

America Turns the Corner at Last

On energy and immigration, the U.S. is ending decades of mismanagement.

by Conrad Black



As the election year progresses, more attention will be paid to the substantial settling of two of the greatest public-policy failings in the United States since the official end of racial segregation. For more than 70 years the U.S. was a sizeable importer of foreign oil, and for more than 25 years it was inundated with almost unsustainable numbers of mostly unskilled illegal immigrants, ultimately totaling more than 20 million people.

President Eisenhower lamented that the United States was importing 10 percent of its oil in the 1950s. He became so

concerned at the time of the Suez crisis in 1956 – when Britain, France, and Israel, in one of the most insane enterprises in the history of each of them, set out to take the canal back from Egypt – that Eisenhower envisioned rationing oil and gasoline in the United States to provide emergency supplies to Europe and planned for the swift construction of super-tankers to circumvent the Suez Canal, which he imagined might be closed indefinitely. (The British and French had pre-agreed to Israel's invasion of Sinai and pre-positioned forces in Cyprus, which then invaded Egypt after the Israeli attack, proclaiming they were "peace-keeping," all without any consultation with Washington. The Israelis did their part well, but the rest of it fell apart very quickly.)

Eisenhower's concerns were vastly exaggerated. There was no oil boycott or embargo, and the canal was closed for only a few weeks. But nearly 20 years later, when there was an Arab oil embargo and sharp price increases following the Arab-Israeli (Yom Kippur) War of 1973, the U.S. suffered serious inflationary pressures and hovered on the verge of gasoline rationing for two years. President Nixon announced "Operation Independence" to reduce reliance on foreign oil as a matter of national-security necessity. But nothing happened: Oil imports continued to rise, and by the mid-Clinton years they had reached 15 million barrels a day, 60 percent of American supply. Whenever Washington appeared to be seriously purposeful, OPEC (the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) lowered the world oil price until the U.S. resolve evaporated and the country flopped back to maximum oil imports.

President Carter wore a cardigan for some television addresses and advised Americans to turn down their thermostats. But conservation measures were tokens, and there was no political will to raise gasoline prices to reduce demand. It was debilitating to the country's balance of payments and made the

United States appear flabby and irresolute to countries that did not wish it well, despite its overwhelming and almost bloodless victory in the Cold War. There was a further dimension to the problem in the application of a substantial share of oil revenue by some OPEC countries to fund terrorism and other hostile and dangerous political activities (including large direct payments by Saudi Arabia to the extremist Wahhabi sect), particularly after the shah of Iran was replaced by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his Islamist theocracy, partially thanks to the Carter administration.

In this century there has been steady bipartisan progress back toward American energy self-sufficiency. American oil imports declined from 15 million barrels a day under Clinton to 10 million a day under President George W. Bush and 5 million under President Obama, and the United States is now an oil exporter. It has been late in coming, but it is an admirable elimination of a strategic vulnerability; America has added more than a cubit to its geopolitical stature.

The saga of illegal immigration across the southern border is even sorrier and is fraught with a great deal more human suffering. As is now notorious, lengthy sections of the U.S.–Mexican border are in rough country with minimal obstacles and surveillance. The natural flow from Central America and Mexico to the United States of people seeking a better life and the ability to send hard currency home is a longstanding phenomenon. For most of the time since the Mexican-American War (1846–48), it has been generally indulged, as some cheap labor has been welcome in the United States to do menial work and relieve some socioeconomic pressure in Mexico.

However, illegal immigration of more than a million unskilled and destitute people per year eventually put intolerable strain on the medical, public-health, education, and law-enforcement systems of the southwestern states. The Democrats

welcomed the votes, which they effortlessly harvested (ignoring the constitutional requirement of citizenship to vote), and the mainly Republican employers were happy to have the cheap labor, especially in the so-called hospitality industry. As has finally been adequately publicized, the political influence of these many millions of illegal residents became so great that many of the country's leading cities have declared themselves to be sanctuaries and local police have been ordered to ignore federal immigration laws. The whole legitimate basis of citizenship and statutory government has been undermined, and a veritable insurrection has been building for many years with the connivance of both parties and all branches of government. Candidate Trump in 2016 in effect denounced this policy of unctuous neglect as a conspiracy against the nation.

The Democrats have fought the Trump administration tooth and nail as it has sought to endow the country with a southern border. House of Representatives speaker Nancy Pelosi opposed spending even one cent to strengthen the border, declared any wall there to be "an abomination," and compared the border detention centers (which were set up in the Obama administration) to Nazi death camps. President Trump has managed to build substantial parts of the wall he promised his supporters, and has asserted such pressure on the government of Mexico that 27,000 soldiers of the Mexican army have been deployed in the approaches to the border, and the practice of Mexico facilitating the passage of large convoys of migrants from Central America through Mexico to the U.S. has stopped. For decades American politicians of both parties piously referred to "comprehensive immigration reform," but this was just a euphemism for doing nothing.

The Democrats have tried to prevent census takers from asking if American residents were citizens (in violation of the Constitution), and the big losers were the Democrats' former constituents in the lower ranges of the urban and rural

working classes. The pressure of illegal cheap labor stalled their standard of living near or beneath the poverty line for decades. They are now starting to thrive. The reduction, under this president, of illegal immigration by 75 percent has effectively ended a scandalous and cynical collusion of the bipartisan political leadership, which operated to the detriment of America's national interest and penalized America's most economically vulnerable citizens. It was a disgrace and a human tragedy and it is finally ending, after many years of ineffectual official flim-flam.

In this contestatious election year, these immense advances in national security and well-being will be appropriately recognized, on the hustings and in the voting booths.

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