

Make a Bad Bill Better

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The great immigration struggle of 2007 has moved from the Senate chamber in Washington to the continent at large. With Congress taking the week off, it's time for constituents to weigh in. You can be sure of this much: The debate will get louder before it gets better.

The problems with the restrictionist provisions of the Senate immigration bill are serious and many. It includes a path to citizenship for 12 million illegal immigrants, which is a rare triumph for common sense, but that path is strewn with cruel conditions, including a fine — \$5,000 — that's too steep and hurdles that are needlessly high, including a "touchback" requirement for immigrants to make pilgrimages to their home countries to cleanse themselves of illegality. The bill imposes an untested merit-point system that narrows the channels through which family members can immigrate.

And it calls for hundreds of thousands of guest workers to toil here temporarily in an absurd employment hokey-pokey — you put your two years in, then one year out, then repeat that twice and go home forever. It would be massive indentured servitude — colonial times all over again, but without any hope of citizenship for those taking our most difficult and despised jobs.

Those who want this bill to be better are horribly conflicted by it. Their emotions still seem vastly overmatched by the ferocity of the opposition from the restrictionist right, with talk radio lighting up over "amnesty," callers spitting out the words with all the hate they can pour into it.

It is encouraging that the bill survived several attempts by that camp to blow it apart, including an amendment that would have stricken the legalization section outright. The center held last week. But it will take a real effort to make the Senate bill much better, given that a core group of senators are bound to the ungainly architecture of their "grand bargain" and that any progress in significantly altering or improving it could unravel the deal.

The Senate bill is repellent in many ways. Its fragrant blossoms are grafted to poisonous roots. But it is also bipartisan, and there lies the kernel of possibility that may ultimately redeem it. A good bill may yet emerge if enough lawmakers — with encouragement from the White House and Americans at large, whose moderate views on immigration were reflected in a New York Times/CBS News poll published on Friday — realize that striking hard-line poses matters less than drafting legislation marrying reality, justice and decency. Advocates of comprehensive immigration reform — which this bill is not — should not give up the fight.

Americans, meanwhile, should look closely at what they have been offered, and to imagine what a strange country this would be if the bill passed as is, if it morphs into a harsher one, or if it is shot down and we are left with the dismal status quo. We would rattle around in our fortified chunk of North America, bristling at our southern border — nothing is stopping that process — as we check our turnstiles carefully for those bright enough to merit entry, bask in the labor of a churning class of serfs, check people's ID's, raid workplaces and fill our detention centers. The anti-amnesty fringe will be pleased with itself, but it won't be an America the rest of us will want to brag about.

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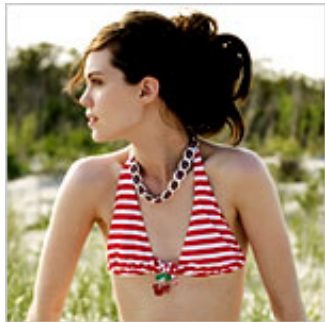
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