

No to scapegoating

by *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

No doubt, the White House announcement last week that the president would seek comprehensive immigration reform this year was directed as much to Mexico as to a domestic audience. President Barack Obama is slated to visit Mexico this week and, if past presidential visits are any indication, immigration will be near or at the top of what Mexican officials will want to talk about — along with the U.S. role in Mexico's narco wars.

But the news should have been welcome also to that domestic audience, whose foreign-born population has grown sizably over the years. Such legislation is long overdue. The nation's immigration apparatus is broken, and the president should not be dissuaded by those arguing that, given the nation's economic straits, it's the wrong issue at the worst time.

Arguments that illegal immigrants take jobs Americans want have mostly been transparent attempts to scapegoat. The economy would struggle even more without them.

As with the previous president — until he embarked on his enforcement-heavy approach following reform's meltdown in Congress — this president's instincts on this issue are sound, particularly his desire to offer a path to legal residency to those here without documents.

He said during the campaign that these workers "have to have some mechanism over time to get out of the shadows."

Obama is likely to return to proposals of old, including a guest worker program and a system that has illegal immigrants gain legal residency by paying fines, learning or demonstrating that they know English and getting a clean bill of health on criminal records.

These were good proposals as part of the failed McCain-Kennedy immigration package in 2007. They are just as worthy today. Effective legislation also would beef up border security, focus on employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants and create a system for employers to verify immigration status for new workers.

Reform was never, as its detractors claimed, just about "amnesty." Beware those who harangue on the "a" word and who use the economic downturn as an opportunity to criticize immigrants. Effective reform will balance enforcement with humanity by offering people who have been here for years — and likely with U.S. citizen children — that path to legal residency.

A matter of simple justice, in other words.

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