weather, Cheaper Living, Nicer People

Mexico’s attractiveness to elderly Americans has obvious sources. Many people lose tolerance for cold weather as they age. Most of Mexico is warmer year around than most of the United States. Swimming in balmy water is more easily done in Mexico than in the United States (although significant overlap exists). In most, if not all, parts of Mexico, a dollar goes farther than it does in most of the United States, much farther than in those parts of the United States, such as Florida and southern California, that offer a similar climate. Moreover, although subjective effects are difficult to quantify, American retirees and other Americans who spend much time

5. Improvements in health care tend to follow a stepwise function because a given town has or does not have a functioning hospital, scanner, and so on.

in Mexico seem to enjoy the country a great deal from a social and cultural viewpoint. Older people in particular might easily become attached to a society that is for the most part more traditional, more courteous overall, visibly more family-oriented, and therefore kinder to elders than most segments of U.S. society.

Of course, it would be easy to falsify this Eden-like description by pointing to large, urbanized but decivilized swaths of Mexican society. However, nonworking Americans can easily avoid the places of genuine, undeniable social devastation. They may confine themselves entirely to the large enclaves of provincial Mexico untouched by severe forms of social dislocation and to tourism-dominated areas that are, for that very reason, well policed.

One might object that most older Americans are ill-equipped linguistically and culturally to deal with an alien environment and especially with the redoubtable Mexican bureaucracy. However, as is largely the case now, few would have to face such an ordeal without assistance. American entrepreneurs are quick to take advantage of new opportunities abroad. Thus, the recent upsurge of American real estate investment in Mexico, perhaps a response to the real estate trouble at home, was guided largely by U.S. firms operating there (Fletcher 2007). By and large, perhaps in fits and starts, American immigrants to Mexico would bring with them the services they could not procure on the spot.

Obviously, in the end, the reservoir of older Americans willing to move to Mexico has a limit. Yet it is conceivably of an order of magnitude commensurate with the present size of the Mexican illegal population in the United States. Approximately 36 million Americans are older than sixty-five. One-third of this number is equivalent to the currently estimated (but difficult to verify) 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States (not all of whom are Mexican). We speculate that near equivalence would help substantially in defusing Americans' ill feelings toward Mexican immigrants and Mexico itself.

Such an imagined exchange of populations would be perfectly in keeping with economic theory and in particular with the principle of comparative advantage. Each country would specialize in what it does at lower relative cost. The United States would put younger people to work, and Mexico would extend the benefits of its climate and, according to our hypothesis, its familial culture to older people. The overall utility gain from such an exchange should be significant.

What Would It Take to Remove Obstacles to American Emigration?

The Legal Status of American Residents of Mexico

The vague legal status of American residents of Mexico is partly a by-product of the sour relationship between the two countries with respect to migration matters in general. If issues related to the American treatment of current illegal Mexican

immigrants and would-be immigrants were solved or even diminished permanently, it would become easier for American civil authorities to press for and for the Mexican political process to achieve a high degree of normalization of American residents' status. Thus, for example, mutual residential rights was hardly ever an issue between France and Belgium, even before the European Union, because the two countries have been historically on friendly terms.

Incompatibility of Medical Standards

The main argument against providing Americans Medicare benefits in Mexico would probably rest on the inadequacy of contemporary Mexican health standards (although Mexican life expectancy is only 2.3 years less than that of Americans) (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 2008). Two responses to this objection may be made. The first is that the beneficiary should have the right to decide what is and isn't adequate care without parentlike government supervision. This libertarian response is undermined by the counterargument that leaving the decisions up to the individual opens the door to all kinds of faddish horrors, from financial support for acupuncture as a treatment for schizophrenia to tax-subsidized self-injection of toxic substances against cancer. This kind of open-mindedness would probably result ultimately in de facto federal government economic support for the medicinal use of marijuana and other currently illegal drugs. As we know from ongoing struggles in several parts of the country, such as California, where medicinal marijuana has been legalized by popular initiative, the American public nationwide appears not to be ready for this step.

