

'Fourth of July'

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The week of July 4 is one of my favorite times of the year. Not only do we celebrate our nation's birthday--and mine!--but I also have the great honor each summer to speak at our local naturalization ceremony.

Today I am proud to be speaking in Castroville, congratulating scores of new citizens on their successful journey through our convoluted citizenship process--and I couldn't be happier. It's an honor to pay tribute to the newest participants in the American experience, and I hope to continue this tradition for many years to come.

But my pride is tempered by a growing tension. It has become a trend to demonize and scapegoat another segment of our immigrant population, the impoverished and unprotected people who make up our undocumented immigrant population.

Politicians and media pundits use fear and anger to drive a campaign against society's most vulnerable. No member of Congress, myself included, favors having 12 million individuals in our country without knowledge of their intention or location. But there is no silver bullet for this problem. Enforcement is only one piece of the solution, and rest assured, it remains a priority for any comprehensive immigration reform.

Some would suggest we round up all 12 million undocumented individuals in our country and deport them. Not only is this unrealistic, it would also have a dramatic effect on all levels of our economy. Hospitality and service industries would suffer without sufficient employees, and our own local farms would experience extreme hardship.

There are even those who oppose legal immigration, suggesting that legal immigrants are taking good American jobs. While I agree that Congress should take a closer look at how private companies are using programs like the H1-B visa, many of our new arrivals are often

highly skilled professionals. With American schools churning out fewer scientists and engineers, our high-tech industries would lag far behind competitors such as India and China without this injection of talented immigrants.

Last week, a Senate vote effectively ended hopes for comprehensive reform this year. There were several reasons that bill was defeated. Some felt it was too weak, others that it was too strong. But the bottom line is that the status quo is no longer acceptable. Those opposed to "amnesty" for undocumented individuals offer just that by not voting for a bill. Those who desire more secure borders vote for weaker borders when they block the process.

Those of us in Congress who support a better system will try again next year, and the year after that if necessary. The path won't be an easy one, and there's no guarantee of success, but it's the right thing to do.

In the meantime, I hope each of you will make an effort to welcome new citizens to our community. Welcome them with open arms. After all, most of us (including those immigrant bashers) have ancestors who took a similar path. I'm proud to be an American, and never more than when I shake hands with a brand new citizen.