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Someday, the country will recognize the true cost of its war on illegal immigration. We don¹t mean dollars, though those are being squandered by the billions. The true cost is to the national identity: the sense of who we are and what we value. It will hit us once the enforcement fever breaks, when we look at what has been done and no longer recognize the country that did it.

A nation of immigrants is holding another nation of immigrants in bondage, exploiting its labor while ignoring its suffering, condemning its lawlessness while sealing off a path to living lawfully. The evidence is all around that something pragmatic and welcoming at the American core has been eclipsed, or is slipping away.

An escalating campaign of raids in homes and workplaces has spread indiscriminate terror among millions of people who pose no threat. After the largest raid ever last month ‹ at a meatpacking plant in Iowa ‹ hundreds were swiftly force-fed through the legal system and sent to prison. Civil-rights lawyers complained, futilely, that workers had been steamrolled into giving up their rights, treated more as a presumptive criminal gang than as potentially exploited workers who deserved a fair hearing. The company that harnessed their desperation, like so many others, has faced no charges.

Immigrants in detention languish without lawyers and decent medical care even when they are mortally ill. Lawmakers are struggling to impose standards and oversight on a system deficient in both. Counties and towns with spare jail cells are lining up for federal contracts as prosecutions fill the system to bursting. Unbothered by the sight of blameless children in prison scrubs, the government plans to build up to three new family detention centers. Police all over are checking papers, empowered by politicians itching to enlist in the federal crusade.

This is not about forcing people to go home and come back the right way. Ellis Island is closed. Legal paths are clogged or do not exist. Some backlogs are so long that they are measured in decades or generations. A bill to fix the system died a year ago this month. The current strategy, dreamed up by restrictionists and embraced by Republicans and some Democrats, is to force millions into fear and poverty.

There are few national figures standing firm against restrictionism. Senator Edward Kennedy has bravely done so for four decades, but his Senate colleagues who are running for president seem by comparison to be in hiding. John McCain supported sensible reform, but whenever he mentions it, his party starts braying and he leaves the room. Hillary Rodham Clinton has lost

her voice on this issue more than once. Barack Obama, gliding above the ugliness, might someday test his vision of a new politics against restrictionist hatred, but he has not yet done so. The American public¹s moderation on immigration reform, confirmed in poll after poll, begs the candidates to confront the issue with courage and a plan. But they have been vague and discreet when they should be forceful and unflinching.

The restrictionist message is brutally simple ‹ that illegal immigrants deserve no rights, mercy or hope. It refuses to recognize that illegality is not an identity; it is a status that can be mended by making reparations and resuming a lawful life. Unless the nation contains its enforcement compulsion, illegal immigrants will remain forever Them and never Us, subject to whatever abusive regimes the powers of the moment may devise.

Every time this country has singled out a group of newly arrived immigrants for unjust punishment, the shame has echoed through history. Think of the Chinese and Irish, Catholics and Americans of Japanese ancestry. Children someday will study the Great Immigration Panic of the early 2000s, which harmed countless lives, wasted billions of dollars and mocked the nation¹s most deeply held values.