

Self-promotion in Arizona

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Let's make a few things clear. We support law enforcement, crackdowns on illegal immigration and the notion that jail inmates should not be coddled. We're fine with immigration raids, speedy deportations and more cooperation between local cops and federal immigration officials, as long as everyone stays in his lane and doesn't try to do someone else's job.

Yet, along with many others, we are very troubled by what has been happening in Phoenix, because it has nothing to do with any of the above. Instead, it has to do with one man's relentless pursuit of anything that will keep his name in the newspaper or get his face on television or even help him land his own reality show. It has to do with theatrics and showboating and those who somehow confuse self-promotion with public safety. In short, it has less to do with law enforcement than with ego.

Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio has turned his latest publicity stunt into yet another public spectacle. Arpaio recently paraded about 200 illegal immigrants in shackles and prison stripes from the county jail to a "Tent City" that Arpaio created more than 15 years ago to house inmates.

Of course, the sheriff contacted the news media. Otherwise, why pull off the stunt? That's the point.

The inmates will remain in the tents until they are deported. Arpaio tried to defend the stunt as a way to curb jail overcrowding and a "financially responsible alternative to taxpayers already overburdened by the economic drain imposed by a growing number of illegal aliens on social services like education and health care."

Those are familiar talking points. Maybe Arpaio is preparing to run for higher office. After all, he once threatened to run for governor. Without a doubt, the man who likes to think of himself as "America's Toughest Sheriff" has decided to milk the illegal immigration issue for all its worth.

What is happening in Arizona has its roots in what is not happening in Washington. Congress has ducked its responsibility to fix a broken immigration system with a comprehensive plan, and so local and state agencies are trying do-it-yourself initiatives that rarely come off without a hitch.

In this case, Arpaio is taking advantage of an existing federal statute that lets local police agencies enforce U.S. immigration law as long as they get approval from Washington, enter into an agreement with the federal government and make sure their officers receive proper training. Now, some activists say Arpaio should be stripped of the right to participate in the program because he is abusing it. Poetically, Arpaio's fate now lies in the hands of another Arizonan, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano. She can terminate

the agreement if she chooses.

We leave it to Napolitano to make that call. But one thing she should do is to use this case and the spectacle of Arpaio as the inspiration to lay out what role local and state agencies can and should play in enforcing federal immigration laws. That is an incredibly important and timely issue. And, as events in Arizona suggest, one that will not wait.

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