

'Illegal' aliens: separating fact, fiction

BY TOM ROACH
Special to The Times

HERE has been much in the media these past few years about illegal aliens. Proposition 187 in California recently and three major pieces of federal legislation during 1996 have sent a clear message: Americans are mad as hell and they're not going to take it anymore. Illegal aliens are here taking American jobs and filling the welfare roles receiving taxpayer-funded government handouts without contributing anything in return. America has had enough and only legal workers will and should be working in America.

Although the sentiments expressed above are commonly held by many if not most Americans, they overlook some important facts that must be understood in order to better appreciate the phenomenon of illegal aliens in America.

It is true that illegal aliens are here working at jobs that Americans could do. The reality, however, is that, for the most part, illegal aliens do the work that Americans simply won't do. The overwhelming majority of illegal workers are cutting asparagus in the Columbia Basin, picking and packing apples in north-central Washington or pruning fruit trees in the Yakima Valley. Those illegals in Seattle, Spokane and Portland work at jobs like bussing tables at the restaurants and making beds at the hotels. American citizens for the most part would not even consider working at those jobs. The work is hard, the pay is low and the benefits are often non-existent.

With respect to the perception that "Illegals come here just to get on welfare," that is just not borne out by the facts. As an attorney whose practice concentrates in the area of immigration law, it has been my observation over the past 14 years that the latest wave of immigrants who have come to this country are here for the same reason my great-grandparents and yours came to this country: to work hard and make a better life for themselves and their families. The vast majority come here to work. They do not come to obtain government handouts. Those who choose to believe the myth that illegals come here to go on the public dole are simply misinformed.

In fact, there are many studies that indicate that illegal aliens actually are net contributors to the economy. Notwithstanding the public programs they might use — principally the public school system and health-care programs — the taxes they pay often exceed the benefits they obtain. Those taxes are the 8 percent paid on every cash-register sale, the property taxes paid by apartment owners whose tenants may be undocumented and the social security and other taxes that are routinely deducted from every worker's paycheck. The notion that illegals are living in this country on a "free ride" without contributing something in return is just not accurate.

The facts of the matter are these: For better or worse, the current situation benefits the three major segments involved. It is good for the illegal worker because it provides him steady employment and income, both of which are not available in most Third World countries. It is good for farmers, hotel owners and restaurateurs because it provides an abundant supply of reliable, low-skill, low-wage workers. Finally, the current situation is good for the American consumer. Whether the average American wants to believe it or not, this steady supply of low-wage labor is a major factor in keeping the cost of lodging, restaurant meals and food at the grocery store affordable for the average consumer. Americans should not forget that the percentage of the average family budget

that Americans spend for food ranks among the lowest in the world.

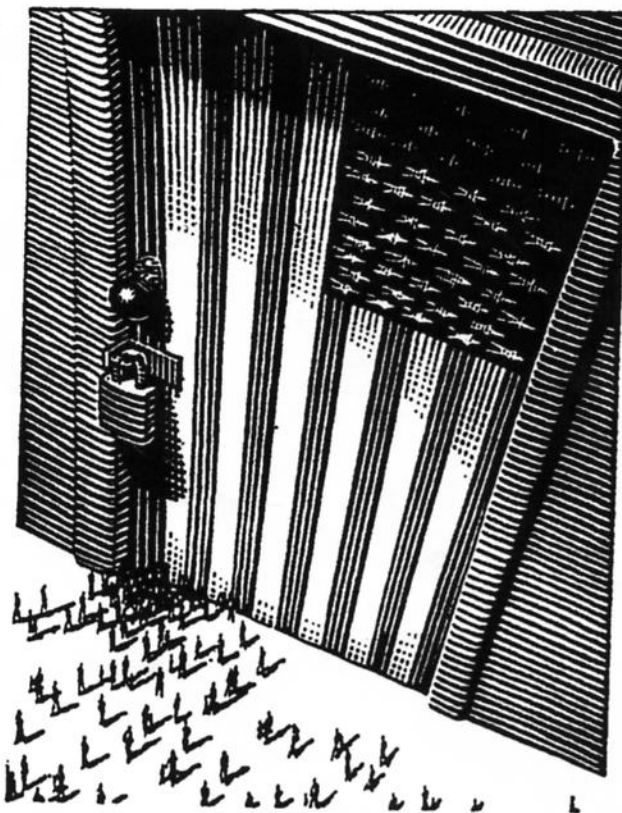
It should also be kept in mind that the rate of unemployment in the U.S. has been almost as low the past few years as it has been for decades. By and large, people in American society who want jobs have been able to find them. And those American citizens who are still looking for work are not seeking careers as farmworkers, chambermaids or busboys.

So, why all the alien-bashing? Why the hue and cry about the hordes of aliens inundating America? In my opinion, I think the Russians are to blame. For 50 years we had the Russians to fear, to demonize and to hate. But, now they've fallen on hard times and it seems that human nature seems to need someone else to kick around, someone to serve as the target of our anxieties. I believe aliens — both legal and illegal — have replaced the Russians as the new rallying point for America's anxieties. They are the ones to blame for problems found in America.

I understand that illegal aliens are by definition here in the U.S. in violation of the law. My purpose is not to deny that nor even justify it. My

purpose is simply to add some balance to the debate. Yes, these people are here illegally and work illegally. The jobs they do, however, are, for the most part, the lousy jobs in this society that nobody else wants. Their presence here is in many ways good for the average American. They do the work no one else will do, contribute to society in the form of most if not all the taxes you pay yourself, and help keep food, restaurant and hotel prices more affordable.

If that's not enough to make you revise your opinion just a little about "those illegal aliens," consider this: These people are human beings, just like you and me, who are trying to survive as best they can and give their kids a life better than they have had themselves. When viewed from that perspective, most Americans would probably agree that illegal aliens may not be all that different than the average American after all.



JOHN MACDONALD/OP ART