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SIFTING THROUGH THE ASHES OF IMMIGRATION REFORM

Sifting through the ashes of the recent failed immigration reform effort in Congress, one can learn a lot of helpful lessons. The most important, of course, is that We the People are still in charge.

I cannot remember when the American public has been as angry as they were over the immigration bill. Americans by and large are fair people, but something struck us as totally unfair about allowing 12 million illegal aliens in the country to gain amnesty and citizenship – however it was rationalized by proponents.

Our political leaders failed to grasp that we consider citizenship a privilege, not a political chip to curry favor with Hispanic voters and to placate businesses that profit from illegals in the workplace. They overlooked the fact that we are tired of illegal aliens not learning to speak our language. We are tired of paying for their babies, their runny noses and their education. We are tired of being told to trust the federal government to manage the immigration issue effectively when we all know our government couldn't find its backside with both hands and a AAA-certified road map.

This may be an oversimplification, but if my mail is any indication, the tide turned in this country with a much-distributed photograph of school kids in (where else?) California in May, 2006, parading around with the Mexican flag flying above an upside-down American flag. School officials at Montebello High School, where the demonstration took place, tut-tutted the incident and said that in the future, "Students will be encouraged to air their concerns and opinions in a safe, structured, well-supervised environment." Typical do-gooder gobbledygook. The little snots should have been bundled up and shipped off to any town in Georgia with a VFW post. I'm sure members would be more than happy to give the urchins a crash course in what happens when you denigrate the Stars and Stripes.

Whoever is charged with the strategy of building sympathy for illegal aliens has the public relations skills of a doorknob. After the upside-down flag episode, protest marchers put away their Mexican flags and their Spanish-language signs and showed up at illegal immigration rallies around the country waving American flags. This assumes we are dumber than an armadillo and wouldn't see through their change in tactics. All that did was to make matters worse for them. Don't fly our flag upside down and then turn around and wave it in our faces. You have doubled the insult.

It was all downhill from there. The clumsy protests seemed to galvanize mainstream Americans, who up to that point had been willing to turn a blind eye to the influx of illegal aliens into the country. A Zogby poll showed that only 35 percent of Americans approved of the Bush administration's proposal to give millions of illegal aliens guest-worker status and the opportunity to become citizens.

While the Bush administration, the odd couple of John McCain and Ted Kennedy, and congressional leaders of both parties – all courting the Hispanic vote – as well as special-interest groups and business groups that profit from the work of illegal labor, were discussing immigration policy among themselves, they forgot about the rest of us. Big mistake. Immigration reform is muy muerte. Not because it is a bad idea, but because it was handled badly. Very badly.

Georgia's senators, Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson, who had been involved in the reform effort, got a whiff of the backlash from angry constituents and wisely backed off the bill. Chambliss, who is up for re-election next year, doesn't have a lot of political capital to squander in the first place. Were he to ask, I would suggest the senator cut back on the blizzard of self-serving news releases and fund-raising letters and spend more time in face-to-face fence-mending with a lot of Georgians who are not very happy with him right now.

What is next for immigration reform? Who knows? I only know that when the issue comes up in the future, somebody in Washington had better listen closely to We the People. We still run things around here.