Exerting Influence

We may consider this issue in another, more constructive way. In general, it is nearly impossible to influence another country to modify its ways without coercion, absent an ongoing friendly relationship. In the current state of chronic low-level hostility between the United States and Mexico, traceable in large part to the festering issue of illegal immigration, Mexican public opinion bristles at every suggestion of American intervention. As the European experience suggests, open-mindedness increases dramatically with each step toward egalitarian mutual dependence and, with it, the ability to influence the other's practice.

If the problem of illegal Mexican immigration were enduringly lessened, much of the chronic tension between the two countries would dissipate. In a less irritable mood, the Mexican public, or some segments of it, might soon appreciate that the imposition of American guidelines on public and private health care would quickly benefit the Mexican population itself while providing a permanent subsidy for improving medical standards within Mexico. The subsidy would come,

of course, from American retirees' and others' increased ability to purchase medical care in Mexico.

Probable Active Opposition to Bringing Medicare into Mexico

Negative corporatist reactions on the U.S. side to the transborder extension of Medicare would be likely. The U.S. medical profession and some hospital corporations would initially oppose that development. However, such an extension is conceivable only within the framework of a liberalized NAFTA and better U.S.–Mexico relations. Under those new conditions, an improved capability of U.S.-based hospital corporations to extend their reach into Mexico and of American doctors to practice in Mexico would dilute opposition to some extent. After all, physicians are people, too, and therefore not immune to the attraction of warm seas and large margaritas.

Doctors nearing the end of their career, many of whom are well off at that stage, might welcome the opportunity to perform meaningful medical work in Mexico, even if at lower fees. Health care corporations, for their part, would have to travel long and far to find new markets with the underserved and fast-expanding potential the Mexican population already offers.

Indirect Economic Benefits to Mexico from the Presence of American Retirees

Aside from the direct improvement of medical care, the indirect economic benefits likely induced by the presence of even a middling American population living in Mexico under stable conditions should not be underestimated. Assuming conservatively an additional 2 million American residents, many less than 100 percent able to take care of themselves, leads to the prediction of approximately half a million new semiskilled Mexican jobs created in the old-age-related sectors alone. These new jobs would indirectly benefit approximately 5 million Mexicans, or about 5 percent of the current population. With 4 million new American residents, the figure jumps to 10 percent of the Mexican population benefiting tangibly and quickly. This economic amelioration would affect most the lower socioeconomic segments of the Mexican population that are presently a significant source of illegal immigration to the United States.

In sum, making Medicare available to Americans residing in Mexico would increase their number in that country and help gradually to improve Mexican medical care standards and the quality of Mexican hospitals and other health infrastructure. Such improvements would facilitate migration of even more Americans (the elderly and others) to Mexico. Such enlarged American migration and the attendant amelioration of Mexican amenities would constitute one of the most humane and dignified forms of assistance this country has ever extended to anyone.

Cultural Implications of Increased Immigration

We suspend temporarily our argument that legalization might not increase the number of immigrants to examine critically the cultural issues an actual increased immigration would raise.

First, contrary to a widespread impression, levels of immigration in recent years, legal and illegal together, are not unprecedented in U.S. history. In 1868, the voters' polls in the tiny, out-of-the-way town of Soquel, California, showed about 20 percent foreign-born residents (Rowland 1986). Between 1900 and 1910, in the average year, approximately ten official immigrants arrived per one thousand American residents (including previous immigrants). The corresponding ratio in recent years is roughly half that large (U.S. Census Bureau 2008, Table 45). Similarly, the widespread impression that the United States is almost the only country or at least the main one targeted for immigration is incorrect. France, for example, has about ten times the numbers of refugees per capita the United States has (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2007, tables 1 and 6). Yet talk-show radio and television commentators assert nearly every day a belief in the unprecedented and unique magnitude of current immigration. Underlying this misperception is probably a comparatively mild wave of "know-nothingness," an ill-defined cultural fear. We do not take this apprehension lightly or contemptuously, as liberal commentators tend to do. In a real sense, culture is what we human beings are, and being robbed of ourselves against our wills is not a negligible matter. Instead, we examine some facts and beliefs that cast a different light on this issue.

