

“Our goal is to create a **beloved community** and this will require a **qualitative change** in our souls as well as a **quantitative change** in our lives.”

➤ **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

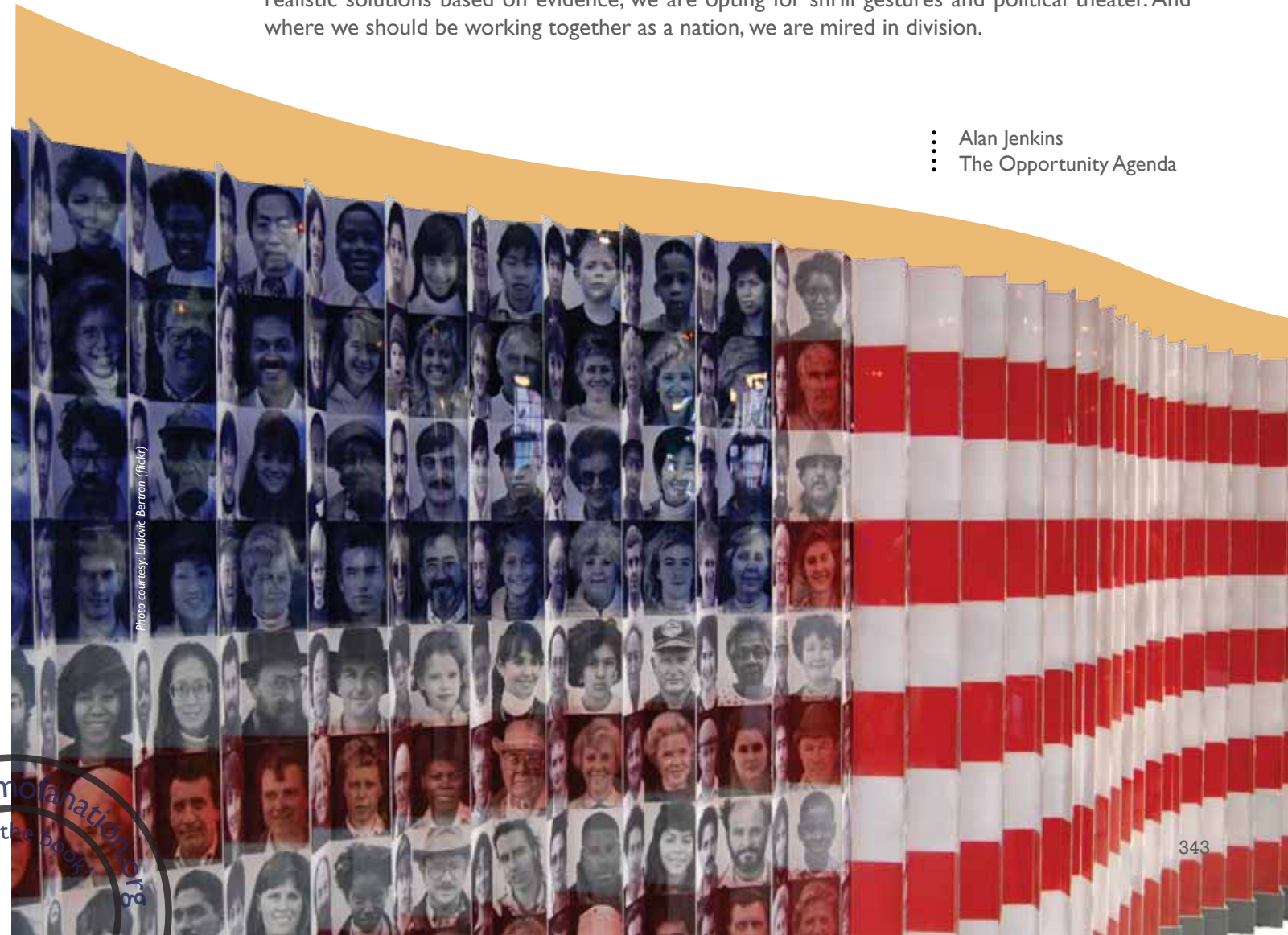
from the editor

Immigrants in America: Common Values, Common Dreams

America’s success has always been driven by a unique combination of core values, clear-eyed pragmatism and unity of purpose. It’s a fusion that has carried us through war and recession, through disaster and recovery and onward toward the quest of a more perfect union.

When it comes to the increasingly heated debate over immigration, however, we seem to have forgotten our national formula for success. Where we should be lifting up our core values of fairness and accountability, our policy discourse is spiteful and arbitrary. Where we should be seeking realistic solutions based on evidence, we are opting for shrill gestures and political theater. And where we should be working together as a nation, we are mired in division.

• Alan Jenkins
• The Opportunity Agenda



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This is not the first time that America has lost its footing on an important national issue. But neither is it too late to turn things around. When it comes to immigration, it's time for practical solutions that uphold our nation's values and move us forward together.

First, the Facts

Americans are understandably frustrated by a badly broken immigration system. Yet there is inadequate discussion of precisely how it is broken. There is simply no way for the 11 million undocumented immigrants

in our country to become legal residents or begin a path toward citizenship. The system for legal immigration is shockingly outdated and inadequate for the needs of American industry in agriculture and many other sectors, and the backlogs of immigrants with close family ties in the United States have made that process unworkable.

