

Yes, U.S. should build the wall (but not because Trump says so)

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. . . . Some of [Donald Trump's] ideas deserve consideration and enactment. One of these is building a wall across our southern border with Mexico.

It has been ridiculed by opponents as an unneeded monstrosity and a colossal waste of money. The theory of the wall is that it keeps out low-wage workers and, thereby, raises the wages of U.S. workers, including earlier Hispanic arrivals

Just what a wall would cost is unknown. Guesses vary. Trump has said \$8 billion. A detailed report by AllianceBernstein, a research firm, estimated between \$15 billion and \$25 billion. These sums seem (and are) large, but within a \$4 trillion federal budget, they're modest.

The crucial question is: If we had a wall, what would we get for it? The answer: A wall probably represents our best chance of reaching broad agreement on immigration policy, a subject that has frustrated Congress and the last two presidents.

. . . . [A] wall could be a catalyst for a comprehensive overhaul of U.S. immigration policy. "It's hard to understand opposition [to a wall]," as my colleague Charles Krauthammer recently noted. "It's the most venerable and reliable way to keep people out." He argues correctly that the outlines of a deal have long been apparent. It would:

- Change legal immigration criteria to favor employability (aka skills) over family connections — the emphasis would be on stimulating the nation's economic growth.
- Require most businesses to belong to E-Verify, the government system that allows employers to check on the immigrant status of potential workers.
- Create a path to legality — and ultimately to citizenship — for the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants now in the country.
- Embrace policies — including a wall — that would credibly and dramatically reduce illegal immigration.

. . . . There are two standard objections to a wall — both true but politically irrelevant. The first is that it might have once been justified but isn't now, because the inflow of undocumented Mexican immigrants is slowing and maybe reversing. Mexico's birthrate — which affects its labor force — has declined, and its economy has improved. It can more easily absorb new

workers. A 2015 Pew study found that the number of undocumented Mexicans in the United States had dropped by 140,000 between 2009 and 2014.

But this is a net figure: people entering minus people leaving. There are still hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Latinos trying to cross the southern border illegally every year. A wall will make this harder and reinforce the natural trend. Some people won't try to enter; of those who do, fewer will make it. Tragedies — dying in the desert, being exploited by “coyotes” — will decline.

. . . . If we could buy an immigration bargain for \$25 billion, or even a bit more, it would be a fabulous deal. That's the opportunity facing the next president. But we won't make it any easier by stigmatizing the one change — a wall — that could be the foundation for compromise.