

Selling Out to Silence by Tim Brooks

In the past hour, according to some estimates, eighty-one illegal immigrants have entered the country (*Immigration*).¹ Less than a year ago, immigration was a major political issue. New regulations were created for business owners to do background checks on their employees to make sure that they were legal citizens. Patrol cars were sent around neighborhoods with higher Hispanic populations to check IDs and identify illegal immigrants. New headquarters were created to help organize day laborers and keep them from loitering in public places such as parking lots (Cyr). Citizens and illegal immigrants alike participated in protests and rallies that attracted significant media attention.

In the recent 2008 presidential debates, however, this important issue has been pushed to the side. What has caused the sudden silence? Robert Samuelson of *The Washington Post* suggests that “Our leading politicians engage in consensual censorship to skip issues that involve distasteful choices or that require deferred gratification.” On the surface, we blame the silence on the deceitful politicians who use rhetoric to avoid answering certain questions. But if we look at the situation more closely, we discover a bigger issue: our current political and electoral process does not allow for discussion of complex and emotional issues.

To point out the obvious, the current economic crisis took priority in all of the presidential debates, and rightly so. The economy directly affects all Americans, whereas an issue like immigration might directly affect only a relative few. But the moderators and candidates have failed to make the connection between the economy and immigration. Not only does illegal immigration pose problems for the safety of our country, it is also a drain on the economy, as it increases the costs of social services for all Americans. This increase would become even steeper if Barack Obama’s universal health care plan, which would give nearly fourteen million illegal immigrants “the entire range of medical services, all free of charge,” passes both the House and Senate (Morris and McGann).

So why hasn’t John McCain brought up the issue in any of the debates? McCain could easily play off the emotions of his constituents. Not only does supporting “criminals” (illegal aliens) seem unfair, but how, other than taxing American citizens, does Obama propose to pay for covering the additional fourteen million people? McCain would seem to have a winning argument over Obama, *if* he decided to address the problem of illegal immigration and health care. As Dick Morris and Eileen McGann state in their *New York Post* article titled “O’s Health Rx: Cover Illegals,” “McCain needs to hit the Obama plan for treating illegal immigrants to free, federally subsidized health insurance – and hit it hard.” But McCain has declined to initiate what could become a heated debate in this election.

The political reality is that McCain cannot reveal the flaw in Obama’s health care plan without addressing immigration, a topic which is not only controversial, but also pits McCain’s views against those of his conservative Republican constituents’ views. McCain, with Ted Kennedy, introduced a Senate bill that would eventually allow illegal immigrants to become legal citizens so that they can pay taxes and become part of the American working class, an idea that appeals to McCain’s Hispanic supporters (Klein). The approach is almost a polar opposite to his party’s view that illegal immigrants should be prosecuted and deported (Babington). A *Dallas Morning News* editorial titled “Obama, McCain Avoid Immigration Reform” observes that McCain is “trying hard not to offend his conservative base,” which claims that the McCain-Kennedy bill would give amnesty to illegal immigrants. Since the immigration issue is not as clear-cut as politicians would like it to be, it is very hard for McCain to talk about. He can choose to stick by his more liberal beliefs

about immigration and upset his conservative constituents, or he can take the more conservative approach, ignore what he personally believes, and upset the Hispanic population by saying that illegal immigrants are felons and should be deported back to their country. Either way, McCain is in a losing situation.

As of right now, McCain is doing what his political advisers tell him to do: he is ignoring the issue. The politically correct move is to try to please both the conservatives and the Hispanic constituents, and the only way to do so without looking like a “flip flopper” is to not talk about the issue. Illinois Minuteman leader Rosanna Pulido has called McCain out for trying to please voters on both sides of the issue, stating to the Associated Press that “He’s one John McCain in front of white Republicans. And he’s a different John McCain in front of Hispanics” (qtd. in Antle). No matter which side of the issue McCain decides to take, he will lose votes, decreasing his chance of winning against Obama. Thus, the political system forces him to keep silent in order not to lose support from either constituency. If the presidential race were not so historic, or if McCain were not running for president, he could openly discuss the complicated immigration issue and perhaps be considered even more of a “maverick.” But because this race is so close and because he can’t afford to lose the support of either constituency, McCain has to remain silent.

On the other side, Obama has the momentum moving in his direction. The economic crisis has given him a winning case against the Republican Party. Obama’s best bet now is to keep the focus on the economy and hope that nothing else monumental happens—such as a terrorist attack—which could help the McCain campaign. Plus, if Obama were to talk about illegal immigration, it would come to light that his universal health care plan would support illegal immigrants. This revelation, of course, would have a negative effect on his campaign.

For these reasons, neither Obama nor McCain has stepped up to tackle the immigration challenge, at least not publically in the presidential debates. Our political system simply doesn’t allow for such a debate because “to discuss these issues frankly might be political suicide. It could alienate crucial blocs of voters...” (Samuelson). In fact, by putting such a relevant matter on the back shelf, the American people have lost the ability to vote in an educated way. An issue such as illegal immigration could be decisive to some and should be talked about publically to prevent voters from casting ill-informed ballots.

Furthermore, how we choose to deal with the issue of illegal immigration may redefine the character of this country. Our country began as the land of opportunity, a refuge for people from different countries to start anew and work to make something of themselves. Are our nation’s leaders going to make a decision that may redefine America without informing the public? America has been known as a “melting-pot,” but under what false pretenses will we be living if we choose to build a wall around ourselves? An open discussion between the two candidates about immigration needs to take place in these presidential debates.

We cannot allow our politicians to put aside debating an important issue just because it is the politically safe thing to do. It may be true that, as Samuelson observes, “Americans want to be told what government will do for them... and not what it will do for the country’s long-term well-being, especially if that imposes some immediate cost or inconvenience.” But choosing to ignore important and controversial issues, such as immigration, may have a more negative effect on the country than if we put politics aside and solved the issue now. Indeed, if we don’t talk and find a solution to the problem of illegal immigration, the economy will continue to be exhausted. Taxpayers will continue to pay for illegal immigrants’ children to go to public schools. Americans will continue to fight for jobs, especially in this state of recession, with some twenty million illegal immigrants.

Sadly, rather than informing the public and coming to compromise, politicians demand that we put the immigration issue on the back shelf, because, if brought to light, it could damage a campaign. But who are we as a nation? Is America the beacon of dreams and hope for a second chance? Can America tell its people who have risked everything in search of a better life to go back to their country with nothing? Are we all not immigrants? These are just a few of the questions we need to ask ourselves and our political leaders, for ultimately it is those we elect who will answer them. To ignore this issue, to not openly discuss it as an issue, hurts those who still believe that America is a place of new beginnings. It hurts those who want to help ensure that America is keeping its course in the direction that our founding fathers set for it.

This is no doubt a time of change in our nation; Obama hit that point on the head. There has been corruption, there has been a war on terror, and there have been advances in technology that we could have never foreseen. Is it not time for our politics to advance with us? With all the progress in the world, our current political system still inhibits politicians from talking about important issues like immigration because of the possibility of offending a certain voting bloc. The time has come to face important issues like immigration head on, and to come to realistic and bipartisan solutions.

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¹ Estimates vary widely, depending upon the political agenda of the source. It's important to note that precise numbers do not exist.