

Ridge's remark shakes up nation's immigration debate Factions assess idea of new 'legal status'

MICHAEL RILEY

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After two years of silence on the issue, a key member of the Bush administration dropped the policy equivalent of an atom bomb into the center of the country's divisive immigration debate this week by hinting that the administration may soon call for a major change in the country's immigration laws.

Opaque as they are, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge's comments Tuesday that "we have to come to grips with the presence of 8 to 12 million illegals, afford them some kind of legal status some way" have sent partisans on both sides of the debate to the barricades.

Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., said Ridge should resign if he is unable to enforce the country's immigration laws, while immigrant advocates said they sensed in the remarks a watershed moment in the Bush administration's stance on immigration policy. The administration has, until now, been coy in its dealings with the divisive and politically risky issue of offering immigrants some sort of temporary legal status that, depending on the specifics of the plan, could eventually become permanent.

"Ridge would not have said this if, in the high reaches of the administration in which he moves, this was not being talked about," said Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA, which advocates reining in immigration.

"It's hard to believe this was an intentional trial balloon. But by doing it, it became a trial balloon," he said.

Reflecting what he says is his concern that the White House may try to spin immigration reform into support from Hispanic voters before November's elections, Tancredo said, "If this is a trial balloon, I'm going to do my best to shoot it down."

Specifically what the administration may have been testing is still unclear.

Asked about Ridge's remarks, White House spokeswoman Claire Buchan told reporters that Bush wants to "match willing workers with willing employers," suggesting the president is still committed to some version of a pre-Sept. 11 proposal that called for a guest-workers program and the legalization of at least 3 million immigrants now in the country illegally.

But a spokeswoman for Ridge's office said the response to the remarks had been overblown.

"What the secretary did was acknowledge that there are several million people in the country illegally. He didn't call for the development of a new immigration policy," said Homeland Security spokeswoman Rachael Sunbarger.

Still, both sides said it was significant that of all the officials in the administration, the comments came from Ridge, whose department is charged with developing the administration's approach to homeland security, of which immigration policy has become a major component.

"When the country's top cop comes out in support of setting the undocumented on the path of legalization, that is the right direction for the White House to go in," said Angela Kelley, deputy director of the National Immigration Forum, an immigrant advocacy group. Experts say the amount of speculation over the true impact of Ridge's remarks stem in part from the fact that the question of what to do with the millions of immigrants now in the country illegally is among the biggest sticking points in the debate over how to fix the country's immigration system in a post-Sept. 11 world.

"The government should do absolutely nothing to reward illegal behavior. Any way it tries to rationalize that action, it's bad policy," Tancredo said.

Specifically, opponents point to the failure of the last major legalization program, an amnesty granted to more than 2 million undocumented immigrants in 1986. The amnesty did little to stop illegal immigration and created a legal avenue for millions of new immigrants who were brought to the country by their newly legal relatives.

That lesson in hand, Republican architects of a comprehensive immigration bill now before Congress say that under their plan, immigrants will have to pay a \$1,500 fine before legalizing their status. They also will be put behind workers who enter the country under a guest-workers program in the wait for legal residency.

"If you do not deal with both pieces of it, those people who are here in an undocumented status as well as those future want-to-be immigrants, all you do is create the next wave of immigrants who will come into the country illegally," said Rep. Jim Kolbe, R-Ariz, one of three Republican authors of the immigration bill.

Still, the political risks for the Bush administration to back such a measure would be enormous, and both sides of the debate are hoping to convince the administration that the votes are on their side.

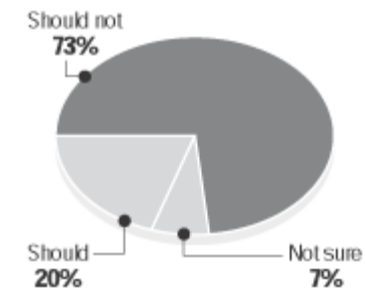
Opponents warn of a backlash of Bush's core Republican voters and point to polls that show most Americans don't favor legalizing undocumented immigrants.

The measure's proponents point to Bush's falling popularity among Latinos and suggest that a full-court press on immigration may reverse his sagging numbers in time for next fall's election.

"An election year is coming up and this is a key issue for the Latino vote that he wants. We're looking at Bush's next step very carefully and we hope he does the right thing," said Katherine Cullinton, a spokeswoman for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund in Washington.

Legal status for illegal immigrants?

Q: Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge has expressed support for legalizing the estimated 8 million to 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States. Ridge said that he does not think these immigrants should be given citizenship, since they broke U.S. law to come into the country, but that they should be given some kind of legal status. Do you think immigrants who came into the country illegally should or should not be given legal status?



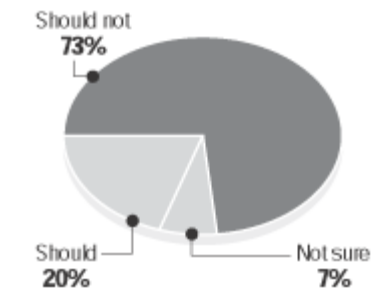
Telephone survey of 500 respondents conducted Dec. 11, 2003, in the Denver metro area. Margin of error is plus or minus 4.4 percentage points.

Source: SurveyUSA

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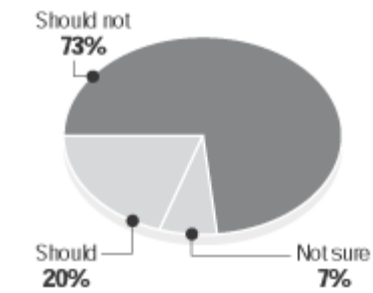
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