

Everyday Citizen

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The Illegal Immigrant: Texan of the Year

By [Larry James](#)

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This year's choice was a shocker. Every year *The Dallas Morning News* names its "Texan of the Year."

He is at the heart of a great culture war in Texas – and the nation, credited with bringing us prosperity and blamed for abusing our resources. How should we deal with this stranger among us?

He breaks the law by his very presence. He hustles to do hard work many Americans won't, at least not at the low wages he accepts. The American consumer economy depends on him. America as we have known it for generations may not survive him.

Usually the editorial board selects some notable or news making individual. The feature article accompanying the announcement is definitely worth reading. Here's just a bit of it to whet your appetite for more...

We can't seem to live with him and his family, and if we can live without him, nobody's figured out how...

Given the public mood, there seems to be little middle ground in debate over illegal immigrants. Spectacular fights over their presence broke out across Texas this year, adding to the national pressure cooker as only Texas can.

To their champions, illegal immigrants are decent, hardworking people who, like generations of European immigrants before them, just want to do better for their families and who contribute to America's prosperity. They must endure hatred and abuse by those of us who want the benefits of cheap labor but not the presence of illegal immigrants.

Especially here in Texas, his strong back and willing heart help form the cornerstone of our daily lives, in ways that many of us do not, or will not, see. The illegal immigrant is the waiter serving margaritas at our restaurant table, the cook preparing our enchiladas. He works grueling hours at a meatpacking plant, carving up carcasses of cattle for our barbecue (he also picks the lettuce for our burgers). He builds our houses and cuts our grass. She cleans our homes and takes care of our children.

Yet to those who want them sent home, illegal immigrants are essentially lawbreakers who violate the nation's borders. They use public resources – schools, hospitals – to which they aren't entitled and expect to be served in a foreign language. They're rapidly changing Texas neighborhoods, cities and culture, and not always for the better. Those who object get tagged as racists.

Whatever and whoever else the illegal immigrant is, everybody has felt the tidal wave of his presence. According to an analysis of government data by the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies, Texas' immigrant population has jumped a whopping 32.7 percent since 2000, a period in which immigration to the United States has exceeded, in sheer numbers, all

previous historical eras. Half the immigrants in the state – 7 percent of all Texans – are estimated to be here illegally.

Though many would agree that the status quo cannot be sustained – more illegal immigrants arrive each year than legal ones, a sure sign that the system is a joke – neither Texas nor the nation seemed nearer in 2007 to resolving this complex crisis. We can't deport 12 million people who already live here, but we can't leave our back door open indefinitely. Compromise comes hard because the issue is tangled up with the most basic aspects of everyday life, down to the core of what it means to be American... (Full essay: [2007 DMN Texan of the Year: The Illegal Immigrant](#))

Yesterday, I attended a very useful conference sponsored by the [National Council of Jewish Women - Greater Dallas Section](#). It was most instructive to hear a wide range of public officials and leaders, including Mayor Tom Leppert, County Commissioner Maurine Dickey, DISD Superintendent Michael Hinojosa and *D Magazine* publisher Wick Allison - a group covering a fairly wide political spectrum -- all agree that our nation needs comprehensive immigration reform.

All called for the provision of a clear track to citizenship for undocumented persons currently living in the country. All were critical of local government bodies and law enforcement taking on this issue without clear public policy support from the federal government.

At last, voices of reason!

Several of these leaders also denounced the silly idea of building a fence. I loved Mr. Allison's line hearkening back to what Ronald Reagan once said about the Berlin Wall, "Mr. Bush don't build that wall!"

Clearly, most Americans favor reform that provides current immigrants an authorized way to stay in the U. S. -- on the order of about 2 to 1. Politicizing the issue has only served to bring out extreme spokespersons, as has been the case in our nation's past.

Dr. Hinojosa made a compelling argument for developing an education track for immigrant youth to be trained as public school teachers who could then fill the hundreds of positions needing bi-lingual instructors.

I've always wondered why we Anglos didn't insist that our schools teach everyone Spanish. Students working on two languages together might actually help one another and build a stronger America. And, in the process, they would eliminate the need for Spanish classes in college. Everyone could study French, Chinese, Russian, Farsi or Classical Greek!

Why are we so afraid?

Why so faithless about our neighbors?