**The Great Immigration Debate**

There's general agreement that America's immigration system needs fixing—but that's where the consensus ends

By *Patricia Smith*

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Five years ago, Ruben Arita journeyed from his native Honduras and crossed into the United States illegally. Last month in Washington, D.C., he joined hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in cities across the country, calling on Congress to offer legal status and citizenship to millions of illegal immigrants.

"We want to be legal," said Arita, 30, a construction worker. "We want to live without hiding, without fear. We have to speak so that our voices are listened to and we are taken into account."

The United States may be a nation of immigrants, but that hasn't prevented immigration from being a hot-button issue for much of the nation's history. The debate is especially intense now.

Since 2000, it is estimated that 850,000 unauthorized immigrants have entered the United States each year. There are currently more than 11 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., mostly from Mexico and other Latin American countries, but also from Asia, Africa, Europe, and Canada.

"It says something about our country that people around the world are willing to leave their homes, leave their families, and risk everything to come to America," President Bush said in an April radio address. But, he later added, "No one is served by an immigration system that allows large numbers of people to sneak across the border illegally."

Congress is currently considering a broad overhaul of our nation's immigration system, which almost everyone seems to agree is broken. There are, in effect, two broad approaches to dealing with illegal immigration.

The first is a get-tough approach, embodied by a bill passed by the House of Representatives in December. It would authorize the construction of a 700-mile fence along the Mexican border; institute a crackdown on businesses that hire illegal immigrants; and make it a federal crime to live in this country illegally, turning the illegal immigrants in the U.S. into felons, ineligible to win any legal status. It would also make it a crime for anyone, including American citizens, to give assistance to illegal immigrants. (For example, if you were to give an illegal immigrant a ride, you'd be committing a crime.)

The other approach—which seems to have more backing, both Democratic and Republican, in the Senate, and is supported by President Bush—is to create a guest-worker program and put most illegal immigrants on a track to citizenship, once they have paid fines and learned English.

Conservatives, like U.S. Rep. Tom Tancredo of Colorado, criticize this approach as essentially granting amnesty to lawbreakers. "It sends a terrible message to every single person who has ever come into this country the right way," he says.

The immigration debate involves several difficult issues. Lawmakers on both sides agree that in the post-9/11 world, the United States needs to do a better job of securing its borders. The question is whether a guest-worker program, which would provide a legal way for migrants to come to the U.S. to work on a temporary basis, would help control the flow of workers across the border.

Another key issue is the impact that illegal immigrants have on the economy. Do they lower wages for American workers—especially younger, less-educated Americans—since they are generally willing to work for less than American citizens would demand? Or do they simply take jobs, like working on farms, that Americans don't seem to want?

Immigrants, both legal and illegal, make up about 12 percent of the U.S. population. In historical terms, that's not unusually high: Immigrants constituted a record 15 percent of the population in 1910. But today's number is a jump from the early 1970s when immigrants made up about 5 percent of the population. What's more, according to Jeffrey Passel, a demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center, today's immigrants are largely Hispanic or Asian, which is a change from the predominantly European immigrants of the past.

**'Greatest Challenges'**

"This is one of the greatest challenges we face in our time—securing our borders, taking 11 million people out of the shadows who are exploited every day, fulfilling the job requirements we all know are necessary to ensure the economic future,'' says Senator John McCain of Arizona, one of the sponsors of the Senate immigration bill.

Staff Sgt. Jose Soto, 30, wore his blue Marine uniform to an April rally in Houston. He said he had fought in Iraq and was in Houston to visit his parents, who came to this country as illegal immigrants. "I've fought for freedom overseas," said Soto. "Now I'm fighting for freedom here."