

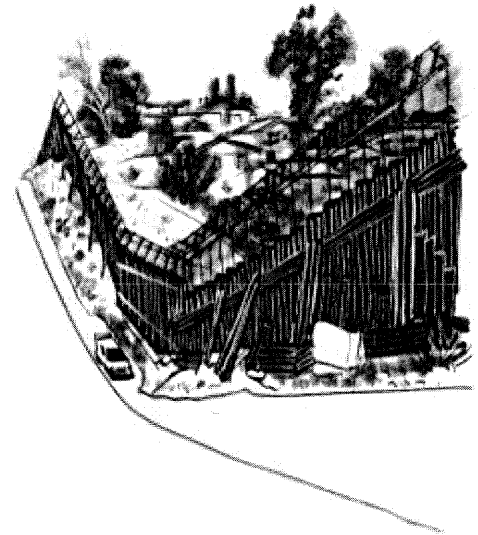
# THE NEW YORKER

COMMENT

## BORDERLINES

by William Finnegan

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When the topic is illegal immigration, some of our political leaders reliably produce more heat than light. On April 28th, in a letter to President Obama, seventeen members of Congress, most of them from the Southwest, demanded immediate action to increase border security, noting that “violence in the vicinity of the U.S.-Mexico border continues to increase at an alarming rate.” Two days earlier, Senator John McCain, of Arizona, in a floor speech defending his state’s newly passed law requiring local officers to investigate individuals’ immigration status, described “an unsecured border between Arizona and Mexico, which has led to violence, the worst I have ever seen.” He went on to cite numbers for illegal immigrants apprehended last year “that stagger.”

In fact those numbers *are* surprising: they are sharply down, according to the Border Patrol—by more than sixty per cent since 2000, to five hundred and fifty thousand apprehensions last year, the lowest figure in thirty-five years. Illegal immigration, although hard to measure, has clearly been declining. The southern border, far from being “unsecured,” is in better shape than it has been for years—better managed and less porous. It has been the beneficiary of security-budget increases since September 11th, which have helped slow the pace of illegal entries, if not as dramatically as the economic crash did. Violent crime, though rising in Mexico, has fallen this side of the border: in Southwestern border counties it has dropped more than thirty per cent in the past two decades. It’s down in Senator McCain’s Arizona. According to F.B.I. statistics, the four safest big cities in the United States—San Diego, Phoenix, El Paso, and Austin—are all in border states.

The problem of illegal immigration isn’t a matter of violent criminals storming the walls of our peaceful towns and cities. It’s a matter of what to do about the estimated eleven million unauthorized residents who are already here. The mass-deportation fantasies of some restrictionists notwithstanding, the great majority of “illegals” are here to stay. That is a good thing, since they are, for a start, essential to large sectors of the economy, beginning with the food supply—the Department of Labor calculates that more than half the crop pickers in the United States are

undocumented. National business leaders have no illusions about these basic facts of economic life. Last month, Mayor Michael Bloomberg formed a coalition of big-city mayors and chief executives of major corporations—including Boeing, Disney, Hewlett-Packard, and even Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation—to lobby Congress for comprehensive immigration reform, including a path to legal status for all undocumented immigrants. Bloomberg calls the current immigration policy “national suicide.”

There are reasons to be uneasy about illegal immigration. In some industries, dirt-poor newcomers lower wages. State and local budgets suffer when workers are paid under the table. The fact that people lack legal status is itself disturbing. The huge immigration surge of the late twentieth century is the first in our history in which many, if not most, immigrants have come here illegally. Yet anti-immigrant backlashes don't always track closely with actual immigration. They track with unemployment, popular anxiety, and a fear of displacement by strangers. They depend on woeful narratives of national decline, of which there is lately no shortage. Scaremongering works. Even as illegal immigration is falling, recent CBS/*Times* polls show that the number of respondents who consider immigration a “very serious problem” is rising—from fifty-four per cent in 2006 to sixty-five per cent this May.

Some of the more vociferous opponents of illegal immigrants denounce their presence as a national-security threat. If that view has merit—which is debatable—then the need to draw the undocumented out of the shadows and into the sunlight of official registration and legal status is all the more urgent. An impressive roster of police chiefs have been arguing against measures like the new Arizona law because they amount, in essence, to racial profiling, poisoning community relations and making crime-fighting more difficult. Anti-immigrant groups, which have proliferated in recent years, are not racist by nature, but they certainly attract racists and give them a platform.

Still, politicians are quick to jump on the nativist bandwagon. This campaign season, candidates are running hard against the immigrant enemy in Massachusetts and Georgia, just as they are in California and Arizona. Small towns in Pennsylvania, Texas, and Nebraska have passed constitutionally dubious anti-immigrant laws. Not to be outdone, Arizona's legislature is contemplating a law that would defy the Fourteenth Amendment, which grants citizenship to any child born on these shores. Jan Brewer, the governor, has suggested that Mexican parents of American citizens take their children to Mexico. She has also claimed that most illegal border crossers serve as “drug mules,” and that beheadings have occurred in border areas—claims flatly contradicted by the evidence. There are reports that Latino residents, legal and illegal, have been leaving Arizona for more congenial states before the new law takes effect (barring an injunction), on July 29th.

During the Presidential campaign, Barack Obama promised to pursue comprehensive immigration reform, but by the time he took office there were more pressing issues. He might also have been given pause by the experience of his predecessor. George W. Bush pushed hard, during his second term, for serious immigration reform, and was defeated by his own party's right wing. This spring, Obama, after getting health-care legislation passed, looked to be in a strong position to move forward with immigration reform. After meeting with Republican senators, he made a characteristic move—suddenly ordering twelve hundred National Guard troops to the southern border. He was faking right, it seemed, before making his drive on the basket.

The President gave his first major speech on immigration earlier this month. He made a powerful case for reform, but was careful to distance himself from the idea of simple amnesty. People will have to “get right with the law,” he said. His Administration has been cracking down on employers of the undocumented and has been increasing criminal deportations. At the same time, his Justice Department is suing to overturn Arizona's new law, contending that immigration enforcement is a federal responsibility.

The problem of illegal immigration has been left to fester for decades. Every effort to address it has provoked a groundswell of angry obstructionism and demagoguery. Disingenuous calls for greater border security are now part of that obstructionism. The President blames, quite rightly, congressional Republicans for blocking reform, but plenty of Democrats, both in Congress and in the statehouses, have no stomach for tackling the issue, either—certainly not in an election year. Given the emotions that the topic arouses, the battle to pass immigration reform may end up making the struggle over health care look mild. It is time, nonetheless, to try to finally bring millions of men, women, and children in from the dark.