Comparative Assimilation

Taking seriously for the moment the dubious concept of "cultural distance" (Shenkar 2001), it is difficult to argue that the current Mexican immigrants are inherently less likely to assimilate than were the hundreds of thousands of Chinese who arrived in the second half of the nineteenth century or the millions of Russian Jews who followed them. Yet few would argue today that Chinese Americans or Jewish Americans are either culturally disruptive or economically burdensome groups.

Mexicans, like the immense majority of Americans, are all essentially Christian. Almost all of them speak a European language with an alphabet, grammar, and syntax fairly close to those of English, and a considerable shared vocabulary (*inmigración, jurídico, inteligencia, precedente, presidente, escorpión, consecuencia*). Moreover, Mexicans' familiarity with the outward forms of our political institutions is far superior to that of earlier immigrant groups because the Mexican political system is largely copied from ours.

Interpersonal prospects also seem favorable. In areas of heavy Mexican immigration (such as the one where we live in California), an often-spoken Anglo consensus

holds that Mexicans are hard-working people. This image is a pretty favorable cultural stereotype in the light of our Puritan and pioneer histories. In spite of a classic situation of direct and visible labor and sometimes entrepreneurial competition (think roofers), overt hard-core hostility toward Mexicans is seldom expressed in these areas. One pejorative, racist term for Mexicans refers to an allegedly large element of their diet. It does not readily come to mind because it is practically never pronounced or written, except in the comedy routines of the trail-blazing Hispanic comic Carlos Mencia. The only ethnic joke used widely by the white working class, the illegal Mexican immigrants' most direct economic rivals, is that in Spanish the same word is used for "screwdriver" and "hammer"! Such talk is pretty mild stuff as ethnic relations go.

This level of interethnic peace contrasts sharply with everything we know about previous surges of immigration to this country. ("No dogs or Irishmen admitted!") Finally, although it is difficult to demonstrate, we believe that, keeping educational level constant, Mexican immigrants today are better informed about American life in general than are today's immigrants from Europe. (An explanation might be that when you live next door to an elephant, you are more inclined to learn its habits.) For the moment, however, let us ignore these realities and examine the real and potential future cultural effects of the Mexican presence in the United States.

Mexicans' Influence on American Culture

An exaggerated version of the fear that large numbers of Mexican immigrants will not assimilate into American society is the terror that *they* will assimilate American society, morphing America into their own image. This fear is so common that it merits consideration. To the seldom expressed but nevertheless rampant preoccupation with the idea that large numbers of Mexicans would alter our valued American culture, it is possible to respond at once: "So what?" and "No, they won't."

Large numbers of people born in Mexico and their children have been living in the Southwest and the West for several generations. The cultural effects of their presence are both small and pervasive. A young Anglo person from those parts of the United States is as likely to consider a taco as a hamburger to be normal lunch fare. In fact, if there were a national cuisine in the United States, it might well be "Mexican" food across the whole country, including Hawaii and especially Alaska.

In the Southwest and the West, mariachi musicians are a common sight. Spanish-language radio stations can be picked up everywhere. Some of the largest U.S. television networks broadcast in Spanish (Rodriguez 2008), and the largest Spanish-language television network in the world is based in Los Angeles (Constantakis-Valdes 2008). In the West and the Southwest, signs in public buildings and restaurants are usually in both English and (often grammatically approximate) Spanish. American manufacturers with no export ambition

increasingly label their products in English and Spanish. Yet Spanish is not replacing English. The two languages simply exist side by side.

