

December 12, 2005 Congress is poised to consider an immigration reform bill this week, but as usual the devil will be in the details. A sensible bill would bolster enforcement of existing immigration laws, reject any form of amnesty, and address the underlying welfare state that adds to the problem. I fear, however, that Congress will bow to the president and accept some sort of amnesty. Even worse, I fear Congress may use the immigration bill to create a national employment database that has nothing to do with border control and everything to do with monitoring American citizens and employers. Most Americans understandably want Congress to do something about illegal immigration, which has become a national embarrassment. One important solution is better enforcement of the laws we've got-- which plainly call for illegal immigrants to be arrested and deported. Congress can pass any law it wants, but unless federal agencies enforce those laws they are meaningless. The ultimate responsibility for our immigration mess, therefore, lies squarely with successive presidents, not Congress. For decades our chief executives simply have lacked the political will, the manpower, or the desire to police our borders and deport lawbreakers. It's been nearly impossible politically for presidents or candidates to suggest the obvious, namely that illegal immigration mocks the rule of law and creates huge social and economic problems. But the tide is turning, and a majority of Americans will demand real action on immigration by the next administration. Real immigration reform will be difficult, but it need not be complicated. First, enforce existing laws by controlling the borders once and for all. We must recognize that true national defense means defending our own borders and coastlines. This is the primary constitutional responsibility of the federal government. This means it's time to stop spending hundreds of billions of dollars on overseas military adventures and countless alphabet soup domestic agencies. Borders should be the number one national priority, plain and simple. Does the federal government have something better to do? Second, we must end birthright citizenship by constitutional amendment, if necessary. House Joint Resolution 46, which I introduced earlier this year, begins the process in Congress. As long as illegal immigrants know that their children born here will be citizens, the perverse incentive to sneak into this country remains strong. Citizenship involves more than the mere location of one's birth. True citizenship requires cultural connections and an allegiance to the United States. Americans are happy to welcome those who wish to come here and build a better life for themselves, but we rightfully expect immigrants to show loyalty and attempt to assimilate themselves culturally. Birthright citizenship sometimes confers the benefits of being American on people who do not truly embrace America. Finally, we must end welfare state subsidies for illegal immigrants. Some illegal immigrants-- certainly not all-- receive housing subsidies, food stamps, free medical care, and other forms of welfare. This alienates taxpayers and breeds suspicion of immigrants, even though the majority of them work very hard. Without a welfare state, we would know that everyone coming to America wanted to work hard and support himself. Immigration admittedly is a difficult issue, and nobody wants America to become an unwelcoming fortress. On the contrary, we need to attract the best and brightest people by remaining an entrepreneurial society that rewards initiative and hard work. But we must gain control of our borders not only to strengthen our national security, but also to preserve our national identity.