

The Human Face of the Immigration Fight, Part II

Contributed by Len Sherman

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From The Globe and Mail: The thumping sound of helicopters overhead signalled to everyone in Postville, Iowa, that the town's 20-year bargain with illegal immigration was about to end. With military precision last week, federal investigators led by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement descended on the town's largest employer, Agriprocessors kosher slaughterhouse, with warrants for the arrest of nearly one-third of the town's 2,400 residents. In the largest immigration raid in U.S. history, 389 people were arrested in a matter of minutes, herded onto buses and interned at the National Cattle Congress Fairgrounds, 120 kilometres away in Waterloo.

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The conditions that brought the government to Iowa could be discovered in cities and towns across the country.

The Iowa slaughterhouse raid is part of a growing trend in the United States, home to anywhere from 12 to 18 million illegal immigrants, that has seen workplace immigration arrests grow tenfold in the past five years. Deemed illegal "aliens," this group has long been the focus of a fierce political debate, most recently in last year's failed attempt to reach a congressional consensus on immigration reform. That effort highlights the enduring tensions in this debate between hawks who want to clamp down on illegal migrants and pour billions into beefing up border security, and those — like the people of Postville, it turns out — who acknowledge that the migrants have earned a place in American society. The truth is, the Mexicans and other Latin nationals did not come to this land unbidden or unwanted. We tolerated this for 20 years, as a de facto national policy, sanctioned by local and federal government, by corporate interests, by small businesses, by Americans who wanted their children watched and their lawns trimmed.

At an emergency town meeting this week, Mayor Bob Penrod summed up the mood of an angry and confused town. "I've asked myself 100 times, 'Why us?'" he said. "We're just a small town in Northeast Iowa."

Postville's transformation began in 1987, when the Rubashkin family, Hasidic Jews from Brooklyn, N.Y., bought a defunct meatpacking plant on the edge of town. The town's population then was 1,400 and shrinking, but it got a boost with the arrival of a few hundred Hasidic Jews from New York and Israel. At a time when the entire meatpacking industry transformed itself by moving out of big cities to cut costs and undermine the power of unions, the Rubashkins, under brand names such as Aaron's Best and Iowa Best Beef, became North America's largest producers of glatt kosher meat, the strictest kosher designation. At first, they hired workers from the former Soviet bloc, some of them in the United States legally and some not. But as Stephen Bloom, the author of *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America*, puts it, the Eastern Europeans didn't work at Agriprocessors a day longer than was absolutely necessary. As soon as they were established, they moved on to better paying, less dangerous jobs. "All you need to work in meatpacking is a strong back and a strong stomach," he said. "The problem was that very few local Iowans wanted to work at the plant, because it's bloody and dangerous work, and the pay is quite low." As the Europeans moved on to better jobs, they were replaced in the late 1990s by new arrivals from Mexico, and then later from Guatemala, who were almost entirely undocumented workers. "This was America's worst kept secret," Mr. Bloom said. "Everybody knew."

Everybody knew, and everybody is culpable. So does everyone go to jail? Will the mayor who oversaw the community or the businesspeople who hired the illegals or the landlords who rented them apartments or sold them homes? And what of the teachers who taught their children and the grocers who sold them food and the clergy who ministered to them and doctors who cared for them? How far does the conspiracy extend?

Postville, a conservative town, is an unlikely outpost for pro-immigrant sentiment. As a state trooper said at the emergency town meeting, everyone was up in arms about the immigration problem after a murder involving two migrant workers a year ago, now they're upset about the arrest of the workers. "When this happened a year ago everyone asked, 'Why aren't we doing something about this?'" Well, something did happen now. "It's kind of damned if we do, damned if we don't." Still, the impression among many non-Latinos in Postville is that the federal government targeted the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Any discussion of the subject often begins with the phrase, "The law is the law, but..." "We got raped and we got plundered and we got pillaged

Monday. Everybody in this town ought to be angry," business owner Lyle Opheim said. Schools Superintendent David Strudthoff said the raid has been enormously disruptive for local children. When the helicopters appeared and word spread of what was happening, some students started crying in their classrooms. A third of the elementary school's 387 pupils were missing the day after, and about half of them were among the 400 women and children who sought sanctuary at St. Bridget's. Most have now returned to school, but 10 or so have already left permanently, and with the end of the school year looming, dozens of children whose parents face deportation are set to return to their native countries, including those who are U.S. citizens by virtue of being born here. "These people have been here 15 years and they're entwined in our families and in our community," Mr. Strudthoff said. "When 10 per cent of the population is imprisoned, it brings a community to its knees." Mr. Penrod, the town's mayor, wears a blue-collared work shirt with his first name stitched on the fabric. He thinks of himself as a straight-talker who gets things done, which is why he's so baffled by the state of U.S. immigration policy. How can it be, he asks, that everyone knows these workers are here, that they're needed, that they're willing to do the jobs that Americans won't do, and yet there seems no reasonable, legal way for them to enter the United States as guest workers? And, of course, the law is the law, but does it make sense to enforce it only once in 10 years? The stakes for his town are quite clear: Without a reservoir of cheap labour, the Agriprocessors plant may shut down, dragging the economic fortunes of everyone in Postville down with it. Already, immigrant families who avoided the raid are packing up and leaving because they're afraid, and that means local schools will receive less funding next year. "I'm like everybody else. Illegals, we got to control them," Mr. Penrod said. "But there has got to be reform to help these people. . . . I can't understand why the federal government can't do that."

In our democracy, we are the government. Thus, the question, Why can't the government stop illegal immigration? can't be answered without knowing a more basic question: Do we really want it stopped?