More tellingly on a symbolic level, most California public schools seem to celebrate the Mexican holiday Cinco de Mayo. The fact that this celebration is probably a product of mindless multiculturalism does not detract from our main point: Mexican cultural influence is already evident in much of the United States, and it is difficult to identify any harm that it does.

Mexicans' Potential Influence on U.S. Political Culture

An additional, somewhat subterranean concern is that Mexicans and their offspring might import Mexico's pathological political culture and thereby pollute our democratic institutions. Note, first, as we stated earlier, a border open to the free movement of persons in no way implies granting suffrage.

Aside from this fact, fear that Mexicans will corrupt our political culture is unrealistic. Most Mexicans are not insane. They are well aware that their domestic political system is corrupt and unjust. They can hardly fail to appreciate that it does not foster production of the economic fruits so abundantly produced under American political institutions, even in hard times. Our institutions hardly need to prove their historical resiliency. In spite of some German American and Italian American flirtation with authoritarianism just before World War II, these institutions have survived wave after wave of immigrants from almost everywhere. The story is worth recounting.

A handful of Puritan families from East Anglia brought a set of political values to English America in the early seventeenth century. Over three centuries, the initial Puritan America sequentially absorbed huge numbers of emigrants from other parts of Britain, then from Ireland, then from everywhere, without dissolution of these values (Fischer 1989).

Today, the democratic political values of Chinese Americans, whose great-grandparents came from collectivist Confucian absolutism, are not distinguishable from the values of the descendants of Mafia-ridden Sicilians or from those of the grandchildren of Ashkenazim refugees from czarist despotism. In political sensibilities, they all descend from the *Mayflower*. There are no reasons to expect Mexican immigrants to behave differently. If anything, Mexico's proximity will probably serve as a permanent reminder of the comparative virtues of American political life. (Note that we are not making here a general argument applicable to immigrants of all cultural origins. Those for whom separation of church and state constitutes blasphemy are another story.)

The Thorny and Promising Matter of Language

In some Anglo social groups, many seem to believe that Mexicans and their children "refuse" to learn English. This perception does not rest on any facts, and it

contradicts casual observation as well as the results of every survey ever conducted (Suro 2004). We suspect that native-born individuals' extensive naivety about the difficulty of learning a foreign language lies at the root of this misapprehension. Mexican immigrants always affirm categorically in overwhelming majorities that they want their children to learn English. The abundance of ads pushing English-learning products in the Spanish-language media provides factual, nonverbal confirmation of the surveys. Mexican immigrants tend to act as rational economic actors and loving parents: they want their children to be equipped to succeed. In reality, the Mexican immigrant experience largely duplicates, transgenerationally, the experience of previous immigrant groups: the immigrants themselves usually have a poor command of English; their children operate mostly in English; their grandchildren often know no or little Spanish (Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean 2006).

Illegality of status affects immigrants' choices, however, and the transient character of their sojourn in this country creates a disincentive for them to master English.

There is scant danger that the United States will become over time a Spanish-speaking country, leaving behind the native born of European and African ancestries who are unable or unwilling to learn Spanish. Precedents exist outside the American experience to the resistance of established languages to influence by large numbers of newcomers: In the nineteenth century, Argentina absorbed several times its own weight in Italian immigrants. Nevertheless, Italian did not become its national language (Delacroix and Carroll 1983), which remained firmly Spanish (with a small number of charming Italianisms thrown in).

The Linguistic Burden on Schools

In spite of Mexican immigrant parents' eagerness, even intelligent and diligent offspring sometimes get trapped between two languages, failing to master either English or Spanish (Delacroix's personal observation during twenty-five years of college teaching in California.) The OECD reports a similar phenomenon among immigrants' children in Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland (2007, 80). Some children of Spanish-literate Mexican parents paradoxically end up illiterate in both English and Spanish. This fact imposes an extraordinary financial and organizational burden on some school districts. Moreover, the presence of many students with poor command of English may well impede the educational progress of the other children in those districts.

This problem may have no good solution, but three imperfect solutions may be identified. First, one can imagine levying a small federal tax on industries that employ many immigrants and redistributing the funds to local schools in proportion to the number of their students whose language is not English. Second, an excise tax might be imposed on individual foreign remittances. Such a measure would strike almost

exclusively immigrants, the people most likely to send money abroad. Third, the Mexican federal government has indicated intermittently its willingness to help with the problem of schooling its nationals in the United States. (Such help, however, would in all likelihood come at the cost of limitations on the principle of local control of curricula.)

Finally, from the standpoint of American society as a whole—as opposed to a local segment—the fair number of truly bilingual children of immigrants probably constitutes more a benefit than a cost. The benefit may more than compensate for the burden of those who possess a poor command of both Spanish and English. Real, literate bilingualism—although rare—has positive fallouts with respect to international business and cultural dexterity in general. Furthermore, as we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, bilingualism, because of its scarcity, sometimes constitutes a precious military asset. Finally, though the claim is difficult to demonstrate, some bilingual individuals (such as we) are convinced that bilingualism is a form of mental heavy lifting that benefits all aspects of intellectual activity.

The Open Border and Crime

The popular press periodically makes much of ordinary crimes committed by illegal immigrants. The indignation such crimes trigger would seem to be legitimate. The reality deserves consideration, as do the likely benefits of an open border with Mexico.

Beyond the criminality associated with border crossing itself, changes in the number and quality of Mexican immigration would likely affect within-country crime. In spite of many heated arguments on the subject during the 2007–2008 primary campaign, the criminal propensity of illegal Mexican immigrants in particular is difficult to establish quantitatively. We have known for a long time that immigrants in general tend to be less criminal than the overall American population. Thus, an unsigned editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (“Keeping Book on Immigration” 2007), referring to a report by the Immigration Policy Center, states that immigrants are five times less likely to be in prison than the native born. In principle, this fact leaves open the possibility that *illegal* immigrants’ criminality is above average. Commentators, even serious authors armed with figures, often take for granted that it is. During a C-Span discussion on the occasion of the release of a book unsympathetic to illegal immigration in December 2007, one of the authors mentioned dramatically the figure of fifteen thousand illegal immigrant felons in California prisons. We note that although that number is a large one in an absolute sense, it is small relative to a California population of more than 32 million (McDonald, Hanson, and Malanga 2007).

Nevertheless, it is not absurd to argue that an increase in the number of immigrants (not a foregone conclusion if the border is erased) would probably raise the overall crime rate in the United States because immigrants are generally younger than their host population, and young people are more likely than older people to commit

crimes (other than white-collar crime). Men, especially unmarried men, are also more likely than women to commit most crimes. An influx of young, single men following erasure of the southern border would therefore probably increase the crime rate.

However, immigrating illegally into the United States is probably easier for males than for females today because of the physical hardships and the precariousness of illegal crossings. Hence, it is reasonable to hypothesize a significant sex imbalance in the current illegal Mexican immigration. Moreover, the condition of illegality in itself discourages family formation. Legalizing all Mexican immigration would probably normalize the sex ratio of Mexicans in the United States and encourage family formation. Which of the two contrary sets of factors, an increase in the number of young men and a decrease in the proportion of those who are unmarried or unattached, would have the stronger effect on crime in the United States is anyone's guess. It is an empirical question, not one to be determined by preferences about policy in general.

The opening of the southern border might paradoxically lower the incidence of crimes committed by Mexican immigrants in general. This effect might be nearly instantaneous as young, single, male illegal immigrants import brides immediately following the removal of administrative obstacles.

We have stayed away from—without minimizing—the problem of an apparent high rate of homicide among the offspring of immigrants. The perception of a “second-generation” problem is strikingly similar in the United States and several European countries, including the Netherlands, France, and Germany. Unfortunately, this issue is too complex for this limited essay. It might conceivably have the potential to outweigh all other arguments in favor of an open border.

Cooperation with Law Enforcement Agencies

Legal Mexican immigrants constitute potential police informants about crime within and around the Spanish-speaking community. Illegal immigrants, in contrast, are understandably apprehensive of any contacts with law enforcement agencies. Immigrants and indefinite sojourners in permanently or temporarily legal status would feel no such apprehension. They would likely be concerned with the control complications at the border that crime carries with it—a significant incentive to cooperate with the police.

Also, all immigrants are potential drug mules. Those who are already in an illegal situation by virtue of their mere crossing of the border might be more willing than legal immigrants to take the additional legal risk involved in drug running: “Hang for a lamb, hang for a sheep.” Legality may diminish the incentive without removing it entirely. Even if this slippery slope argument is invalid, initial illegality may select in favor of personality traits, such as impulsiveness, that are themselves associated with the propensity to commit other crimes. This argument has validity on its face because in general it is difficult to believe that emigration is random and does not select some personality types over others. *A fortiori*, it is difficult to sustain the

idea that the additional selective constraint of illegality does not further bias the selection of emigrants out of the parent population.

National-Security Implications of an Open Border

Vocal opponents of illegal immigration into the United States frequently mention fear of terrorists. An ill-policed border would seem to invite crossing by all kinds of opportunity seekers, including those who seek to do harm. However, as comedian Carlos Mencia pointed out several years ago on Comedy Central, not a single would-be terrorist has ever been apprehended on our southern border (in contrast to our northern border). Mencia credited the vigilance of illegal Mexican immigrants for the absence of terrorists crossing our southern border. He argued that illegal Mexican immigrants would be quick to notice non-Mexicans in their midst and quick to turn them over to U.S. authorities in order to avoid stricter enforcement of the border. Increased numbers of legal Mexican border crossers would be equally capable of spotting non-Mexicans and almost as motivated to report suspected individuals in order to avoid administrative complications.

If the border were opened to Mexicans, the United States might also be able to count on a degree of cooperation by the Mexican authorities now unimaginable. The large Mexican constabulary cannot reasonably be expected to assist vigorously in preventing their compatriots from going where they can make an honest living. Never having experienced large-scale problems with immigration, Mexicans, including Mexican law enforcement officers, are not especially sensitive to the indignation that illegal immigration triggers in many Americans. Rather, they are quick to see racism and hypocrisy where Americans see a basic exercise of sovereignty.

Much anecdotal evidence suggests that the plight of Mexico's undocumented emigrants seldom lies far from ordinary Mexicans' consciousness. Thus, the popular Mexican TV news magazine *Los Reporteros* (similar to *60 Minutes*) included a segment starkly titled "Repatriation of Cadavers" (broadcast in California on April 15, 2008). The reporters claimed that two to four thousand Mexicans die in the United States every year. That figure would include three hundred who lose their lives annually while trying to cross the border. It matters little how correct these figures are; they surely express a widespread public perception.

The dignity conferred on all Mexican nationals by the legal right to come and go across the border would probably go far toward improving Mexicans' opinion of the United States, and it would probably help to motivate Mexican law enforcement officers and other Mexican agencies to cooperate on ordinary police matters concerning thieves, murderers, and potential terrorists.

In spite of their overall bad reputation, not all Mexican law enforcement agencies are rotten, nor do all individual officers wish to lead corrupt lives. Hence, with an open border, we might obtain superior assistance from Mexico in terrorism

surveillance out of simple goodwill. In any event, to be completely cynical, U.S. law enforcement authorities will always be in a better position than any conceivable terrorist organization to reward (“bribe”) their Mexican counterparts.

Mexico seems to have little trouble controlling its own southern border and other ports of entry to its territory. Hence, will rather than competence seems presently to be lacking on the Mexican side of the U.S.–Mexico border in the matter of cooperation with U.S. security agencies.

