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'A crisis of our own making'

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It is remarkable that so many of those who rail against illegal immigration don't really understand the terrain. This includes folks at Washington, D.C., think tanks who write about immigration without interacting with actual immigrants, TV commentators who remake themselves for higher ratings, and opportunistic politicians who spin anger and prejudice into votes.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who actually know what they're talking about. They have logged long hours and done their homework, which might include interviewing real people – hundreds of them on both sides of the border.

They include Douglas Massey, a Princeton sociology professor and nationally acclaimed expert on immigration who for more than 20 years has monitored the U.S.-Mexico border, tracked immigration patterns, chronicled the Mexican migrant experience, and studied both the Mexican communities that cast off migrants and the U.S. communities that receive them.

Massey recently shared some of what he has learned in a lecture sponsored by the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the University of California San Diego. If there is one thing about which he is absolutely sure, it is that we're not facing an invasion but rather what he calls "a crisis of our own making."

It's not just that Americans are hiring illegal immigrants or at least tolerating the practice. It is also that, throughout this nation's history, businesses and government have indirectly facilitated the entry of millions of illegal immigrants through recruitment efforts and ineffective enforcement strategies. The government doesn't directly recruit illegal immigrants. But when it allows the recruitment of legal ones – through guest-worker programs – millions of undocumented, including workers' relatives, tend to follow.

As Massey explained, the history of U.S. immigration policy is a push-pull saga of recruiting immigrants when we need workers, then deporting them when jobs are scarce. The immigrants are acting in a totally rational manner, going north for better-paying jobs. Someone who makes \$7 a day in Mexico can make \$70 a day picking fruit in California or \$140 a day doing construction in North Carolina. As Massey sees it, it's Americans who can't decide whether they want to get rid of illegal immigrants or hire more of them.

"It's the gringos who can't get their act together," he said.

The recruitment campaign started in 1907, when agricultural growers launched private efforts to go

into Mexico and ensnare low-skilled workers for stints that resembled indentured servitude. There was more recruiting in 1917, when the labor supply was depleted during World War I, and it continued through the 1920s. The 1930s brought the Great Depression and a national unemployment rate that hit 25 percent – and with it, massive deportation raids that resulted in the forced removal of even U.S.-born Latinos. World War II meant more labor shortages and thus more recruitment in the 1940s. The result: the Bracero program, which matched up millions of Mexican agricultural workers with U.S. employers. In the 1950s, President Eisenhower unleashed “Operation Wetback,” as it was called – a massive roundup by both federal and local authorities of both Mexicans and U.S.-born Mexican-Americans.

But to solve the labor shortage that the sweep created in the years that followed, the U.S. government quietly recruited a new batch of guest workers. And, as tends to happen, more illegal immigrants followed. They have been coming ever since.

Massey has no more confidence in the new fad – the multibillion-dollar initiative to build walls and fences along the border.

“It’s worse than useless,” he said of the enforcement strategy. “It’s counterproductive.”

Fortifying the border enriches and emboldens immigrant smugglers by letting them charge more to bring their human cargo into the United States. In the early 1990s, immigrant smugglers charged migrants \$500 a head. Now, it’s up to \$3,000.

Besides, Massey notes, building fortresses makes it less likely that illegal immigrants on this side of the border will go home for family visits because they’re reluctant to pay the higher price to come back. That’s a bad trend. For generations, immigrants have gone home with regularity, and some would stay there. Now they simply stay in the United States – and, as a result, the undocumented population increases. And so, Massey argues, we’ve cut the family ties that – more than revolving-door deportations or ordinances banning taco trucks – represented our best hope of shrinking the number of undocumented in the United States.

What a brilliant system we’ve concocted. Except for that minor glitch where it achieves the opposite of what we set out to accomplish.

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