NORTH AMERICA 30.11.2018 | Thomas L. Friedman

We need a high wall with a big gate

With Trump using immigration for political gain, Democrats need to be the adults and offer a realistic vision

Kamala Harris, the Democratic senator from California, recently raised eyebrows when she asked Ronald Vitiello, President Trump's nominee to lead Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), whether he appreciated the 'perception' that ICE spreads 'fear and intimidation' among immigrants the way the Ku Klux Klan did among blacks.

Harris carefully worded her question around the 'perception' of ICE — and it was raised in part because Vitiello had once shamefully tweeted that Democrats were 'the NeoKlanist party.' Nevertheless, with Harris a likely Democratic presidential candidate in 2020, Republican media pounced on her with variations of: 'Hey voters, get this: Democrats think the ICE officers protecting you from illegal immigrants are like the KKK You gonna vote for that?'

ICE does seem to have a bad culture, but it is not the KKK At the same time, I don't think the Democratic Party is just for open borders. Alas, though, I'm also not sure what exactly is the party's standard on immigration — and questions like Harris's leave it open to demonisation.

Since Republicans have completely caved to Trump's craven exploitation of immigration as a wedge issue, the country, as usual, needs the Democrats to be the adults and put forward a realistic, comprehensive approach to immigration, which now requires two parts.

The first is a way to think *about the border* and the second is a way to think about all the issues *beyond the border* — issues that are pushing migrants our way. You cannot think seriously about the first without thinking seriously about the second, and if you don't, this week's scenes of Customs and Border Protection officers firing tear gas to keep out desperate migrants near Tijuana will get a lot worse.

Regarding the border, the right place for Democrats to be is for a high wall with a big gate.

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Democrats won't do as well as they can nationally without assuring Americans that they're committed to securing our borders; people can't just walk in. But the country won't do as well as it can in the 21st century unless it remains committed to a very generous legal immigration policy — and a realistic pathway to citizenship for illegals already here — to attract both high-energy, low-skilled workers and high-IQ risk takers.

They have been the renewable energy source of the American dream — and our secret advantage over China.

But thinking beyond the border is where Democrats can really distinguish themselves; it's where Trump has been recklessly AWOL.

A bit of history

This is how we got to where we are today: During the 19th and 20th centuries, the world shifted from being governed by large empires in many regions to being governed by independent nation-states. And the 50 years after World War II were a great time to be a weak little nation-state.

Why? Because there were two superpowers competing for your affection by throwing foreign aid at you, building your army, buying your cheap goods and educating your college students; climate change was moderate; populations were still under control in the developing world; no one had a cellphone to easily organise movements against your government; and China was not in the World Trade Organization (WTO), so everyone could be in textiles and other low-wage industries.

All of that switched in the early 21st century: Climate-driven extreme weather — floods, droughts, heat and cold — on top of man-made deforestation began to hammer many countries, especially their small-scale farmers. This happened right as developing-world populations exploded. Africa went from 140 million in 1900 to one billion in 2010 to a projected 2.5 billion by 2050.

I was in Argentina last month and am in Peru now; in both countries I

Syria grew from three million people in 1950 to over 22 million today, which, along with droughts, totally stressed its water resources. Guatemala, the main source of the migrant caravan heading our way, has been ravaged by

found people worried about the refugee flows from Venezuela.

deforestation thanks to illegal logging, farmers cutting trees for firewood and drug traffickers creating landing strips and smuggling trails.

A satellite map just released by University of Cincinnati geography researchers demonstrated that nearly a quarter of the earth's habitable surface changed between just 1992 and 2015, primarily from forests to agriculture, from grasslands to deserts and from wetlands to urban concrete.

Meanwhile, the internet has enabled citizens to easily compare their living standards with those in Paris or Phoenix — and find a human trafficker to take them there. Also, China joined the WTO, dominating low-wage industries, and the end of the Cold War meant no superpower wanted to touch your country, because all it would win was a bill.

21st century migration

So it's now much harder to be an average little country. The most frail of them are hemorrhaging people, like Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Sudan and almost every nation in sub-Saharan Africa. Others — Venezuela, Syria, Afghanistan and Libya — have just fractured.

Together, they're creating vast zones of disorder, and many people want to get out of them into any zone of order, particularly America or Europe, triggering nationalist-populist backlashes.

But not only. I was in Argentina last month and am in Peru now; in both countries I found people worried about the refugee flows from Venezuela. Peru has taken in 600,000, and it's beginning to stir resentment here among lower socio-economic classes.

Forget the 'Space Corps'; I'd make the 'Peace Corps' our fifth service.

The BBC reported in August: 'Tens of thousands of Venezuelans are fleeing their country amid chronic shortages of food and medicines. The country's longstanding economic crisis has seen more than two million citizens leave since 2014, causing regional tensions as neighboring countries struggle to accommodate them.'

The story added, 'The UN — whose migration agency has warned that the continent faces a refugee "crisis moment" similar to that seen in the Mediterranean in 2015 — is setting up a special team to co-ordinate the

regional response. ... More than half a million Venezuelans have crossed into Ecuador this year alone and more than a million have entered Colombia in the past 15 months.'

There are now more climate refugees, economic migrants searching for work and political refugees just searching for order than at any point since World War II, nearly 70 million people according to the International Rescue Committee, and 135 million more in need of humanitarian aid.

We need a 'Peace Corps'

A responsible presidential candidate in 2020 needs a policy that rationally manages the flow of immigrants into our country *and* offers a strategy to help stabilise the world of disorder through climate change mitigation, birth control diffusion, reforestation, governance assistance and support for small-scale farmers.

This is our biggest geopolitical problem today. Forget the 'Space Corps'; I'd make the 'Peace Corps' our fifth service. We should have an Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Peace Corps, to send Americans to help stabilise small farms and governance in the world of disorder.

And this has to be a global project, with the US, Europe, India, Korea, China, Russia, Japan all contributing. Otherwise the world of order is going to be increasingly challenged by refugees from the world of disorder, and all rational discussions of immigration will go out the window.

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Thomas L. Friedman became the New York Times's foreign affairs Op-Ed columnist in 1995. He joined the paper in 1981, after which he served as

the Beirut bureau chief in 1982, Jerusalem bureau chief in 1984, and then in Washington as the diplomatic correspondent in 1989, and later the White House correspondent and economic correspondent.