

EDITORIAL

Nuance

Changes to deportation guidelines bring fairness, balance.

SECURE Communities, the federal program created to target and deport immigrants identified as dangerous felons, ended up leaving many individuals and communities feeling far from secure.

Since its inception in 2008, thousands of illegal immigrants who had no criminal record, or had misdemeanor convictions, were deported. Under the program, police had to turn over the fingerprints of anyone they arrested to federal authorities to be checked for prior criminal records or deportation orders. Until last month, when the guidelines were changed, more than half of those marked for deportation

Not everyone who is caught up in the system of detention and deportation is a threat.

either had no criminal record or had been convicted only of misdemeanors, reported the Los Angeles Times, and only 30 percent were the serious offenders the program was intended to target.

Several states, legislators, police departments and municipalities and immigrant groups rose up in angry protest, and on June 17, John Morton, head of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, unveiled substantive changes in the program.

In a Chronicle opinion piece a week ago Sunday ("Prosecutor discretion in deportation cases just makes sense," Page B8, July 10) Geoffrey A. Hoffman, director of the University of Houston's immigration clinic, praised the changes for showing "an effort by the government at the operational level to make nuanced decisions about persons in removal proceedings.... Not everyone who is caught up in the system of detention and deportation is a threat to our country." We agree with his assessment. There is a vast difference, for instance, between pursuing a vicious career criminal and a victim of domestic abuse who makes a police report. Morton, in his change memorandum, gave agents several factors to consider.

These included how long a person has lived in the U.S.; military service, particularly in combat; education, graduating high school or college; community ties and contributions; relation to a U.S. citizen or permanent resident; or being an asylum seeker or a victim of domestic violence.

With 11 million or so undocumented immigrants living here, many of them contributing members of our society, it's good to remember those nuances.



A plan to move past debt status quo

United States needs balanced budget law

By JOHN W. DIAMOND

THE policy of brinkmanship on display in our nation's capital is a dangerous risk — one that could have severe consequences. While the current political squabble is trivial relative to the problems that will confront the U.S. in the coming decades, it is not unimportant. In fact, it could lay the groundwork that would force future policymakers to pass sustainable budget policies. To reach this outcome, the result of the ensuing debate should include both short-term cuts in deficits and long-term, meaningful constraints on future budget policies.

First, spending and tax expenditure cuts should be phased in moderately to minimize the immediate shock to the economy. A ratio of spending cuts to tax increases of at least 4-to-1 seems most reasonable, but a ratio of 3-to-1 as suggested by the administration is acceptable. The reduction in tax expenditures should take the form of eliminating deductions or credits (e.g., the deduction for state and local income taxes or the child tax credit) and should not increase marginal tax rates. The phase-out of deductions or credits for middle- and upper-income taxpayers should be avoided, because it increases marginal tax rates over a range of incomes for these taxpayers. The elimination of deductions and credits also spreads the burden of the costs of balancing the budget across all

taxpayers. A "tax-the-rich" strategy has three disadvantages: It creates disincentives to engage in economic activity and increases the amount of effort spent on avoiding taxes; it is based on class warfare and increases the probability that brinkmanship will end badly; and it does not spread the costs of paying for public goods and services among all taxpayers. The last point is important given that almost 50 percent of tax filers do not pay taxes, and thus are more likely to support unsustainable budget policies if viewed as a free lunch.

Second, we need to implement a balanced budget amendment in the United States. It is clear that politicians are incapable of spending restraint. Thus, the prospects of constraining future policymakers are bleak. Looking at evidence for state and local governments, NYU political scientist Shanna Rose found that imposing a system that requires a balanced budget appears to improve fiscal sustainability. She notes that stricter forms of balanced budget rules (such as rules that prohibit carry forward of debt) are more effective at improving fiscal discipline than weaker rules (such as requirements that governors submit — or state legislatures pass — balanced budgets). Any balanced budget rule should include a mechanism so that Congress could override the rules in times of economic crisis by way of supermajority consensus. Rules constraining revenues as a share of gross domestic product should be avoided to reduce the potential for brinkmanship ending in economic disaster. The focus should be on producing a strong budget rule with moderate flexibility in times of

economic crisis. The rule should allow for automatic stabilizers (e.g., unemployment benefits) that offset cyclical changes in the economy.

Implementing these two steps would eventually lead to a sustainable fiscal policy scenario. The immediate spending cuts would boost confidence that the U.S. will deal with its fiscal problems and increase the prospect for long-term growth. For example, the Congressional Budget Office estimated that a phased-in reduction in the primary budget deficits of \$2 trillion over the next 10 years would decrease gross national product (GNP) by 0.1 percent to 0.6 percent in 2012-2014 but would increase GNP by 0.5 percent to 1.4 percent in 2019-2021. A strict balanced budget amendment, which maintained fiscal flexibility by requiring a supermajority vote for new deficit spending, would constrain future policymakers to adopt affordable legislation but also allow for policy responses in times of economic downturns. In addition, reforming the nation's tax code to increase economic efficiency, simplify the tax code and reduce administrative costs would lessen the burden of raising the funds to pay for publicly provided goods and services.

Failing to change the status quo — or a failure to avoid a U.S. default — will result in huge financial costs that will burden current and future generations. It is not too late to change our path on our own terms, but we are dangerously close to the precipice.

