

Erickson Column: The immigration solution: Get politicians to commit

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As the Obama administration begins to tackle the issues associated with immigration reform, it is undoubtedly searching for the keys to fixing our broken and neglected immigration system. The issues that we face are not all new and previous administrations have recognized the seriousness of finding and implementing a proper strategy. When President Clinton appointed Barbara Jordan to chair the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform on Dec. 14, 1993, he understood that immigration was an issue that could no longer be ignored. In appointing Ms. Jordan, he said:

“I have chosen Barbara Jordan — one of the most well-respected people in America — to chair this commission because immigration is one of the most important and complex issues facing our country today.”

Ms. Jordan led what is referred to as the “Jordan Commission”... due in large part because of her efforts and her leadership on the commission. She passed away in January 1996 and the commission’s report, largely completed at the time of her death, was issued on Sept. 30, 1997. It’s important to note that this was a bipartisan group of nine members — four members chosen by the leadership from both the House and Senate, and the chairman being chosen by the president. Despite the differences in political loyalties among the group, the commission was unanimous in almost all of its policy recommendations, with the exception of an 8-1 vote in favor of reducing the annual number associated with legal immigration.

Ms. Jordan also understood that the issues were tough. In testifying before Congress, she said:

“Our work has not been easy. Distinguishing fact from fiction has been almost impossible, because of what has become a highly emotional debate on immigration. We have heard contradictory testimony, shaky statistics, and a great deal of honest confusion regarding the impacts of immigration. Nevertheless, we have tried throughout to engage in what we believe is a systematic, nonpartisan effort to reach conclusions drawn from analysis of the best data available. The recommendations that I present today have been adopted unanimously.”

One of the commission’s most forward-thinking recommendations was to divide the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) into two separate divisions: one for enforcement and border patrol, and the other for immigration services, such as processing

visas and permanent resident applications. That idea, along with many others, were not acted upon initially and, in fact, little occurred after the report was issued in 1997. Again, having great ideas is only half the battle when it comes to immigration reform.

The recommendation to divide INS was finally embraced after the events of Sept. 11, 2001 and was ultimately implemented in March 2003. The strategy provided that all immigration functions would be in the hands of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security, but now the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) would be solely responsible for the adjudication of visa petitions, naturalization, asylum and refugee applications while the Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) would be responsible for border patrol, detention, removal, intelligence, investigations and inspections.

The U.S. immigration policies are exceptionally complex and have long been considered too hot to handle. As a result, politicians have sidestepped the larger issues and have been unwilling to step up and be heard on the issues for fear of risking re-election.

Getting the support from the public will require that the immigration proposals makes sense and that there will be significant improvement in handling an issue that has long vexed political leaders. We will need our leaders to act in a nonpartisan way as they search for a solution and agree on a plan to implement same.

Our country is at its best when government functions in a nonpartisan fashion, truly seeking to do good for the country as a whole. There is no doubt in my mind that solutions to the immigration crisis can be developed. The bigger challenge will be finding politicians committed and willing to speak up and advocate implementation of the solutions.

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