

Simple solutions

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

The politics of immigration reform is full of simple ideas, the execution of which is not so simple.

Near the top of that list you'll find something that we have long opposed as expensive, ineffective and problematic: the construction of a fence stretching hundreds of miles along the U.S.-Mexico border.

History shows us that walls and fences don't stop illegal immigrants, who will find a way to go around, over or under any barrier. Ending the jobs magnet and taking pressure off the border by creating legal avenues for people to migrate is a much better way to deal with this problem. Besides, as those experts who have studied the border will tell you, too often walls and fences create the effect of caging in illegal immigrants and preventing them from going home. And we thought that was what immigration restrictionists wanted?

Still, border fencing remains popular with much of the public and with many members of Congress. To give you an idea of just how crazy this debate can get, Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., at one point went so far as to propose building a 2,000-mile barrier. The most Congress was willing to approve was 670 miles of border fencing, of which about 260 miles still remain to be built.

Yet along the line, the fence hit a wall. There were questions involving private property rights and environmental reviews. Then there were lawsuits, and the threat of more litigation to come.

So what did the Bush administration do? It simply brushed aside those obstacles and decided to proceed with building the fence anyway. This week, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, using power foolishly granted by Congress, issued waivers to bypass environmental hurdles and speed construction of the fence so that it might be finished by the end of the year. Chertoff says this is necessary because there is - surprise! - criminal activity on the border, and this sort of thing doesn't wait around for lawsuits to be resolved or political debates to run their course.

No doubt, Chertoff is right about that. But no one said that democracy was speedy and convenient. Beware of public officials who hide behind alarmist rhetoric to justify acts of bureaucratic heavy-handedness.

This whole episode is bizarre, especially coming from an administration that has been lukewarm to the idea of a physical fence and more eager to rely on virtual fencing. To recap, we're doing all this to defend our territorial sovereignty and illustrate that rules are to be followed. So naturally, the first chance it gets, the government tramples the sovereignty of individuals who oppose fencing on their property and brushes aside the rules.

Simple.

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