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CAUCUS ROOM

Immigration Reform: An Awakening Or Political Reality?

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For three years, the Biden Administration has engaged in egregious denialism, blame shifting and half-truths before now finally conceding the southern border is in crisis and pronouncing itself open to significant changes to stem the unprecedented flood of illegal

immigration into the United States.

The dramatic change in attitude burst into the open when the president, discussing his Administration's official posture on immigration, uttered five words – “significant compromises on the border” – would be considered by the White House.

While the president's remark changed the dynamics of the immigration debate, it infuriated the progressive left wing of his party who accused the Administration of caving in to the demands of Congressional Republicans and signaled a return to the Trump era restrictive policies – denial of asylum claims, arrests and deportations – the president himself repealed immediately upon taking office. Warnings of an immigrant surge went unheeded.

The American people would be encouraged if they believed the change in approach resulted from an epiphany, an awakening in the Administration that the scales have fallen from its eyes and it realized that its indecision and outright refusal to act has exacerbated the financial and humanitarian crisis that has befallen communities along the southwestern border and a number of major American cities as they struggle to provide housing, food and social services to tens of thousands of migrants.

It didn't.

The Administration's hand was forced by the application of a major dose of power politics, an “I'll-give-you-what-you-want-if-you-give-me-what-I-want” accommodation usually referred to in more polite terms as bipartisan compromise.

The deal shaping up would award the Administration its' request for \$100 billion in aid to Ukraine to continue its war against Russian invasion and to Israel in its war with Hamas in return for significant changes in immigration policy, including rejecting claims for asylum as well as detention and deportation of those found to have entered the country illegally.

Republican demands that heightened border security measures be included in the Ukraine/Israel aid package has placed the entire issue in the hands of a bipartisan group of Senators to develop a consensus that hopefully will win approval in the Congress and the White House.

Hopes for an aggressive schedule to reach agreement before year's end have faded and action now appears delayed into January.

The Administration desperately needs the legislative victory represented by aid for Ukraine and Israel and, while willing to accept more stringent border security measures to achieve it, has recognized – albeit belatedly – that it must act to wriggle out from under the perception that it is responsible for an open border and the record influx of migrants into the country.

Mayors of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Washington, San Francisco and Denver, for instance, have taken their grievances with the Administration public, demanding millions in Federal aid to deal with the rising migrant population.

They face cutting their municipal budgets for education and policing, for instance, to provide funding for housing and other services to migrants. At the same time, they have come under severe criticism from their citizens and taxpayers who claim their needs are being ignored in favor of individuals here illegally.

That the Administration has bungled the issue since the very outset is undeniable. Its insistence that the border was secure was undermined by news accounts and images of border crossings in record numbers and migrants put up in hotels, police stations and airports.

Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and White House press secretary Karine Jean Pierre clung stubbornly and without apparent embarrassment to an everything is under control narrative.

Jean Pierre, faced with mountains of contradictory evidence, attempted to shift the blame to former president Trump and Republicans in Congress for failing to act on comprehensive immigration reform.

She has consistently been on the defensive, scrambling for explanations and excuses while her credibility crumbled.

Even when it became clear that the Administration position had become untenable, it failed to move.

Leaked news accounts describing White House officials as failing to act out of a fear of offending its left wing only added to the poor management of the issue at the highest levels.

The president's public disapproval of his performance on immigration rose to 65 percent and, when combined with dismal ratings on the economy, inflation, crime and foreign policy, dragged his overall standing below 40 percent. In some surveys, he trails Trump in a hypothetical 2024 matchup.

The Republican demands for including border security measures to the Ukraine and Israel aid package smacks of legislative hostage taking — a not uncommon occurrence — but also offers the Administration a path toward recovering some level of credibility to its' immigration position.

It was all so avoidable, however, if the Administration had recognized and responded to the warning signs rather than allowing ideological pressures and a desire to draw sharp contrast with Trump to dictate policy.

Choosing to allow the issue to fester and produce an enormous and potentially election jeopardizing political headache was a badly misguided and amateurish decision.

As distasteful as it may be to some in the Administration, accepting the recommendations of the bipartisan Congressional committee offers a lifeline, an opportunity to recover and demonstrate they really do understand the severity of the problem.

How far the progressive left is prepared to go to tank the effort remains to be seen. Dealing with them will require direct involvement of the president and convincing them there is far too much at stake — a re-election and control of Congress — to fail to act.

Not only is addressing immigration at risk, but the potential for long delays in providing aid to Ukraine and Israel — if not losing it altogether — it would seriously weaken a president already in danger as he heads deeper into his re-election bid.

The blame, though, lies squarely with the Administration. It continued to paint itself into a corner on immigration and, rather than attempt to extricate itself as undamaged as possible, chose to send out for more paint.

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