

Sadly, today's immigration debate familiar

TIMES
LEADER

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 23, 2006 PAGE 11A



WHEN Hazle-
ton's City Coun-
cil approved an
"Illegal Immigra-
tion Relief"
ordinance earlier
this year, it was

determined to make the town
among the most hostile places in
the United States for illegal im-
migrants to live or work.

The measure made it illegal for
individuals and businesses to aid
undocumented workers, punishes
landlords who rent or lease to
them, suspends licenses of busi-
nesses who hire them and makes
English the city's official language.
It also thrust Hazleton into the
foreground of a national debate on
illegal immigration.

Since the passage of the Hazle-
ton ordinance, similar measures
have been passed in Riverside, N.
J., Palm Bay, Fla., San Bernardino,
Calif., and states such as Colorado
and Georgia. These anti-immigra-
tion laws target a growing Hispan-
ic population and echo the com-
munity-driven Repatriation Move-
ment of the 1930s that forced
Mexicans to return to their native
country.

In both cases, the danger is
failing to distinguish between
illegal aliens, who are exploiting
the United States for jobs and
services, and those who are con-
structive immigrants intent on
contributing to this country,
whether they are legal citizens or
in the process of becoming one.

The Repatriation Movement
was triggered by the laxity of the
federal government in controlling
Hispanic immigration rates and
the most severe economic crisis in
American history.

In the early 1910s, the U.S.
Immigration service paid little
attention to the 100,000 Mexican
nationals who crossed the border
to escape the chaos and blood-
shed of the Mexican Revolution.
As a result, Mexicans continued
to immigrate in large numbers,
legally and illegally, into the 1930s.

When the Great Depression set
in, Los Angeles, which had some
175,000 residents of Mexican
descent, turned on the immi-

COMMENTARY

WILLIAM C.
KASHATUS

economic threat, taking jobs and
services away from cash-strapped
Americans. Others were accused
of increasing the city's crime rate.

The xenophobia resulted in
raids of Mexican communities by
local police searching for proof of
legal residence. A repatriation
movement followed and quickly
spread across America. As many
as 1.2 million Mexican immigrants
— legal and illegal — were driven
out of the United States as intimi-
dation replaced legal procedure.

The roots of the Hazleton ordi-
nance can also be traced to the
federal government's inability to
pass effective immigration reform
as well as xenophobia. A Senate
bill that would allow illegal im-
migrants to gain citizenship after
paying fines and taxes has been
thwarted in the House by an
anti-citizenship coalition which
includes Charles Dent (R., Pa.)
and Bill Shuster (R., Pa.).

While Congress continues to
flounder on immigration reform,
towns like Hazleton, over-
whelmed by a sudden influx of
foreign-born residents, have taken
matters into their own hands.

Republican Mayor Lou Barletta
and his supporters argue that the
growing numbers of illegal im-
migrants "are destroying the city"
by creating higher crime rates,
failing schools, and a diminished
quality of life.

The argument doesn't hold
much weight, though. Unlike the
poor economic conditions that led
to the Repatriation Movement in
the 1930s, Hazleton's economy
has been revitalized by Hispanic
immigrants.

Between 1948 and 2000, Hazle-
ton's population dropped from
38,000 to just 23,000 residents,
reflecting the steady demise of
once-flourishing mining and tex-
tile industries.

During the last six years, how-
ever, an influx of predominantly
Latino immigrants raised the

sparked new economic growth.
Hispanic residents started dozens
of new businesses in the down-
town area, according to Donna
Palermo, president of the Greater
Hazleton Chamber of Commerce.

The growing Latino community
also created a greater demand for
housing, resulting in an increase
in home values from \$40,000 to
\$90,000. Even Barletta, in an
October 2005 interview with the
Northeast Pennsylvania Business
Journal, admitted that the "pop-
ulation boom had brought the
city's economy to its healthiest
state in decades."

Contrary to the claim that
foreign-born residents have in-
creased the town's crime rate,
recent statistics reveal that since
2000 there has been a decline in
reported rapes, robberies, homi-
cides and assaults, and the num-
ber of arrests is also down.

At the same time, the Hispanic
community is not helping matters
by accusing Barletta and the city
council of "promoting state-spon-
sored racism" and bringing in the
New York-based Puerto Rican
Legal Defense and Education
Fund to sue Hazleton on the
grounds that the ordinance in-
fringes upon the federal power to
regulate immigration.

The goal should not be to rid
our country and its local commu-
nities of immigrants, but rather to
have those immigrants who genu-
inely wish to become constructive
citizens observe the legal process
for doing so and to force others
who have no intention of citizen-
ship to leave through appropriate
legal channels.

Unless our local and federal
authorities make a stronger dis-
tinction between these two groups
and the Latino community is
willing to assist rather than fight
them in the process, we will be
guilty of the same shameless
disregard for the rights of legal
American citizens that occurred in
this country three-quarters of a
century ago.

William Kashatus teaches history at
Luzerne County Community College
and contributes regularly to the