

Border control places

lawmakers on hot seat

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WASHINGTON — Connecticut lawmakers side with President Bush in the emotionally charged debate over immigration reform and border security.

The argument raging in the Senate has divided the Republican Party over how to treat the estimated 12 million immigrants already in the United States either by illegally entering the country or overstaying visas and other permits.

Bush wants to tighten the U.S. and Mexican border, but he would create a temporary worker program for those illegal and undocumented immigrants already in the country.

"You cannot enforce the border without having a temporary guest-worker program," Bush said last week. "The two go hand in hand. There are people doing jobs Americans will not do. Many people who have come into our country are helping our economy grow. It's just a fact of life."

Sens. Joe Lieberman and Chris Dodd, both D-Conn., endorsed a bill approved last week by the Senate Judiciary Committee that would allow as many as 400,000 new workers to come to the U.S. legally each year.

The bill, which was sponsored by Sens. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., and John McCain, R-Ariz., would also set up a way for illegal immigrants to gain legal status and eventually citizenship. Lieberman was a sponsor of the original bill.

Current law allows for 65,000 people to enter the United States annually with H-1B temporary worker visas.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., wants to tighten border security without raising the annual quota of legal migrants. He also would increase penalties on U.S. employers who hire illegal immigrants.

But Dodd and Lieberman disagree with that approach.

"By bringing honest, hard-working immigrants out of the shadows, we can better focus our enforcement resources on looking for the few who pose real threats to the country," Lieberman said. Lieberman said the bill would reduce unacceptably long backlogs for legal immigrants waiting to be reunited with their spouses and children who are already in the United States.

Moreover, he said, it should reduce the flow of illegal immigrants by channeling foreign workers into a new work-visa program.

"Our immigration system is flawed and must be fixed," Dodd said. "The Kennedy-McCain proposal is a realistic solution that is consistent with our values as Americans. "It increases resources for border security, toughens penalties for employers who hire illegal workers and creates a system in which illegal immigrants

could come forward and register, pay a fine and work towards earning citizenship."

In the House, Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3, and Rep. Christopher Shays, R-4, also support stronger measures to secure the U.S. and Mexican border and want a workable system for dealing with undocumented and illegal immigrants. Neither has lined up solidly behind any legislative proposal.

"I am torn in a hundred different directions on this issue," Shays said. "There are lots of moving parts here," DeLauro said. The immigration debate comes at a time when a majority of Americans are expressing dismay with the flood of illegal workers crossing the Mexican border into the United States, according to a Quinnipiac University poll released earlier this month.

The poll found "very serious" concern about immigrants "gathering on street corners, waiting for jobs, or packed into illegal housing and the like," said Maurice Carroll, Director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. American voters, by a margin of 62 percent to 32 percent, oppose making it easier for illegal immigrants to become citizens. And, by a margin of 54 percent to 41 percent, they also oppose making it easier for illegal immigrants to gain legal status.

The Pew Hispanic Center, a research organization in Washington, D.C., estimates that about 12 million illegal immigrants are spread across the nation. Connecticut's share grew from about 20,000 in 1990 to 80,000 in 2004.

During the 2004 fiscal year, 12,138 foreigners obtained permanent legal residence in Connecticut and 5,597 others were naturalized. The Greater Bridgeport area saw 1,659 foreigners given permanent legal residence and 936 were naturalized.

The top countries of origin were Jamaica, India, Poland and Haiti, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Myra Oliver, executive director of the International Institute of Connecticut in Bridgeport, said much of the political debate is driven by polls in an election year.

"The number of immigrants is bigger, there is concern about our economy and, of course, when we are at war there is not very much empathy for foreigners," Oliver said. "So, the issue has come to the forefront."

Oliver believes most of the illegal immigrants in Connecticut arrived with valid visas and just never left when the documents expired. Part of the problem is that the United States has not increased the number of legal immigrants that it will accept each year.

She also said that the immigrants are willing to do work Americans aren't interested in. "If you go through every landscape company and maid service you would find people here without proper documentation," she said.

Peter Gadiel, a founder of 911 Families for a Secure America, has been battling for stronger border protections since his son's death in the World Trade Center towers nearly five years ago. He worries that the nation's porous borders provide an easy path for terrorists to enter the country.

"To keep terrorists out you, have to keep illegals out," said Gadiel of Kent, Conn.

In February, former deputy secretary of Homeland Security Adm. James Loy testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee that they could "count on the next terrorist attack" being carried out by al-Qaida operatives crossing the border illegally.

"Recent information from ongoing investigations, detentions and emerging-threat streams strongly suggests that al-Qaida has considered using the southwest border to infiltrate the U.S.," he said.

"Several al-Qaida leaders believe operatives can pay their way into the country through Mexico and also believe illegal entry is more advantageous than legal entry for operational security reasons."

Congress should heed that warning, Gadiel said.

Gadiel believes the McCain-Kennedy bill is wrongheaded because it would essentially give illegal immigrants a free pass.

"My son [James] is dead because of people like McCain, Kennedy, Lieberman, Dodd and other open-border advocates. They are partially to blame for the murder of more than 3,000 who died on 9-11 and all the others who have been hurt by illegal aliens. Morally, they are guilty," Gadiel said.

The 19 hijackers entered the United States a total of 33 times. They arrived through 10 different airports, though more than half came in through Miami, New York or Newark, N.J.

During their stays in the United States, at least six of the hijackers violated immigration laws, according to the 9-11 Commission.

Shays said that a thorough national debate is needed to hash out all the varying viewpoints on immigration reform.

"It is a responsibility of the government to protect its borders. People who come here illegally are violating basic laws of the country," he said. "But the reality is there are more than 11 million undocumented workers

here and we are not going to send them all home. It is just not going to happen."

Shays said he supports expanding legal immigration — particularly to fill jobs in agriculture and some high-tech industries where it is needed. He also believes more money is needed to beef up security along the borders.

DeLauro agreed that serious border controls are needed and that employers should feel the heat for hiring undocumented workers.

However, she said it does no good to criminalize illegal aliens, as was proposed in an immigration bill approved last year in the House.

"What are we going to do, arrest all of them and deport them?" she asked. We need something orderly and something that is workable."

Dodd said the United States should do more to improve the economies of Mexico and other Latin American countries so that workers there won't feel compelled to head north.

"People leaving Mexico have jobs but they can double their income by coming to the United States," Dodd said. "They are doing what people have done throughout history to improve their lives. They moved."