

## Flaws in Bush's Guest Worker Program

*David Hayes*

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Long taken as the very motto of American immigration policy, the last lines of Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus," inscribed beneath the Statue of Liberty, are now more relevant than ever. As more and more people join the debate on illegal immigration, the United States faces an interesting dilemma. Does it send these immigrants away, violating our immigrant tradition, or allow them legal residency with only modest penalties? Increasingly, policies appear to look toward European immigration models rather than the idealized "one great period of immigration," as President Bush called the turn-of-the-century period, "[in which] our nation received some 18 million men, women and children from other nations" (White House). Surely American's idealized view of its immigration past is just that, but it seems a far better basis for immigration policy than the European programs, which have recently and blatantly shown their failings. By advocating a guest worker program that seems far more European than American, Bush

puts our country at risk of increasing immigrant dissatisfaction and alienation in the absence of traditional assimilation and understanding. This is made all the more clear if we examine the failures of European immigration plans and the successes of America's idealized immigration mythology.

Where the Bush program first errs is that it borrows heavily from Europe, where immigration policies have largely failed to produce happily assimilated immigrants. As Fareed Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek International*, points out, "Many Americans have become enamored of the European approach to immigration—perhaps without realizing it. Guest workers... are a part of Europe's mode of dealing with immigrants" (39). He explains why this is problematic by saying, "Across Europe one sees disaffected, alienated immigrants, ripe for radicalism" (39). Zakaria is claiming that Bush's guest worker program would be inherently flawed, and that those flaws are readily apparent across Europe today. This tells us that we must tread carefully in this debate. If Zakaria is right about the similarities, these claims should worry supporters of the program. If Zakaria is right, we have good reason to avoid mimicking this approach in solving our own immigration problems.

The flaws of European guest worker programs are pointed out by Stephen Castles, a sociologist now of Oxford University. Castles argues that these workers, who were first hired after WWII, were largely made into permanent ethnic minorities who never returned home. He goes so far as to say that "guest-worker systems inevitably lead to permanent migration in the long run, and that it is better to plan for orderly settlement" (Castles 761). By ignoring research like Castles's, Bush's program is at risk of developing the same problems that Europe has had. In turning a blind eye to this

research, we're risking the creation of an unintentional pool of immigrants with few legal rights that would further exacerbate our current problems.

The devastating effects of the failures of European guest worker programs were made strikingly clear in the Parisian riots of late 2005. In a story on the riots, CBC News supports Castles's claims by pointing out that these rioters were the remnants of the guest worker waves, and that the program created large ethnic neighborhoods that showed a volatile "combination of ethnic concentration and poverty and high unemployment" (CBC) that made these young people largely dissatisfied and disconnected from the French mainstream. Thus the remnants of the French guest-worker program clearly fomented the riots of 2005. In the absence of efforts to bring these immigrants into the mainstream of French society, due to a lack of foresight on the government planners' part, Zakaria's "disaffected, alienated immigrants" were the result.

Clearly, the French program has failed, and we can see that the Bush program ignores these failures. Bush should be applauded for attempting to provide incentives for these immigrants to return home. In his proposal, he offers "tax-preferred savings accounts, [which hold] money they can collect as they return to their native countries" (White House). This and his promise to "give temporary workers credit when they enter their own nation's retirement system" (White House) are hopeful, but unrealistic. These workers can likely (without specifics of these programs we can only assume) make as much as or more than these financial incentives by overstaying their welcome and reentering the illegal workforce. This argument is supported by Phillip Martin, an agriculture and economics professor at the University of California, Davis. Martin argues that the US Bracero program, which was in effect from 1942 to 1964 and was structured

similarly to European programs of the same era, served only to increase illegal immigration. He elaborates that these workers overstayed their initial welcome for economic advantage (Martin). Much the same argument is made by Tamar Jacoby, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute,<sup>1</sup> who says that “the adage is true: there is nothing more permanent than a temporary worker” (Jacoby). Jacoby allows that this could be either because they’ve grown attached to their new home, or because they simply desire the economic advantage. In either case, the immigrants would likely be willing to break US laws in order to stay here. Clearly, the consensus appears that even with Bush’s new incentives there is no such thing as a guest worker. And whether they would remain behind for economic or sentimental reasons, the law would be ineffective.