Conclusions and Limitations

We have tried to explore systematically the possible and the likely consequences of the boldest solution to the problems raised by illegal Mexican immigration to the United States: the unrestricted opening of the southern border to Mexican nationals.

We began by examining the conventional solutions to the perceived dual problem of a large and growing illegal immigration from Mexico. We concluded that none was likely to be implemented effectively for political, practical, and ethical reasons.

We argued that opening the southern border to Mexican nationals without restriction would not necessarily increase the magnitude of Mexican immigration. We argued further that Mexican immigrants with higher skill levels would likely increase in number. We also speculated that opening the southern border would accelerate the existing tendency of Americans, especially older Americans, to reside in Mexico. We tried to show that both a qualitatively improved Mexican immigration into the United States and an increased outmigration of Americans to Mexico would have tangible benefits for both countries. These benefits include a possibly rapid alleviation of the structural problems of U.S. welfare programs for the elderly. Nevertheless, we recognize that the short-term effect of any rise in the number of immigrants would probably be deleterious to some U.S. wages.

Suspending our proposition that the magnitude of Mexican immigration would not rise, we examined briefly both the cultural and the linguistic implications of potentially increased Mexican immigration. We concluded that the cultural effects would in all likelihood be benign, but that the burden imposed on schools would be considerable and not subject to easy solutions.

Finally, we speculated that an increased influx of Mexicans would have a mixed effect on crime in the United States, but were unable to predict whether the positive or the negative would prevail. We take credit, however, for drawing attention to the probability that the elimination of border crossing itself as a law-breaking act might have a moderating effect on the immigrants’ criminal propensity. We also examined briefly why opening the southern border more than it presently is would not increase the risk of terrorism in the United States and might even lessen it.

For our discussion in general and the arguments about crime and terrorism in particular, we relied to an extent on the supposition that many benefits would flow from the goodwill that opening the border would generate in Mexican society. That such goodwill would in fact arise is difficult to demonstrate empirically. For this supposition, we counted on our diffuse but sustained observation of the Mexican and Mexican American media. If humility allowed, we would claim that our reading of these media deserves some weight because probably few if any English-language commentators combine our personal experience as immigrants with our capabilities in this respect and yet have no particular ax to grind.

We bypassed three issues that impinge on this discussion. First, we paid insufficient attention to the magnitude of the pull that social services in the United States would continue to exert on the general Mexican population. Some social services might be rationed because a good-neighbor policy not associated with eventual citizenship does not entail equality of treatment. Other services, probably the most costly, such as schools, cannot be rationed practically. Subjectively however, we suspect that those people born in the United States overestimate the virtues of basic American education and underestimate the obstacle of language. Hence, they inflate in their own minds the pull of basic American education on Mexicans in Mexico.

Second, we circumvented as too complex for this already lengthy article the issue of the seemingly high criminality of the children of Mexican immigrants.

Third, for the same reason we skirted the likely changes an increase in Mexican immigration or a change in the quality of Mexican immigration would trigger in U.S. electoral dynamics, although we argued that political institutions would be unaffected.

We conclude by reminding the reader of an additional, little-discussed benefit of the open-border solution: it would put an immediate end to the intangible but nevertheless real ethical damage inflicted to our institutions by the flouting of our laws by millions of immigrants and the even more numerous Americans who abet them.

We hope that this modest endeavor suggests that the bold solution to the problem of illegal immigration from Mexico should be studied more thoroughly and more systematically with better data than we were able to marshal in this article. We also fervently hope that the open-border solution will soon be discussed in the media.

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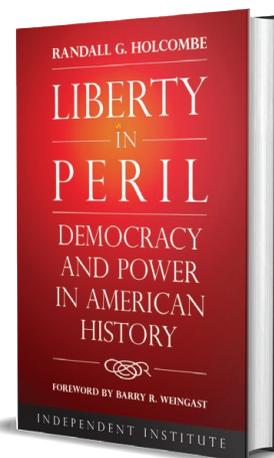
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