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Published: March 25, 2009

In order to have a meaningful debate on the topic of comprehensive immigration reform, it's important to discuss the issues using understood terms and definitions. First, we need to have a common understanding of the term at the center of the immigration debate, "illegal alien". Ironically, this term, which is thrown about by nearly everyone involved in the immigration debate, is not used in immigration regulations or formally defined by the federal government. For debate purposes, an illegal alien can be considered a person who is in the U.S. without any legal paperwork or immigration status. This would include an individual who enters the U.S. without proper documentation or permission as well as an individual who enters with proper documentation or permission but does not abide by the terms of his or her stay in the U.S. Of the approximately 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., it's estimated that almost half entered the U.S. on a visa that allowed them to visit the U.S. temporarily, but then stayed beyond the time permitted in their visa.

MYTH: Illegal aliens shouldn't receive special treatment for being here illegally.

FACT: For the vast majority of illegal aliens, there is no legal way under the current immigration law to obtain legal status while in the United States.

There's a common misconception that by illegally entering the U.S., illegal aliens are able to apply for permanent resident status sooner than had they remained in their home country and applied from abroad. The reality is that, for the vast majority of illegal aliens, there is simply no process that would allow for them to be considered for permanent resident status. This is why so many continue to live in the shadows and fringes.

While most illegal aliens in the U.S. want nothing more than to have legal status, there is just no option for most. The reality is that the immigration laws actually encourage an illegal alien to remain in the U.S., because leaving would likely mean it would be years before he or she would be eligible to return. Under current law, an illegal alien who leaves the U.S. will be unable to return for 3 years if he or she has been in the country illegally for more than six months, and a bar of 10 years would apply if he or she has been in the U.S. illegally for more than one year.

The relevant immigration laws, which unfortunately have not been updated in nearly 20 years, provide limited avenues for securing legal immigration status for any applicant who is here illegally. For those

who are in the U.S. illegally, the limited options for obtaining permanent residency in the U.S., and the consequences of leaving the country, mean that most will choose to stay.

Family situations also contribute to the dilemma. Children who are illegally brought into the U.S. by their non-citizen parents grow to be adults and remain in the U.S. as illegal aliens. These individuals, who as children were brought here by no choice of their own, are now adults forced to live and operate in a sub-culture of illegal aliens within our society.

Another common family scenario that encourages illegal aliens to stay in the U.S. arises when illegal aliens have children that are born in the U.S. The children born within our borders are U.S. citizens by law, but the parents are still here illegally. Additionally, the parent(s), if ever deported, are faced with the option of either taking their U.S. citizen children, who only know the U.S. culture, to a foreign country or leaving their children in the U.S. in hopes of giving them the opportunity for a better life. A Morton's Fork, to be sure.

The children of illegal aliens will be one of the issues at the heart of the immigration debate. On March 14, the New York Times featured a lengthy article discussing the difficulties faced by non-English speaking students at Cecil D. Hylton High School in Woodbridge. This article noted that *'inside schools, which are required to enroll students regardless of their immigration status and are prohibited from even asking about it, the debate has turned to how best to educate them.'* *The immigration debate and its resulting plan will affect Prince William County significantly. Our current U.S. immigration laws make it impossible for most illegal aliens to obtain any form of legal status and assimilate into U.S. culture. It doesn't matter that a person may have U.S. family members or that he or she has lived in the U.S. for his or her entire life.*

The issue of immigration reform will be debated soon. The reality is that the argument requiring the deportation of all illegal aliens is not a realistic proposal given the enormous costs combined with the issue of family displacement. It will be necessary for immigration reform to take a multi-faceted approach. It's a given that our borders must be secured. The real hurdle is that we need to develop a strategy to deal with the millions of people in the U.S. who currently live here without valid status. Real change occurs when people come together with an open mind to all sides of the argument. Let's put this myth to rest and push forward in developing a solution.

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