Leaky borders and limited lives

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

On (last) Thursday, the U.S. Senate refused to pass a comprehensive immigration bill supported by the Bush White House and the leadership of both political parties. If that rejection were to hold, these would be some of the consequences:

- Twelve million illegal aliens would continue to live in America as members of an underclass - trapped in low-wage jobs, many paid in under-the-table cash, afraid of the police and raising American-born children in poverty. The proposed bill would have given legal status to those without criminal records and offered them a difficult but by no means guaranteed path to citizenship.

- Their numbers would grow as more sneak into the country, most across the Mexican border. The bill would have added 18,000 border patrol agents and paid for 370 miles of fencing and many more miles of vehicle barriers.

- Unscrupulous employers would continue to hire illegals and laugh at the law. The bill would have required employers to check new hires against a national database to ensure the legality of their status, and it would have tightened enforcement against employers who cheat. The lesson from the Senate's refusal to act last week? Crime pays.

- By continuing to pay rock-bottom wages, those same unscrupulous employers would continue to take business from companies run by honest executives who obey the law. We saw a vivid example of that in O'Fallon, Mo., last year, when American construction workers picketed a major construction site where a contractor had brought in illegal workers he could pay cheaply.

Last week, 50 senators voted to cut off debate and bring the bill to a vote, while 45 opposed; under the rules of the Senate, 60 votes are required to cut off debate. The Democratic leadership then pulled the bill from the floor. Realistically, votes would have to change for the bill to be revived and stand a chance at passage.

President George W. Bush worked hard for passage, and he's still trying. "I'll see you at the bill signing," he said Monday. But between the effective organized opposition to the bill and the president's plummeting approval ratings, Republicans in Congress who once followed the president faithfully have developed minds of their own.

The immigration bill was a compromise hammered out among senators of both parties. They labored over a complex problem made nearly intractable by ideological baggage and political posturing. As introduced, the bill satisfied no one completely, which may have been its undoing. It certainly drew fire from all sides.

Strong conservatives, for example, opposed granting visas to people who defied the rules to get here. But the United States government is not going to deport 12 million people. Here's how Michael Chertoff, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, put it last week: "I understand there is an elegance to the proposition that when you break the law you should not benefit from it," he said. "But I also recognize in real life ... there are degrees to breaking the law. It's important to solve the problem, as opposed to holding out for a purity of resolution that doesn't exist in the real world."

Meanwhile, technology businesses objected because the bill wouldn't provide for the admission of enough of the highly skilled workers they need, and pro-labor lawmakers were leery of a plan to admit 400,000 guest workers on temporary visas for low-skilled jobs.

The defeat was a bipartisan affair, although more Republicans opposed the bill.

Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., objects to so-called amnesty for illegals, although he favors the tighter border protections in the bill. Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., a former prosecutor, wanted tougher prosecution of employers who hire illegals and opposed aspects of the guest-worker program. She predicted that many of the bill's guest workers would have gone underground when their visas expired and that the problem of illegals would have started growing again.

The bill's guest worker plan needs improvement, but the bill as a whole would do much good. Accepting imperfections - in the real world, as Chertoff explained - is the essence of compromise. Without it, no immigration bill ever will pass, and the problem will fester.

The American people are as torn as their elected representatives. According to a recent ABC News/Washington Post poll, 52 percent of Americans favor a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, while 44 percent oppose it. Overall, the American people want immigration reform. Bond and McCaskill should reconsider their doubts, accept compromise and provide that reform.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch - CNS

Leaky borders and limited lives by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch