

THE END OF THE INS

Let's not forget our immigration duties

BY JAMES W. ZIGLAR

On Saturday, the Immigration and Naturalization Service was abolished and its functions, along with those of a number of other federal agencies, were absorbed into the new Department of Homeland Security.

I was the last INS commissioner, having served from August 2001 until December of last year. The 36,000-person agency that I directed had two important, but distinct, missions. The first was a law-enforcement function, ensuring that our immigration laws were enforced by preventing entry into the country of criminals and terrorists and by deterring illegal immigration.

The second role was a service and facilitation function, making sure that our government was responding appropriately to the needs of millions of immigrants and visitors whose presence in this country is in our national interest.

After the events of Sept. 11, the nation has understandably placed unprecedented focus on law enforcement and border security. In this context, the decision to move the INS' functions into the new Homeland Security Department makes sense and should help improve coordination among various border enforcement agencies.

But while this focus on national security is appropriate and wise, there is also a continuing need for immigration officials in the Department of Homeland Security to maintain, and even strengthen, the INS' traditional service function. Indeed, the Department of Homeland Security should consider taking advantage of the opportunity to begin a dialogue on our immigration policies and find new ways to better assimilate immigrants into our culture.

This will not be easy, and it is not a natural fit for this new department. The law creating the Department of Homeland Security spells out its security mission in great detail. But the role this agency will play in serving immigrants and visitors -- a role that helps to boost our economy, enrich our culture and secure our moral standing in the world -- is barely mentioned.

Part of the interest in preserving and enhancing the INS service role is economic. Consider the role that foreign tourists -- many of whom are required to have visas -- play in bolstering our economy. In New York City alone, one of five tourists annually -- 7.5 million people -- are foreign tourists who help to fuel the city's \$20 billion travel industry. From Maine to California, from Disney World to the Grand Canyon, foreign tourists are part of the lifeblood of the \$260 billion tourist industry in this country. As the Department of Homeland Security works to enhance border security, it must simultaneously find a way not to discourage these tourists from coming to our country.

But the economic benefits extend far beyond tourist dollars. For two centuries, America has reaped vast benefits from the energies and special skills of immigrants who have come to this country to reunite with families, to pursue economic opportunities and to find refuge from persecution.

Immigrants have come -- and continue to come -- bringing special job skills and talents. Consider, for example, Albert Einstein, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Andy Grove, Yao Ming. They and millions of other less renowned men and women from around the world have enriched our society in science, business and the arts.

In my 16 months as INS commissioner, I came to see the beauty and the power of the American melting pot. No other nation on Earth has the richness and diversity that immigrants continue to bring to this country. Each year more than 550,000 students from almost every country in the world come to study in American schools. Their presence enriches and

strengthens our academic institutions. It also exposes these young leaders to a nuanced, textured picture of American society that they will take back to their home countries. Isn't this more important than ever as the world becomes increasingly divided and suspicions about this country escalate?

Still others come here as refugees fleeing persecution. Refugees have always sought safe haven here, ever since the Pilgrims fled religious persecution in Europe in the 17th century. As Jews sought refuge from Hitler, and Cubans, Vietnamese and other refugees fled communist dictatorships in the last half of the 20th century, refugees continue coming here today from all parts of the world, and we must not forget their plight.

For decades, the INS' asylum officers have been on the front lines, working to maintain this country's 200-year commitment to helping legitimate refugees flee persecution. Many of these dedicated public servants will continue this work as part of Homeland Security. But they are concerned that the beacon of hope that we have made to shine so brightly will be dimmed because of inadequate attention or resources.

After the shock and trauma of Sept. 11, there is a natural inclination by our political leaders to listen to those who seek to close our borders. The challenge for the new Homeland Security Department is to protect our borders while, at the same time, upholding our long-held values. This is a job too important to be left half done.

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