Diamond is the Edward A. and Hermena Hancock Kelly Fellow in Public Finance at the Baker Institute at Rice University.

Politician-created crisis was avoidable



E.J. DIONNE JR. says many members of Congress should have their pay docked for wasting time instead of solving the problem.

THE House Republican strategy to link a normally routine increase in the nation's debt limit with a crusade to slash spending has already had a high cost, threatening the nation's credit rating and making the United States look dysfunctional and incompetent to the rest of the world.

But that's not the most awful thing about it.

What's even worse is this entirely artificial, politician-created crisis has kept government from doing what taxpayers expect it to do, which is to solve problems that citizens care about.

The most obvious problem is unemployment. The best way short-term to drive the deficit down is to spur growth and get Americans back to work. Has anyone noticed that Americans with jobs can provide for their families, put money into the economy — and, oh yes, pay taxes that increase revenues and thus cut the deficit?

There are some entirely obvious steps government can take. Ramping up public works spending is a twofold: It creates jobs upfront and provides the nation's businesses and workers the ways and means to boost their own productivity down the road.

Wise infrastructure spending can save energy. And when public works investments are part of metropolitan plans for smarter growth, they can also ease congestion, reduce commuter times and give our citizens back valuable minutes or hours they waste in traffic. If you

want a pro-family policy, this is it.

State and local budgets all across the country are a shambles. Teachers, police, firefighters, librarians and other public servants are being laid off. As The New York Times' David Leonhardt pointed out recently, even as the private economy has been adding jobs, if too slowly, state and local governments have hemorrhaged about half a million jobs in two years.

President Obama knows this. "As we've seen that federal support for states diminish, you've seen the biggest job losses in the public sector," he said in his July 11 news conference. "So my strong preference would be for us to figure out ways that we can continue to provide help across the board."

So why not do it? "I'm operating within some political constraints here," Obama explained, "because whatever I do has to go through the House of Representatives."

Excuse me, Mr. President, but if you believe in this policy, why not propose it and fight for it? Leadership on jobs is your central job right now. Let the Republicans explain why they want more cops and teachers let go, or local taxes to rise.

There is also an extension of the payroll tax reduction instituted last year and of unemployment insurance. Why so little discussion of how balky Republicans have been on this Obama tax cut, or how resistant they have been to further help to the unemployed?

The Republicans won't raise taxes on

LETTERS

Start fighting

REGARDING "GOP Caucus gets school cuts passed" (Page A1, June 29), I find it irresponsible of our state Legislature to cut educational funding by unconscionable amounts, thus putting more responsibility on our teachers by

(1) increasing class size and (2) reducing their pay.

The House was clearly divided on this issue because the bill initially failed, there were meetings, and then it was passed. Democratic leader Jessica Farrar, D-Houston, reportedly joked after the meetings that a few of her Republican colleagues suffered broken kneecaps.

That sounds more like coercion than negotiating.

Broken kneecaps are fightin' words.

I implore our government to start fighting for us, the public, and do what is right for the people you work for. Start acting reasonably and responsibly, and you won't need to worry about getting re-elected.

The money our government spends is ours; it belongs to the public. Our government's role is to manage this money in a reasonable and responsible manner. Apparently they can do neither. Has the House or Senate considered reducing their own pay or benefits? Or would that be too difficult a decision?

Our federal government threw buckets of money at reckless financial institutions that played a large role in causing the current recession and has yet to pass any substantial reform of them. Now our state government is penalizing teachers and children who played no role in bringing down the economy. Could it be because our children can't vote?

— SCOTT MILLER, Spring

Tearful setting

REGARDING "Murder trial set in fatal fire at day care" (Page B1, Thursday), attorney Mike DeGeurin, in describing Jessica Tata's tearful reaction to the lengthy charges against her being read, stated, "It's overwhelming."

May I remind Mr. DeGeurin that for the parents of the children who died in his client's care, it was also "overwhelming."

— NORMAN DIAZ, Cypress

A new low

REGARDING "McConnell offers Obama new debt limit authority" (Page A4, Wednesday), it seems as though our president has sunk to a new low by using Chicago scare tactics just to get his own way in the budget crisis.

To scare seniors with the threat of withholding their Social Security checks is cruel and very immature. It may be time for our federal legislators give up some of the very nice perks they have always enjoyed.

It is time they are responsible for their own travel expenses and their own liquor tabs. They need to stay home and just eat their peas.

— LINDA ANDERSON, The Woodlands

Cheating not new

REGARDING "Signs of cheating at HISD" (Page A1, Thursday), Dr. Grier doth protest too much. TAKS cheating starts at the top, not the bottom. For years HISD has reacted with endless apologies and excuses for TAKS cheating.

The hidden message from top administrators has been that TAKS cheating is encouraged to give the public a false impression of school improvement. Whistleblowers are harassed out of their jobs, not cheaters who are usually given promotions and lucrative bonuses.

Under Grier's tenure, honest teachers have been fired or laid off while cheaters have kept their jobs. Same is true for honest principals who refuse to bilk TAKS testing to further their careers.

TAKS cheating is expensive and undermines the mission of the district to educate our children for the future.

— JON DANSBY, Houston

BIBLE VERSE

Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us: for we are exceedingly filled with contempt. Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scornings of those that are at ease, and with the contempt of the proud.

— PSALM 123: 3-4

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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