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PRO-IMMIGRATION GROUPS STILL HOPEFUL AFTER TERRORIST ATTACKS

By Joe D'Amato

On September 7, 2001, newly-elected Mexican President Vicente Fox appeared with President George W. Bush in Toledo, Ohio. The joint appearance was meant to highlight the close relationship shared by the two recently elected leaders as well as the close ties both men were attempting to forge between Mexico and the United States. Also at issue was what was shaping up to be the key immigration policy debate in the Bush Administration—the possibility of amnesty for illegal immigrants, guest worker reforms, and the possibility of opening up the Mexican border. The tragic terrorist attacks that occurred just four days later shifted the focus of the debate from opening the border to locking it down.

Although President Bush repeatedly ruled out a blanket amnesty for illegal residents prior to September 7, he stated for the first time publicly that he was willing to consider an immigration policy that included permanent residency for some of the more than three million Mexicans living illegally in the United States. After the events of September 11, 2001, however, both the Bush Administration and Congress have devoted more of their energy to strengthening security at the border than to crafting immigration policy. This dynamic shift in focus has created a level of uncertainty that has left proponents on both sides of the debate wondering what the U.S. government will do next.

“If you sat in a room with a

bunch of immigration junkies or experts on the 12th of September, the default option at the end of the conversation would have been: ‘We’re going back to the 1920s. We’re going to slam the door shut,’” said Demetrios Papademetriou, co-director of the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington-based public interest group that studies immigration.

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Although a crackdown on immigration was expected in some circles, it never occurred. Instead, the Bush Administration has walked a political tightrope, separating the issue of immigrants and immigration from the nineteen Middle Eastern men who hijacked four commercial airliners. “These weren’t immigrants,” said James W. Ziglar, the Immigration and Naturalization Commissioner. “These were terrorists.”

The Administration’s distinction has left pro-immigration reform groups hopeful. “We’re breathing a sigh of relief to be honest,” said Angela Kelly of the National Immigration Forum located in Washington, D.C. “So far, not all immi-

grant groups have been tarred with a tough legislative brush.”

If pro-immigration groups are elated by the government’s attitude concerning the situation at the Mexican border, groups that favor deep cuts in immigration have shown disappointment. Instead of cracking down on immigration, the White House has opted to fortify border controls and has begun a reorganization of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in an attempt to separate its conflicting enforcement and service functions. Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, is not satisfied with the Administration’s efforts to reach a compromise between homeland security and the problem of illegal immigration. “It’s all border control or process issues, rather than the substance of immigration policy,” he said. “The tension between high immigration and homeland security cannot be resolved by organizational restructuring.”

Others groups opposing any type of amnesty view the immigration issue as one that has become too politicized. “You’ve got two political parties with their heads in the sand trying to play this ethnic politics game,” said Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, another non-profit organization favoring deep cuts in immigration. Even though Congressional leaders seem poised to renew talks on immigration policy, the White House has given no indication on when such talks will resume.