

High stakes

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

It can't be over. Not like this. Along with many Americans, we find it inconceivable that, after many months of debate and dozens of bills and amendments, immigration reform in Congress would die such a bizarre death.

In the end, there were few fireworks and no firefight. The Senate's bipartisan immigration compromise now seems in danger of simply expiring. Worked out by senators with the blessing of the White House, the bill is in jeopardy because Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., jumped the gun and pulled it from consideration, just as the two sides seemed to be coming together over the amendment process.

That's strange. If we didn't know better we might think Reid doesn't really want an immigration bill, at least not as much as he wants a weapon to use against Republicans in the 2008 elections.

Be that as it may, the Bush administration is not ready to throw in the towel, and Americans can be grateful for that. The plan is for an all-out effort, led by President Bush himself, to revive the bill over the next few days. The White House insists the legislation can be approved with just a few more days of debate. In fact, White House spokesman Tony Snow described the bill as "alive and well."

That may be overselling it a bit. Snow's assessment of the situation seems awfully optimistic. The bill may be alive, but clearly it's not well. The way to improve its health is to do what Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., suggested. You simply gather the key Senate Republicans in a room and get them to whittle down to a reasonable number the amendments they would like to offer. Then you get the list to Democrats and secure enough time to give every one of those amendments a full and fair hearing.

Right away, the dividing lines would be drawn, and the Senate would split into two easily discernible camps. Not Democrat versus Republican. Not those who support this particular bill versus those who oppose it. Rather, the camps would be split between those who want to do something on immigration reform versus those who don't. Then we'll know who in the Senate wants solutions and who wants sound bites, who knows how to lead and who is content to block progress.

Here's the good news. We believe there are enough members in the first camp to overcome the resistance of those in the second. If we're wrong about that, there will be no immigration reform this year or for many years to come. And if that comes to pass, it will be time to worry because we will have something that is just as worrisome as a broken border - a broken Congress.

The stakes are too high to turn back now. Failure is not an option. The status quo is not acceptable. This bill

must pass, and the White House and Congress have to see that it does.

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