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President Bush signed a bill to authorize a 700-mile border fence last week, thus enshrining into federal law a key part of the Republicans' midterm election strategy. The party of the Iraq war and family values desperately needs you to forget about dead soldiers and randy congressmen, and to think instead about the bad things immigrants will do to us if we don't wall them out. Hence the fence, and the ad campaigns around it.

Across the country, candidates are trying to stir up a voter frenzy using immigrants for bait. They accuse their opponents of being amnesty-loving fence-haters, and offer themselves as jut-jawed defenders of the homeland because they want the fence. But the fence is the product of a can't-do, won't-do approach to a serious national problem. And the ads are built on a foundation of lies:

Lie No. 1: We're building a 700-mile fence. The bill signed by Mr. Bush includes no money for fence building. Congress has authorized \$1.2 billion as a down payment for sealing the border, but that money is also meant for roads, electronic sensors and other security tactics preferred by the Department of Homeland Security, which doesn't want a 700-mile fence. Indian tribes, members of Congress and local leaders will also have considerable say in where to put the fence, which could cost anywhere from \$2 billion to \$9 billion, depending on whose estimates you believe.

"It's one thing to authorize. It's another thing to actually appropriate the money and do it," said Senator John Cornyn, a Texas Republican. "I'm not sure that's the most practical use of that money."

Lie No. 2: A fence will help. A 700-mile fence, if it works, will only drive immigrants to other parts of the 2,000-mile border. In parts of the trackless Southwest, building the fence will require building new roads. Who uses roads? Immigrants and smugglers. And no fence will do anything about the roughly 40 percent of illegal immigrants who enter legally and overstay their visas.

Lie No. 3: The Senate's alternative bill was weak, and its supporters favored amnesty. In May, the Senate passed a bill that had a fence. Not only that, it had money for a fence. It also included tough measures for cracking down on illegal hiring. It demanded that illegal immigrants get right with the law by paying fines and taxes, learning English and getting to the back of the citizenship line. It went overboard in some ways, weakening legal protections for immigrants and hindering judicial oversight. But it went far beyond the fence-only approach. Its shortcomings and differences with the House bill might have been worked out in negotiations over the summer. But instead, House Republican leaders held months of hearings to attack the Senate bill. And all we were left with was the fence.

Will the Republican strategy work? We'll know next week, but we hold out hope that hard-line candidates are misreading the electorate. Voters all over are concerned about immigration, of course, but many polls have repeatedly shown that they want reasonable solutions and not to stridency. They can recognize the difference between the marauding army of fence-jumpers they see in commercials and the immigrants who have become their neighbors, co-workers, customers and friends. Citizen anger cuts both ways, and many voters, Latinos in particular, say they are put off by the Republican hysteria.


Poll results in some races suggest that xenophobia and voter deception are not necessarily a ticket to victory. In Arizona, Randy Graf, a Republican, is running for Congress as a single-issue candidate focused on border security, Minuteman-style. He has said that if his strident argument won't fly in his prickly border state, it might not fly anywhere. He is trailing Gabrielle Giffords, a moderate Democrat who supports the comprehensive approach to immigration reform endorsed by the Senate and — once upon a time — by President Bush.

Whatever happens in November, Congress will eventually have to deal with the 12 million illegal immigrants unaffected by the fence, and the future flow of immigrant workers. That means tackling "amnesty" directly. The sad thing is that Democrats and moderate Republicans — and Mr. Bush — already did this, and settled on an approach that is both tough and smart.

But now is the time for stirring up voters, and the pliant Mr. Bush has decided to go along, adding his signature to the shortsighted politics of fear.

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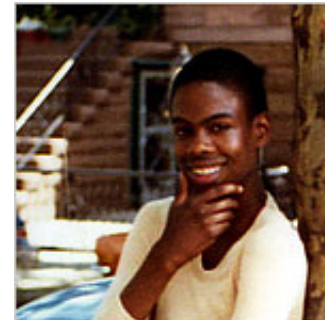


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