

Voices

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Parting shots on immigration

from the desk of General Manager
Carisa P. Cortez

Over the last month, millions of workers, documented and undocumented, and their supporters in more than 140 cities have taken to the streets in protest of the recently passed House legislation making illegal immigrants vulnerable to felony charges. The bill, which would erect 700 miles of fence along the U.S.-Mexico border and make it a crime for churches and charity groups to provide aid to known undocumented immigrants, has galvanized communities across the U.S. into action and brought immigration to the forefront of the national political agenda.

The fact that U.S. senators failed to agree on their own version of an immigration-reform package before their two-week Easter recess only increases pressure. After touching base with home constituencies over the break, I suspect champions on both sides will come out swinging, armed with the knowledge that Congressional approval rates are at an alarmingly low 23 percent. Many groups are urging the Senate to pass

a more comprehensive, bipartisan bill that creates a guest-worker program and a path for permanent residency and citizenship.

The marches that shook the nation in April were the largest mobilization of immigrants in U.S. history, according to the National Council of La Raza, the nation's largest Hispanic rights organization. Of the 12 million undocumented immigrants believed to be in the United States, roughly half are from Mexico, making the debate not only about economics, but racism and classism in a country founded by immigrant labor by those fleeing persecution. The recent protests exceeded expectations because they were driven by students, private citizens and immigrants; activists took the lead in a parade that was already moving. The debate over this increasingly divisive issue has also mobilized vocal allies outside the Hispanic community, including

union activists, grassroots and civil-rights groups and interfaith organizations, including the Catholic Church. Bishops nationwide have publicly positioned themselves on the side of the Gospels. Their definition of the undocumented worker is that of "the least among us," which is far from that of the criminal and illegal. As one Catholic priest from San Antonio, Texas phrased it on Easter Sunday, "There is no such thing as an illegal human being."

This will be my final contribution to *Voices*, as I leave for California to pursue a doctoral degree in (perhaps fittingly) Chicano Studies. I leave you with this thought: Whomever you may be standing next to in this political minefield, the immigration debate will redefine America and what it is to be American. In the coming decades, when people of color increasingly form the majority of the population and whose voices will define new American politics, which side of the fence do you want to be on?

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