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SECURING THE NATION'S BORDERS (House of Representatives - September 21, 2004)

Mr. DREIER. Mr. Speaker, since the 9/11 Commission's final report was issued, we in this body have been working diligently to prepare legislation to improve our Nation's security. To that end, I want to talk about a paramount national security concern, and that is the security of our borders. I know many of us have seen this recent Time Magazine cover story which focused on the incredibly porous southern border that we have with Mexico.

I personally was absolutely horrified when I read this article, Mr. Speaker, on reports of human rights abuses perpetrated by ``coyotes" who charge exorbitant fees to lead immigrants illegally across the border, as well as Time's accounts of the heinous acts committed by some of those illegals. And clearly, having a border which people feel they can cross illegally at any time is a national security vulnerability.

We must recognize that the vast majority of people who are coming across our borders illegally are looking for better economic opportunity for themselves and their families. This does not justify illegal entry into the United States. So let me make it very clear, Mr. Speaker, ``illegal" means ``illegal." But it does mean that a long-term solution to our immigration problem will only be found when the economies of Mexico and the rest of Latin America provide better opportunities for their citizens. But the process of improving those economies, while underway, will be very, very difficult, it will take decades, and we obviously are hoping to implement the Ronald Reagan vision of a Free Trade Area of the Americas which will be very important to that.

As altruistic as Americans have historically been toward immigrants, we are, after all, a Nation of immigrants as we all know, we clearly cannot have foreigners illegally crossing the United States borders unbeknownst to our government. We know that international terrorists have illegally entered our country. That is why we must act now.

In this effort, I have been working closely with two great Americans. Those of you who read this Time Magazine article may recall the comments made by T.J. Bonner, a 26-year veteran still working as a border patrol agent, who is president of the National Border Patrol Council, which represents 10,000 border patrol employees. Bonner's first priority is to ensure that our border patrol agents have the backing they need to do their job. It is his plan, the Bonner plan, which I am introducing as legislation today.

I am joined by my good friend and Democratic colleague, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. Reyes), who himself served as chief of the border patrol in both McAllen and El Paso, Texas, during a long and distinguished career fighting to protect our border from infiltration. I am extremely pleased to have the support of Messrs.

Bonner and Reyes, for their expertise in border patrol issues is unparalleled. Our legislation gets at the root of the problem of illegal immigration, the draw of our strong economy.

We know why most people illegally cross our borders, as I was saying earlier. Jobs lure them to this country. They are seeking economic opportunity. We do not want to shut the door on that great American dream of opportunity, which is why we have programs where foreign nationals can legally migrate to the United States, can work and can eventually become citizens. But people who skirt the process and enter the United States illegally should not expect to benefit from the American taxpayer.

Under the Bonner plan, we will strenuously enforce laws which prohibit American businesses from employing illegal immigrants. Regrettably, these laws have not been regularly enforced. The laws are also undermined by the explosion in counterfeit identity documents and employers who are unable or unwilling to establish the authenticity of documents presented by job applicants.

Under our legislation, Mr. Speaker, we will dramatically improve the security of the very precious Social Security card by adding a photo ID and other countermeasures to reduce fraud. This same card will be encoded with a unique electronic algorithm to allow employers to verify each prospective applicant's work eligibility status prior to hiring, either through an electronic card reader or a toll-free number. Mr. Speaker, employers will face stiff Federal fines of up to \$50,000 and up to 5 years in jail if they knowingly hire an illegal immigrant or choose not to verify a prospective employee's eligibility. The employer would also then be responsible for the cost of deporting the illegal immigrant. With the new and improved Social Security card and verification system, employers will have no excuse if they are found to have hired illegal immigrants.

By eliminating the supply of jobs for illegal workers, we will end the incentive for illegal immigrants to enter the United States because they know that they will be unable to make a living here.

I fully recognize that a number of American industries, from agriculture to gardening and house cleaning and others, have come to depend on an ample supply of illegal workers. That is why I have long supported efforts to establish a responsible guest worker program to allow willing employers to match up with willing foreign workers and to allow those workers to legally enter the United States temporarily to work and then ensure that they return to their homes as scheduled. Coupled with a guest worker program, the Bonner plan will have a positive impact on our economy and on our prospective workers. Workers will only need to update their Social Security card once, to have their photo placed on the card and for other long overdue antifraud measures to be applied. A worker would only need the updated Social Security card when applying for a new job. I want to make it very clear that this is not a national ID card. This is not a national ID card, Mr. Speaker. In fact, the legislation contains language to ensure that the improved Social Security card does not become a national ID card and is only used to verify a prospective employee's authorization to work in the United States. Social Security cards are already routinely required to be provided to new employers. The changes we are proposing to the Social Security card take us no further down the road of creating a national ID card.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage my colleagues to join in supporting this very important effort that will, as Governor Schwarzenegger has said, encourage the American people and those who are looking to come in to play by the rules. This is a top national security priority for us. I hope all of our colleagues will join with us.