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Morality and immigration

President Bush said on Sunday he will find supporters in Congress and change the nation's immigration laws. He assured Mexico President Vicente Fox of his commitment to immigration reform and expressed optimism that he would be able to get a bill through Congress.

All of which has been said before. The question now is whether Bush has enough clout to move congressional leaders who so far have blocked any attempt to ease immigration laws.

Immediately following his reelection, Bush declared, "I earned capital in the political campaign and I intend to spend it." When Congress reconvenes after the holiday season, we will see whether the diehards in the House who have opposed a guest worker program are willing to sell what the president wants to purchase with his political capital.

Immigration reform is long overdue.

As a two-part series on child immigration showed Sunday and Monday in the Star, our current immigration policies lead to family tragedies.

In his comments on Sunday, Bush said, "We want people from Mexico treated with respect and dignity." The Star series demonstrated national policies that result in just the opposite.

The current laws are the worst kind of failure; they do not achieve their intended purpose and instead create hardship and tragedy for people already so hopelessly destitute that they will risk death to move to a place where they can find work and elevate their standard of living.

What we have seen over the years is that necessity is not the mother of invention; desperation is. To those living in a country where economic and social mobility is practically impossible - especially for people on the bottom rung of society - the risks involved in trying to get to a better life in the United States are nothing.

Immigration policy has been in a deep freeze since 1996, when Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. The law, a response to the Oklahoma City bombing, added thousands of new employees to the Border Patrol. It also appropriated millions of dollars for equipment needed to detect and intercept people entering the country illegally. This approach has been roughly equivalent to trying to extinguish a forest fire with a garden hose.

Enforcement alone will not work, since it does not deal with the circumstances that force people to leave Mexico in the first place.

It will not work because families torn apart by economic desperation will still risk life and limb to rejoin each other in the United States.

At the beginning of his first term, President Bush vowed to address the immigration issue, but the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, erased that item from the national agenda. Arizona Sen. John McCain has already met with the president to discuss the bill that he and Reps. Jeff Flake and Jim Kolbe introduced last year.

Immigration reform must be among the president's and Congress' top priorities. If indeed Bush has political capital to spend, he should use it to get House Speaker Dennis Hastert to move legislation that includes a guest worker program allowing Mexicans to enter the country legally. Doing so will save the country millions of law-enforcement dollars and add to the enormous sums immigrant laborers contribute to the economy.

Aside from the dollars, we expect the president to demonstrate the force of his moral values and work to end the

suffering of illegal entrants.

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