

# The lawbreakers America needs

Because the United States has an immigration policy that is inherently hypocritical, lawmakers routinely find themselves in conflicted positions trying to deal with the problems that about 10 million undocumented residents present.

It's hard to believe that it was only a year ago that Gov. Bush and a number of legislators from both parties were supporting a bill that would allow illegal immigrants to obtain driver's licenses.



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The bill's proponents argued that it would make the roads safer, reduce the number of uninsured drivers and enhance security by creating a registry that identifies illegal immigrants and records where they live. The information could be used to track down terrorists, supporters said.

The bill never made it out of committee. The reason? Security concerns. Opponents argued that driver's licenses could help terrorists carry out attacks. Nine of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 had Florida driver's licenses, opponents said.

Who's right? As is so often the case with immigration matters, both sides are.

There is no doubt that driver's licenses provide a useful registry for law enforcement. Those nine licenses were vital in retracing the movements of the 9/11 terrorists. The licenses also were useful to the terrorists, of course.

But the real problem was fraudulent passports and visas, which

## *Conflicting immigration rules make U.S. no safer.*

made obtaining the driver licenses possible. The 9/11 commission found that as many as 13 of the hijackers had entered the United States with altered passports and that many of the visa applications had been filled out improperly. In several cases, the hijackers gave information that was false. Three of the hijackers were allowed into the country even though they were listed in the government's counter-terrorist databases.

Had passport and visa security been adequately tight, the attacks might have been prevented. If the hijackers had been denied driver's licenses, the attacks probably would have been carried out as they were.

The issue of whether illegal immigrants should have driver's licenses has been rekindled, this time in Congress. The Real ID Act, sponsored by Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., would require motor-vehicle employees in all states to verify the immigration status of driver's license applicants. It will turn a qualified state employee who knows a lot about motor vehicle laws into an unqualified Border Patrol agent who knows nothing about immigration rules.

It is the latest example of the federal government abdicating its responsibility to enforce immigration laws and leaving it for state and local officials. It's a point of irony that conservatives would choose to interfere with each state's right to decide who's fit to drive. The idea

that the states should be ordered to verify immigration status is another ridiculous Washington ruse. The states have neither the resources nor the expertise to perform such a task. And, of course, the feds aren't willing to give them any. What's one more unfunded mandate, anyway?

The Real ID Act appears headed for passage, and this time a Bush is lined up on the winning side. The president says he will sign it, apparently abandoning his promise to inject common sense into immigration policy.

The net effect of the law will be to ostracize further a huge population of essential workers, most of them Mexicans, from participation in a legitimate system. The law will reinforce the nation's hypocritical message to illegal immigrants: We need you to stay here and do our dirty work, yet we're also going to consider you lawbreakers for staying.

Denying undocumented workers driver's licenses won't make the country safer. On the contrary, it will force more of them to drive without insurance and keep more of them in the shadows of anonymity.

The French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote about democracy in America 170 years ago, said that people are always more willing to accept a simple lie than a complex truth.

That is the underlying problem with the immigration debate today. The politics of the simple lie continues to overwhelm the reason of the complex truth.

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