

Back to the mass slander of the undocumented

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

The U.S. Senate has decided there's a chance for that immigration bill, after all. Under way, therefore, is a second phase of the only truly important debate that's likely to ensue in the 110th Congress.

This may also revive some of the nastiest talk heard in our land since the civil rights debate raged nearly 50 years ago. It would be comforting to feel immigration reform can be addressed without resort to mass slander of the several million undocumented aliens living and working among us - an element usually referred to in terms no gentler than "illegals."

Their legal status aside, however, it's hard to view the wretched outcasts encamped nightly in north San Diego County canyons as evil folk. Can we seriously suppose their desire to find a life in America scores high on the scale of deadly sins?

No matter how one feels about the pending legislation (an issue mixing patriotism with partisanship and often economic interests as well), everyone of good faith should aim to deal with the facts. That would seem to start with assessing the size of the problem. How many immigrants have entered the United States unlawfully and remain here? Although we must wait more than two years for our next national population count, the Census Bureau currently estimates the undocumented at 11 million to 12 million.

A sizable number, that - but not stark enough, it seems, to satisfy members of a self-styled "Immigration Caucus" in Congress. Habitually, and absent supporting evidence, this politically charged, mainly Republican bloc puts the number at 20 million.

Except for a militant border band calling themselves Minutemen, our most ardent anti-immigrant citizen front is a six-year-old cyberspace network that has taken the name Grassfire. Its purported 2 million armchair warriors keep their computers alive with a steady stream of suggested talking points for use in castigating the mostly Mexican horde. Under other auspices, Grassfire's output would be designated urban legends - alarming tales that, though lacking proof, gain credence with their constant retelling.

Sample offerings: Only 2 percent of illegal aliens do farm work - while 20 times their number draw welfare. One baby in every 10 currently born in the United States is to unlawful immigrant parents, and paid for by Medicaid. An average 13 Americans are killed every day by uninsured alien DUIs. A typical illegal doing prison time has been arrested eight times, and committed 13 crimes.

Oh, yes, and Los Angeles has 300,000 immigrants huddled in residential garages.

Grassfire's organizer, one Steve Elliott, lists himself a graduate of the Rev. Pat Robertson's 30-year-old Regent University, in Virginia Beach, Va. "America's pre-eminent Christian university" has been much in the news of late. Young Elliott may have failed to make the cut among some 150 fellow collegians who landed jobs in the Bush administration. Instead, he applied his talents to an Internet assault against the alien scourge.

Whatever the extent of Christian training available at Regent, Elliott apparently passed on any sessions dealing with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Or, for that matter, with the fourth chapter of St. Matthew and its challenging line, "I came a stranger, and ye took me in." Regrettably, most of the talking points spewed regularly from Elliott's Grassfire would fail the Eighth Commandment's stricture regarding false witness.

Those statistics on crime, for instance. A check with the Federal Bureau of Prisons discloses that illegal aliens - possibly because of a desire to stay out of sight - actually may be more law-abiding than the rest of us. The percentage of America's general population behind bars is markedly higher than the percentage of undocumented.

For sheer irresponsibility, however, no rap against aliens could top a statistical fabrication passed off as fact in a show hosted by TV reporter Lou Dobbs on CNN (a cable channel self-promoted as "The Most Trusted Name in News.") Dobbs' startling allegation was that the illegal influx is responsible for 7,000 leprosy cases in the United States - "far more than in the past, and probably an understatement," Dobbs added somberly.

The number 7,000 had a basis in fact, yes - except that the government report on which it was based made clear those cases stretched over 30 years. Health officials assert that the once dread disease is well in hand - indeed, that new leprosy cases have declined significantly since the early 1980s.

But so what? We'll be reminded those people shouldn't be here, damn it, with or without a communicable disease.

Van Deerlin represented a San Diego County district in Congress for 18 years.

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