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OPINION

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## Build bridges, not fences

The key to Mexican immigration is investment and economic cooperation.

By Robert A. Pastor

**T**HE ELECTION of a Democratic majority in Congress and the inauguration of Felipe Calderon as president of Mexico offer our two countries an opportunity to reinvigorate a deteriorating relationship and, at the same time, build confidence in the idea of a true North American community. To do so, the new leaders must change the agenda from illegal immigration to North American development and resolve to narrow the income gap between Mexico and its two northern neighbors.

Since President Bush took office in 2001, the percentage of Mexicans and Canadians polled who view the United States favorably has declined by half. There are many reasons, the most recent being the plan to build a 700-mile wall between Mexico and the United States, after Bush had promised a "comprehensive" immigration bill.

Early in their presidencies, Mexican President Vicente Fox and Bush made the mistake of putting immigration at the top of the agenda. Migration is a net cost to Mexico and a net benefit to the United States, but conventional wisdom in the two countries begins with the opposite premise. Many Mexicans see migration to the United States positively as an "escape valve" and a source of remittances, while Americans exag-

gerate the costs to the United States.

The main reason that emphasizing immigration was a mistake is that the United States won't do the two things necessary to stem the flow of migrants: strict enforcement of employer sanctions for hiring illegal workers (because business wants a cheap, docile workforce) and creation of a fraud-proof national identification card (because it is expensive and some view it as intrusive).

Without these two measures, we should blame ourselves, not Mexico, for failing to stop illegal migration.

However, for a long-term solution, we need to take another step. Migrants come to the United States for higher income, and so the only way to stop them is to narrow the income gap between Mexico and its northern neighbors. The North American Free Trade Agreement succeeded in stimulating the economy of northern Mexico because of its proximity to the United States. The north grew 10 times faster than the south, but it served as a magnet, pulling labor from the south. Part of the solution to Mexico's development problem should be to extend NAFTA to the south with new highways. And then the jobs would follow.

Bush and Calderon should work with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to create a North American Investment Fund to invest \$20 billion a year for a decade in infrastructure — roads, ports, railroads, communications — to connect the southern part of Mexico with the lucrative North American market. Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas) has introduced a little-noticed bill for such a fund. The three leaders should

support it.

The United States is unlikely to give any aid to Mexico unless Washington is convinced that the funds will be well spent. That is why we should take note of Calderon's comments to Bush at their meeting Nov. 9 and hold him to them: "I did not come to the U.S. looking for the Americans to solve Mexico's problems. We have to solve them on our own." If Mexico undertakes needed reforms on energy, electricity, education, labor and taxes, and puts up half of the money for the North American Investment Fund, the U.S. and Canada should pledge the other half.

Such an initiative would not only begin to heal the political and economic division within Mexico, it also would stimulate the second-largest, but potentially fastest-growing, market for U.S. goods.

And although it would not stop illegal migration soon, if the initiative succeeded in doubling Mexico's growth rate, the income gap with the U.S. would be reduced by 20% in a decade, and Mexicans would begin to think about their future in Mexico rather than seek jobs to the north.

The U.S., Canada and Mexico should stop debating NAFTA and blaming each other for migration and begin collaborating to make the continent more competitive, as they work to integrate a developing country into a First World economy.

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