

5.23.24 Senator Padilla Floor Speech Opposing Immigration Bill

Mr. President,

When I was a kid growing up, the last thing I thought I'd do when I grew up was to be involved with government and politics.

But when I returned home from college, I came home to California to find hateful TV ads warning of an “invasion” at our border. These were in support of a ballot measure demonizing immigrant families and communities — like mine.

A generation of Latinos in California grew up knowing that officials who were elected to represent us were actually more than happy to scapegoat our families as the root cause of the state's challenges.

But instead of putting our head down and waiting for the political tides to turn, my generation decided to get involved.

And we started a movement that put more people from our communities into positions of power.

Now three decades later, the State of California is not just home to more immigrants than any other state in the nation, we also represent the largest economy of any state in the nation. That's not a coincidence.

But sadly, today, we're also seeing some of the same hateful rhetoric once again. And when I hear it, I feel it.

And I think about my children, and a whole new generation of Latinos across the country that see leaders of the Republican party demonizing immigrants and people who look like us;

Yes, the Republican presidential nominee warns that immigrants are “poisoning the blood” of our nation — echoing rhetoric from Nazi Germany. That's happening!

I even had to come down to this very chamber earlier this year, just a couple months ago, to object to one of our colleagues seeking to declare an “invasion” at our southern border.

That's the moment we're in . . .

And it's an undeniable part of the context in which the bill that we're going to be voting on soon was written.

The proposal before us was initially supposed to be a concession — a ransom to be paid to Republicans to pass urgent and critical aid to Ukraine. Not my words, theirs.

The proposal was three months ago. But guess what, Mr. President. We passed the foreign aid! It was the right thing to do.

And so I can't help but ask, what's this concession for now?

Because it surely cannot be our new starting point for negotiating immigration reform.

Mr. President, I'm disappointed. Because this bill contains some of the same tried and failed policies that would actually make the situation worse at the southern border.

It includes arbitrary border closures and will practically eliminate the right to seek asylum for people fleeing for their safety or for their very lives.

Many of us have acknowledged, both sides of the aisle, in both formal conversations and informal conversations, that one of the biggest reasons that so many people come to the southern border is because it's so hard to come to the United States legally.

So I look at this bill, and guess what? It fails to address the root causes of migration or to establish more lawful pathways.

And it's not just what's in the bill that troubles me; it's what's not in the bill.

If enacted, this bill would fail to provide relief for a single Dreamer, for a single farm worker, or a single essential worker or long-term resident of the United States who has been here for years, in some cases decades, working, paying taxes, contributing to the strength of our communities and our country and the success of our economy.

So the Senate is voting on this package for a second time, but still no vote on the DREAM Act?! Which, by the way, does enjoy bipartisan support. It's hard to swallow.

And there's more. We hear that there's some extreme executive actions are coming soon.

Now, for as much as has been accomplished by this body, this chamber has also served as the backdrop for some of the most vile rhetoric in our nation's history.

The same hatred that met Irish and Italian immigrants coming through Ellis Island permeated these walls to help pass the Chinese Exclusion Act, before spreading west to villainize immigrants from Mexico and Latin America at our southern border.

And every time political leaders villainize immigrants, communities like mine feel the effects.

Just ask any Latino kid who's been told to go back to where they came from.

Ask anyone speaking Spanish in America who's been told to just "Speak English."

Ask any Asian American who was harassed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Colleagues, what chapter of our nation's history are we choosing to write today?

I ask because yes, there will come a time when history judges us. And what will you say? Will you say that you worked to defend the American Dream for future generations? Or settle and deny opportunity for future generations.

Today, countless immigrants and children of immigrants will ask whether Republicans and Democrats will leave them behind once again.

Colleagues, I urge you to vote no today and to be more thoughtful in how we address border safety.

I urge you to join me in staying true to our values in modernizing our immigration system.

I urge you to join me today in doing what's right for Dreamers, farm workers, and other long-term undocumented members of our communities.

They deserve better. And we should be better than this.

I yield the floor.

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