Regardless of the European failures, however, some have rightly taken issue with the guest worker program itself as “un-American,” and contrary to what many believe to be America’s immigrant tradition. Many characterize the United States as “a nation of immigrants” where people can become whatever they want so long as they work to achieve it. This so-called American dream is central to America’s immigrant mythology, which, however inaccurate, is central to the way that Americans see themselves. Further, this “American dream” has long served to unite the disparate immigrants into a single American category. This much is said quite eloquently by the editors of the *New Republic*:

There is little that is more antithetical to the American ideal than a guest worker.

While there are dangers in romanticizing this country's immigrant heritage, it is an unmistakable part of the national ethos. For generations, immigrants have come to

the United States in search of a better life. In the process, they often remake themselves--as Americans. Even those who are here illegally, and whom we call illegal immigrants, can transcend that identity--or at least see their children who are born here transcend it. (New Republic, 11)

By shunting guest workers into a new and previously unknown category we'd be systemically denying them a reason to assimilate or strive. Where previous immigrants were encouraged to become part of the American mainstream because it was likely to afford them success, these guest workers would be eternally placed into some new limbo. They'd be alienated with no incentive to mesh with their new country or community; after all, they're just leaving in three years anyway.

Public distaste for the creation of a "permanent underclass" is illuminated by Jacoby, who reports that in focus groups conducted by the Manhattan Institute:

Democrats and Republicans alike overwhelmingly preferred the citizenship model for reasons of both principle and practicality. It might make sense initially, these voters said, to admit workers on a provisional basis. It might also make sense to create incentives for the more transient to go home at the end of their work stints. But if they worked hard, put down roots and invested in their communities, wouldn't we want to encourage them to stay? Don't we want immigrants to assimilate? Don't we want to attract the kind of hard-working, committed folks

who plan for the future and invest? (Jacoby)

Clearly, this new guest worker program is not ideologically desirable, but by this report it also lacks public support. And just as the immigrants are likely not to want to leave after the three years Bush has allowed them, Americans aren't likely to willing force them to go either. In this atmosphere, where neither side wants the immigrants to go, it seems most likely that they would be able to stay on illegally.

Bush's further promise to "increase the annual number of green cards that can lead to citizenship" he himself admits would still be a "difficult path" (White House). His changes to the requirements aren't elaborated, however, so we cannot know how "difficult" this path would be. Regardless, changing the requirements now seems unfair (to put it mildly). This makes his promise to make the citizenship test harder and more rigorous ironic. Bush states that "We must ensure that new citizens know not only the facts of our history, but the ideals that have shaped our history. Every citizen of America has an obligation to learn the values that make us one nation: liberty and civic responsibility, equality under God, and tolerance for others" (White House). However, at the same time that he will ensure that potential citizens are aware of these traditional American values, he'll be subverting those very values by creating a class of immigrants who, despite popular opposition, are distinctly less than equal. By denying these immigrants access to traditional American values, he's making it all the more likely that they would become like Zakaria's "disaffected and alienated immigrants" of Europe.

Clearly then, on both ideological and historical grounds, a guest-worker program is likely to fail. It would deny access to the mythology of immigration that has so long

been sold as part of the American experience. And leaning on the evidence from Europe, we can see that despite modest improvements, Bush's program does little to solve the problem of immigrants remaining after they're no longer welcome. For these reasons, it is wise to consider other options.

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1. The Manhattan Institute is a leading libertarian think tank, established in 1978. According to its website, “the Mission of the Manhattan Institute is to develop and disseminate new ideas that foster greater economic choice and individual responsibility.”

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