

Defining issue Immigration and Gunner DeLay

GUNNER DeLay, the state senator from Fort Smith, may have been more accurate than he ever suspected when he called illegal immigration the defining issue of the race to succeed Asa Hutchinson in Congress. It certainly seems to have defined him. Until he spoke about, or rather against, immigration, this contest had been marked only by the standard campaign fliers. Now everybody's started talking about an actual issue, one that might matter to voters. While he was at it, Gunner DeLay may also have defined himself right out of the contest by not only raising the question of illegal immigration but exploiting it. Which made him look suspiciously like a single-issue candidate. He found himself aligned with Americans for an Immigration Moratorium, a bunch that might better call themselves Americans Against Immigration, Period. AIM could hardly stop applauding Gunner DeLay's tough line. The state senator said he was even willing to consider stationing American troops on the Mexican border to stop the illegals. Our immediate reaction: Hands off the U.S. Army, buster. Our boys (and now girls) have enough on their plate without being ordered to do the Border Patrol's job, too. But it was a good, snappy applause line. Like many a popular platform, it was bold, clear and idiotic. Only when you think about calling out the troops does it become clear that such a move is only demagoguery, not a solution. There are millions of illegals in this country whose status needs to be regularized, maybe by a variation of the old guest worker or bracero program, so these people can work, pay taxes, send money home, be assured of decent treatment, and have their whereabouts known. Economic reality makes this country a magnet for such immigration. It can't be turned off, but it can be monitored and regulated. Just orating against it while neglecting the problems and opportunities immigration presents will only make things worse. OH, YES, Gunner DeLay also wants to cap the number of immigrants allowed into this country at 200,000 a year. That limit would barely sustain our various engineering faculties, ballet companies, Silicon Valley dotcoms, and revived inner cities full of Korean groceries and Vietnamese shoe repair shops. Not to mention Northwest Arkansas' chicken industry. We don't think it's just a coincidence that the largest increase in immigration since the 1920s has coincided with one of the longest economic booms since that same decade. The labor, ambition, and energy of these new immigrants may explain a lot about this country's economic vitality. If the faces of American immigrants change over

time, their importance in this country's economy doesn't. And neither, alas, do the fears they stir--from the anti-Irish sentiments of the [19th](#) Century to the current ugly talk about Hispanic immigrants. His scare talk may have endeared Gunner DeLay to the folks from AIM, but he was left in the awkward position of having to defend its embarrassing support for him. He went to some trouble to emphasize that the group hadn't officially endorsed him. And to justify his bringing up the subject of immigration, he even revealed some poll numbers--something politicians rarely do--which indicate that illegal immigration is a source of concern to most Republican voters in the district. Well, who isn't concerned about it? But concern is no excuse for rabble-rousing. Ol' Gunner's approach to immigration, with ax in hand and infantry, artillery and armor at the ready along the Rio Grande, brought to mind H.

L. Mencken's classic prescription for how to run an editorial campaign in the yellow press. Just substitute voters for readers, and you've got a fairly accurate summation of how to run a scare campaign for Congress: At bottom the business is quite simple: First scare the voter--and then reassure him. First get him into a panic with a bugaboo--and then go to the rescue, gallantly and uproariously, with a stuffed club to lay it. First fake him--and then fake him again. This, in substance is the whole theory and practice of the art

. it is the business of snouting out new and startling horrors, atrocities, impending calamities, tyrannies, villainies, enormities, mortal perils, jeopardies, outrages, catastrophes--first snouting out and exhibiting them, and then magnificently circumventing and disposing of them. The first part is very easy. It is almost unheard of for the mob to disbelieve in a new bugaboo. Immediately the hideous form is unveiled it begins to quake and cry out: the reservoir of its primary fears is always ready to run over. And the second part is not much more difficult. The one thing demanded of the remedy is that it be simple, more or less familiar, easy to comprehend--that is, that it make no draft upon the higher cerebral centers

. And what could be simpler than calling for troops and demanding that the gates be shut on this latest, awful danger: Immigrants! It is particularly bemusing to watch so many people descended from immigrants rush to the ramparts to fend off this looming enemy, namely themselves a few generations back. Gunner DeLay's approach to this question puts him at odds with two leaders of this state's Republicans: Asa Hutchinson and Mike Huckabee. Both have counseled

members of their party to adopt a more welcoming tone toward Hispanic immigrants, who will soon enough be Hispanic voters. And so will their very American kids. And when they're grown, these kids will remember how they were treated. They'll remember even more vividly how their folks were treated. And they'll vote accordingly. Our politicians would do well to remember such simple facts. Why alienate a large part of the population, with consequences that could go on for generations? Why not befriend the newcomers instead? It's not only the smart thing to do, but the right thing. IMMIGRATION is a complicated issue, wrapped up in questions about legal vs. illegal, the kind of jobs that immigrants move to Northwest Arkansas to take, economic conditions south of the border, and cultural differences that'll take Americans new and old a while to sort out. We recommend food, fiestas, and a common idiom, like Tex-Mex, to unite folks. (Could we call it Ark-Mex?) The first sign we're all in trouble is when people start thinking in terms of stereotypes, and talking about Them, instead of the real people they know, teach, employ, or do business with. We may be afraid of Them, but we don't fear or hate the Jos or Mar a we know and depend on, go to church with, or work with. Yes, all this needs to be talked about. Gunner DeLay's right about that. But it's the way we talk about it that will determine the conclusions we reach, and whether we come together in unity or tear our society apart. You'd think Arkansas had learned enough from the late unpleasantness of 1957 not to repeat that experience with this new minority. Let's hope so. Let's insist so. Hitting emotional buttons with loose talk about troops on the border and a drastic reduction in immigration only divides us, and encourages the kind of fear and anger we already have too much of. Those weren't happy folks at a recent meeting of AIM. It turned into a shouting match the police had to keep from becoming a brawl. Is this really the way we want to discuss these issues? Come, let us reason together--not just shout at one another. It's easy to say we need to talk our problems out. It's a lot harder to do that well, and keep cool when debating with somebody who thinks differently. Give Gunner DeLay credit for bringing the immigration issue to the table. But not for the way he served it up--hot and spicy and as sure to cause heartburn as bad refritos. Giving aid and comfort to the xenophobes among us is no way for a responsible leader to act, poll numbers or no poll numbers. It would be nice to think that Gunner DeLay will yet provide leadership on this issue, not just agitation. Slug Line: nwisue