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Immigrants can also be a vital part of our nation's future, including our much-needed economic recovery. Even before we were a nation, those who chose to journey to the New World were people who wanted to rewrite their destinies, who wanted their stations in life to be determined by their own efforts rather than by the circumstances into which they were born. With them came an entrepreneurial spirit that time and again has led to innovation and progress.

In the 21st century, that innovation has often translated to job creation and a boon to the economy. In 2010, for example, approximately 340 out of every 100,000 Americans created a new business each month; the rate for foreign-born Americans that year was 620 out of 100,000—more than double the average.¹

“Immigrants not only help fuel the Nation's economic growth,” wrote Edward P. Lazear, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors to President George W. Bush in 2007, “but also have an overall positive effect on the income of native-born workers.”² A study authored by the Council went on to state that immigrants have lower crime rates than natives and improve the solvency of entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare. The dairy industry estimates that half of US farms rely on immigrant labor to put produce and dairy products in our grocery stores.³

Returning to Our National Values

Yet these new Americans' full contribution has not yet been tapped, due to our broken system. To avoid the threat of deportation, they are forced to live underground. Unscrupulous employers can and frequently do take advantage of this situation, opting to pay sweatshop wages—or not pay at all—because they know these workers have no recourse under the law.

While attempts to right this situation have fallen victim to partisan bickering and ideological arguments, we have too often witnessed the ills brought by misguided efforts to enforce the laws under our current broken system. In May 2008, federal officials conducted the largest immigration raid in US history at a meat-packing plant in Postville, Iowa. Nearly 400 workers—more than a third of the plant's employees and almost ten percent of the town's population—were taken into custody. The aftermath was akin to that of a natural disaster. Businesses were shuttered, including the meat-packing plant. Churches were empty. Half of the school system's 600 students were absent. And families were torn apart.

Policies that allow such actions are unnecessarily harsh and do not live up to our national values. Neither do laws like Arizona's S.B. 1070 and similar copycats, which single people out based on ethnic stereotyping and put cities and police departments at risk of significant and costly lawsuits. These efforts violate our cherished civil liberties and illustrate the America we don't want to become.

Protesters in Minneapolis, MN march on International Worker's Day, against immigration raids, deportation policies and the Arizona S.B. 1070 law.



Photos courtesy of Florinaca Blue (flickr)



Three generations of Mexican-American citizens stand together at a rally for immigration policy reform in the nation's capitol.

The Bigger Picture

While the frustration felt by many in Arizona and other states is understandable, a patchwork of draconian solutions will not solve our national problem. Those who focus on deportation and border fences are missing the bigger picture. Nearly 50 percent of undocumented individuals currently living in the United States came into the country legally, through a guarded port of entry, then overstayed their visas.⁴ Yet between 1993 and 2005, US spending on border security tripled—and some legislators are calling for more.⁵

Likewise, mass deportation is not a realistic option. In 2010, a record 392,000 people were deported from the United States.⁶ Even if that rate were maintained year after year, deporting 11 million undocumented immigrants would take nearly 30 years and cost over \$200 billion.⁷ More importantly, it would tear our nation and communities apart. These are people who work in American farms and factories, people who buy clothes and food for their families. In many cases, they are also people who have taxes deducted from each paycheck,

though they have no way to access that money later or get the full benefits of being taxpaying citizens. Removing them from the economy would reduce the US GDP by an estimated \$2.6 trillion over just the next ten years.⁸ And the human impact on families and neighborhoods would be staggering.

Our immigration system is broken, and Americans are hungry for solutions—workable, comprehensive solutions that address the entire problem. Above all, Americans value fairness. When asked, the majority of those polled said they would favor a solution in which undocumented individuals are put on a path to citizenship if they agree to learn English, pay a fine and pay back any taxes they owe the US government.⁹ That's a solution that works.

And in addition to reflecting our values, integration of the existing 11 million undocumented immigrants would bring in an additional \$66 billion of revenue from income and payroll taxes as well as various administrative fees.¹⁰ If there were ever a time for actions that

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bolster the US economy, that time is now. Continuing to sacrifice America's values and economic opportunities, solely for the sake of partisan bickering and ideological posturing, benefits no one but the politicians.

Though fixing our broken immigration system at the federal level would be the most efficient approach, there are a number of proactive steps that state legislatures can take to integrate immigrants living in their communities. Affordable courses for English-language learners typically have long waiting lists and are in need of funding. Wage and hour laws should be enforced for all workers, not just those with documentation. And implementing policies that limit police inquiry into immigration status, especially when working with a victim or witness to a crime, improves public safety for all.

Despite the negative rhetoric that has controlled the debate around immigration and held us back from national progress, there are civic and political leaders who understand the benefit of recognizing the reality of immigration, as well as the many contributions immigrants make and the value of integrating them into the fabric of society. Those who want to see positive change in our country must make their voices heard. Only when Washington hears a chorus of Americans demanding real, effective, values-based solutions will the bickering end and the action begin. We cannot afford to wait any longer.

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Alan Jenkins is executive director of The Opportunity Agenda (<http://opportunityagenda.org>), a communications, research and policy organization dedicated to building the national will to expand opportunity for all. His previous positions have included director of human rights at the Ford Foundation, assistant to the Solicitor General at the US Department of Justice and associate counsel to the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. Jenkins has also taught law at Brooklyn Law School and clerked for Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun and US District Court Judge Robert L. Carter. He holds a JD from Harvard Law School, an M.A. in Media Studies from New School University and a B.A. in psychology and social relations from Harvard College.

