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Siskind

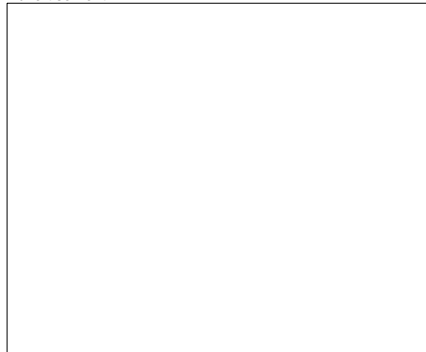
Immigrant crackdown? Weigh the myths first

April 13, 2006

Bio info: Greg Siskind is the founding partner of Siskind Susser, a Memphis-based law firm that specializes in immigration issues.

Most of you probably won't remember the 2004 movie "A Day Without a Mexican." The film's premise turned out to be a lot more interesting than anything else about the picture: What if one day the people of the United States woke up and all the Mexicans were gone?

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The movie was a comedy that spoofed just how dependent we are on this community of people. But if anti-immigrant advocates got their way and were able to deport the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, I doubt many of us would be laughing.

Memphis is a city with an estimated 100,000 undocumented immigrants. But like the rest of the country, it is only in the past several weeks that people in our community have begun to think about immigration.

Members of the public are starting to ask whether America is better or worse off because of immigration. What would our country look like if Congress enacts the anti-immigrant H.R. 4337, already passed by the U.S. House, which makes being an undocumented immigrant a crime punishable by a year in prison, and would throw those offering humanitarian assistance to such immigrants into prison along with them? What would America be like if Senate Bill 2425 becomes the law of the land? This bill, under consideration in the U.S. Senate, includes border enforcement provisions, a guest worker program and a plan to put the country's undocumented population on a multiyear path to lawful permanent residency.

These are serious questions requiring serious thought. Unfortunately, a lot of false assumptions shape public opinion on immigration, and they need to be dispelled if we are to have informed views.

Myth #1: My problem is with people coming in illegally. I don't have a problem with people who come to the United States by following the rules. After all, that's how my family came.

When most of our families came to America, there was open immigration. For all the stories about people being sent home when they tried to come in through Ellis Island, more than 98 percent actually were admitted. Basically, anyone who could afford the price of a ticket on a ship could become an American. Today, there is no legal way for the vast majority of unskilled workers to enter the United States legally. For most, there are just two choices: enter the country illegally or don't enter at all.

Myth #2: We tried comprehensive immigration reform in 1986. It didn't work then and we shouldn't repeat the same mistake today.

In 1986, President Reagan legalized 3 million immigrants and also required U.S. employers to begin checking the status of their employees. That was supposed to be the end of the immigration problem in our country. But the law failed to deal with future immigration by not including a guest worker program and, thus, was not comprehensive reform. This time around, we need to fill that gap by including a new guest worker visa program so we don't have a massive future illegal population.

Myth #3: The Senate bill is nothing but an amnesty program.

The Senate plan to legalize the undocumented population in this country is far from a free ride. First, it provides a temporary right to work here for 6 to 10 years and only then offers opportunities for people to become permanent residents. And the proposed law is written to ensure that everyone currently seeking a green card would be processed ahead of undocumented immigrants. A person must then wait five more years to seek citizenship after they get a green card under the law.

The bill fines undocumented people \$2,000. Given the types of jobs most of these

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workers hold, paying a fine of this size is an enormous penalty. It also requires people seeking legal status to pass English and civics exams, pay any back taxes and work continuously.

Myth #4: Immigrants displace hard-working Americans.

At an astoundingly low 4.7 percent, America currently has one of the world's lowest unemployment rates. There are simply not enough Americans available to fill all the jobs. It's as simple as that. Americans are working. They're just working in better, higher-paying jobs than the undocumented.

By the way, one job that a lot of Americans should be happy immigrants fill is that of a soldier. One-third of the U.S. soldiers in Iraq are Hispanic (some citizens, many green card holders) and a number of them were legalized under the 1986 "amnesty." Your irony meter should be going off the scale at reading that, since immigration restrictionists are usually the ones complaining that Mexicans are just coming here to take from this country.

These myths still don't disguise the reality that the undocumented in this country are not going home. The United States doesn't have the finances or the cruel instincts to rip families apart and deport all those people. It's time to do what has worked for more than 200 years in this country: Welcome the immigrants and allow them to enrich our country, as they have in so many generations past.

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