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Who Likes the Immigration Bill?; A Back Door For Terrorists

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AMID all of the xenophobia and nativism surrounding the immigration debate, there is a real security concern. In the language of the bureaucracy, the problem is referred to as the "O.T.M.'s," or Other Than Mexicans.

Thousands of non-Mexicans are caught crossing the United States border every year. They cannot be sent back to Mexico, but must be deported to their home country. Until recently, most were given a deportation hearing date and then simply released. Not surprisingly, few showed up for their scheduled appearances. Beginning last year, however, most who are caught are put into detention. They are then put through a procedure called expedited removal, under which many are flown back home within a few weeks.

Many of these non-Mexicans come from Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, the Palestinian territories and other areas of concern to counterterrorism officials. What we don't know is how many others are evading the Border Patrol every year and what happens to them when they leave the border area. It's not too hard to imagine that these illegal immigrants, who have clearly spent a lot of money getting to Mexico and then into the United States, are able to buy themselves an identity and corroborating papers once in an American city.

Since 9/11, it has been far more difficult to get a visa to enter the United States if you are a citizen of a country considered a terrorism concern. But it is not difficult for a Pakistani, for example, to enter Mexico or another Central American country from which he can get to our border relatively easily, cross it and blend in.

The Real ID Act of 2005, which among other things established standards for state-issued driver's licenses and non-driver's identification cards, has now been put off until at least 2009. And many states are in open revolt against its tough requirements for issuing driver's licenses.

The result is that potential terrorists here illegally can easily use phony licenses or, in many states, get real ones issued to them, along with credit cards and all of the other papers needed to blend into our society. (The only places in this country that seem to check the validity of drivers' licenses are bars in college neighborhoods.) Indeed, those arrested for allegedly planning to attack Fort Dix in New Jersey included illegal immigrants who apparently had little difficulty getting along in this country.

In his commencement speech at the Coast Guard Academy last month, President Bush was right to express concern that Al Qaeda is trying to bring terrorists into the United States. He was wrong, however, to claim that fighting in Iraq somehow helps stop such attempts. In the absence of a secure border and verifiable biometric identification systems, preventing terrorists from getting in to this country and setting up sleeper cells here is almost impossible. Maybe we will get serious after the next attack.

Richard A. Clarke, the former head of counterterrorism at the National Security Council, is the author of "Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror."