



Illegal immigrants are here to stay (I)

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Jeff Jacoby

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Suppose you learn that a New England manufacturer is exploiting its employees, many of them illegal immigrants, with wretched working conditions. It fines them for talking on the job, refuses to pay overtime, and penalizes them for bathroom breaks of more than two minutes, all in addition to low wages, long hours, and squalid facilities. What do you do?

Well, if you're the United States government, you send armed agents to [haul the workers off in shackles](#) to a military base 100 miles away, then fly scores of them more than 2,000 miles to a holding pen in Texas. You provide the frightened detainees with little information and no access to lawyers. You act so rashly that many of those you seize are [separated from their children](#) and can't get word to spouses or

babysitters. You display such ineptitude, in fact, that [babies end up in the hospital](#), dehydrated, after their nursing mothers are taken away.

The company's owner and managers, meanwhile, you arrest, charge, and release on bail. They reopen for business the next day.

That pretty much sums up last week's federal immigration raid on [Michael Bianco Inc.](#), a leather-goods factory in New Bedford, Mass., which has been deservedly condemned as a humanitarian fiasco. But it is more than that. It is also an object lesson in the incoherence of American immigration policy, and in the harm being caused by the national obsession with, and hostility toward, illegal immigrants.

Immigration hardliners wax wroth at any suggestion that illegal aliens be given some way to come out of the shadows and legalize their status. Every such proposal they reject scornfully as "amnesty." Illegal aliens are criminals, they fume. [Such people should be deported](#), not rewarded.

But no one this side of the fever swamps really believes that 12 million people -- the population of Pennsylvania -- can be rounded up and expelled. The raid in New Bedford involved just 361, and look what a botch was made of that. To deport 33,000 times that number would require the iron fist of a Stalin, and a heartlessness not seen since the [Trail of Tears](#). No sane American would tolerate it.

Ah, but mass expulsions aren't necessary, some hardliners say. Cracking down on just a few thousand illegal immigrants, or maybe a few dozen thousand, would "persuade more and more of them to give up and deport themselves," [claims Mark Krikorian](#), executive director of the restrictionist [Center for Immigration Studies](#). He estimates that 6 million illegal immigrants would pick up and leave if only "the government summoned the gumption to stand up to the elite interests that support open borders."

But immigrants who braved daunting risks to be here, many of whom already live in perpetual fear of being caught and deported, will not pack their bags quite so readily. On the contrary, writes [Manhattan Institute scholar Tamar Jacoby](#) (no

relation to me), stiffer enforcement of the immigration laws -- *i.e.*, more New Bedfords -- will only "force them further underground -- further into the arms of smugglers, document forgers, and unscrupulous, exploitative employers."

We might as well face reality: Most illegal immigrants aren't going anywhere. They are here to stay -- working, raising families, living among us, and making an indispensable contribution to the American way of life. Doesn't it behoove us to figure out a way to assimilate them into the national mainstream, instead of consigning them to a permanent limbo that does neither them nor us any good?

To say that, though, is to run smack into the chief impediment to sensible thought about illegal immigrants: the fixation on their status as violators of the law. "[What part of 'illegal' don't you understand?](#)" seal-the-border types demand in high dudgeon, as though the fact that many immigrants break the law to come here is all we need to know about them.

Is it? Or is it at least as important to know why they come? And how they act once they're here? And whether Americans benefit from their presence?

If tens of millions of drivers consistently break the interstate speed limit, do we assume that they are all criminals who should lose their licenses and be banned from the highways? No: A more plausible explanation is that the speed limit is

too low for safe highway driving and [ought to be raised](#). By the same token, if hundreds of thousands of immigrants come here illegally each year, is it realistic to conclude that we have a massive crime problem for which a ferocious crackdown is the only solution? Perhaps it is the

case instead that America's immigration quotas are simply too low for the world's most dynamic economy. And perhaps the persistent influx of industrious workers is not a plague to be cursed, but a blessing to be better managed.