

Illegal Immigration

By Dr. Art Pitz, PhD

Let's picture large numbers of illegal immigrants flowing across the Texas border seeking economic opportunity. They bring their culture with them and many do not assimilate well with the host culture. The latter group often chooses not to obey the laws in their new country. They become a constant source of disruption. They insist on speaking their own language and often demand that it be recognized.

Their host government, appalled, does its best to keep them out. Attempts are made to seal and fortify the border, but it is too long and too porous. There is talk of trying to deport all those who came in illegally.

Sound familiar?

Why, that was the situation that the United States of Mexico faced by the 1830's.

Mexico, though warned by the British that one couldn't and shouldn't trust Americans, had invited Americans to settle in Mexico's borderlands with the U.S.A. provided the Americans agreed to obey the laws. The Mexican government really ought to have known better.

Stephen Austin and some like him were honest and kept their word. All too many didn't. Even after Mexico reversed its policy of encouraging Americans to come in, they kept coming in large numbers without any legal status. One should add to it that a fair number of these Americans brought their slaves with them though Mexico, like most civilized nations by then, had abolished slavery.

Did the U.S. government make any efforts whatsoever to prevent its citizens from doing this? No.

And, Mexico paid for its error by first losing Texas to these illegal immigrants and eventually all of their northern borderlands. American style Manifest Destiny prevailed and Mexicans soon became second class citizens in what had been their own land. Their land rights were not allowed to stand in the new American courts. Later, the descendants of those Mexicans would feel the sting of Jim Crow.

It is curious in the ongoing debate over illegal immigration that our own history in the 1820's and 1830's is not brought into the discussion. Maybe it wouldn't do to suggest that a significant number of the "Tejanos" at the Alamo, Goliad, and San Jacinto were—illegal immigrants.

But, wait, there's more, much more, in the history of illegal immigration. Perhaps the classic case involves the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty between the U.S. government and several of the Indian tribes of the upper Great Plains. In this Treaty, the U.S. government recognized the Black Hills as being sacred to those tribes and it was set aside "forever" as part of the Great Sioux reservation. "Forever" lasted only until 1874 when General

George Armstrong Custer led a military expedition accompanied by some miners to see if the rumors were true that there was gold in “them thar hills.” The rumor was true. Thousands of miners flocked to the Black Hills to find the gold.

Instead of keeping its word, enforcing the Treaty and keeping those illegal immigrants out, the U.S. government instead insisted on removing the Indians from the Black Hills. General Custer went out to enforce that directive and I suspect you know the results for him and his soldiers. Less known by most Americans is what happened to the Indians AFTER that. It’s a sad story and would take too long to tell here. If you’re interested, find and watch the PBS film *In the White Man’s Image*.

Why tell these stories from our past? They serve as useful reminders and help balance the debate over illegal immigration today. There are powerful forces today interested in criminalizing their behavior or at least making their path to citizenship difficult as well as building a fence on our border with Mexico. Would those forces have condemned the American illegal immigration behavior described above at the time or even condemn it now?

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