

## Immigrants: Making the guest list

### Only so much to go around in land of opportunity

A shipload of Chinese immigrants floats along the Pacific coastline desperately hoping to dock somewhere in California. They hear no cries of welcome. They see no fabled Statue of Liberty holding high her flame, bidding the huddled masses, the tired, the poor, the hungry to find refuge here.



ROBERT VASQUEZ  
Columnist

Meanwhile, near Laredo, a group of Mexicans walk through a field of dirt and brush, their eyes peeled — not for snakes or scorpions, but for men in dull green uniforms whose sting would prove far more painful. Though miles apart, these people share a common problem. Whether they seek the American dream or simply to live and be treated as human beings, one sad, stony wall rises to stare these people square in the face: The United States seeks to return them to their countries — only partially because they are breaking the law.

The immigration laws which prohibit people from simply crossing the border and declaring citizenship have long been maligned as cold and heartless, like an exclusive list clause on a charter which designates who will be allowed to join a club with a restricted membership. The laws seem to slam shut our nation's doors and fly in the face of the glowing invitation set forth in Emma Lazarus' poem which declared our nation the world's refuge from hunger, poverty and human oppression.

Why then, are these laws enforced? What keeps us from opening our arms and our harbors to the shiploads of immigrants who seek the same good fortune sought by our forefathers so many years ago? Surely a nation whose population consists almost entirely of immigrants and their descendants would not deny others the same opportunity. What happened to the open invitation?

Times have changed. Back when the nation begged for immigrants there was a bounty of enticements spurring would-be Americans to the great new world. States had specific selling points to settlers seeking their piece of the fortune. There was gold in California, fertile soil for farming in Nebraska and land, land everywhere. Hundreds of acres could be bought for a song, or at least a few dollars. If you didn't have the money, you could find a spot, build a house, tie a mule to a post and call it "home."

With all the farming and industries sprouting up, jobs were coming into being faster than positions could be filled. A boatload of immigrants was instantly absorbed into the economy and the boat sent back to bring more.

With images of golden streets and fields of opportunity, the newcomers arrived and often flourished. The potential

for success, the American dream as well as its resources, appeared unlimited.

Those opportunities, those jobs, those times have all but faded into the past. Jobs once found in the farming and textile industries are now filled by machines which provide greater efficiency and a higher profit margin. When new positions in industries such as electronics, business management open up, they hardly replace the old positions so readily filled by the new arrivals.

And now American citizens are fighting to keep their own jobs. Once immigrants themselves, they don't particularly welcome competition. Yet immigration continues. It seems the American dream has not died.

But illegal immigrants who reach our shores face a rude awakening. Each year more than one million illegal aliens are arrested and returned to their homelands. Many immigrants promise to pay up to \$40,000 to be deposited on American soil. Not having the money up front, these people become servants until their debt is paid.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service says this indentured servitude is close to slavery because in many cases the "master" can abuse the immigrants, exploiting their fears and ignorance in the strange land. Hiding from the law, immigrants have little recourse.

Each year, the INS admits thousands of legal immigrants into the country. The United States still stands as a refuge from political and religious persecution, as it should. But the millions who forgo the process and enter illegally force those who seek legal immigration to wait. Many who seek to enter the United States must wait up to four years before being considered. The INS estimates that for every illegal immigrant caught, two escape. That means more than two million people enter the United States each year illegally; consequently, those who chose to enter legally must wait.

Why must they wait? Because the United States has only so many resources. Funding for schools, medical care and other social services must meet the demands of the population. Given the current situation with public services, our resources appear to be lagging.

It would be nice to welcome and embrace all who desire to live in our nation. It seems inherent in the human spirit to help everyone and deny no one. But the human race has a mind as well as a heart. We must plan as well as feel.

We must assume responsibility for what we have been granted. Take a look in any of the cities in our glorious nation. You will find the tired, the poor, the huddled masses. They are ours. The invitation issued so long ago has been graciously received and overwhelmingly accepted.

The guests have arrived. And they keep coming. But the party is over.

Vasquez is a senior journalism major

### The Battalion Editorial Board

Jason Loughman, editor in chief

Mark Evans, managing editor  
Stephanie Pattillo, city editor  
Dave Thomas, night news editor  
Mack Harrison, opinion editor

Kyle Burnett, sports editor  
Susan Owen, sports editor  
Anas Ben-Musa, Aggiefire editor  
Billy Moran, photo editor

The Battalion



100 years at  
Texas A&M

## EDITORIAL

### Un-Open Records Act

#### Legislature blocks access to info

The public is up against government forces who would deny freedom of information. And in Texas, the government seems to be winning.

The Dallas Morning News reported Monday that the Texas Legislature is disguising restrictions to the Open Records Act as amendments to relatively obscure administrative laws.

These restrictions include denying the public information on dangerous health trends, inspections of retirement homes and financial data on shaky insurance companies.

The Legislature is misleading the public by sneaking this anti-open government legislation into amendments to non-related bills.

Texas Attorney General Dan Morales said if legislators "obscure what you're doing to modify these acts, then you don't get the open discussion that it deserves."

The Texas Open Records Act entitles people — the general public and media alike — to inspect records maintained by state and local agencies such as basic information on police reports, tax appraisals and collections, government budgets and expenditures and planning and zoning proposals.

The original law listed 16 categories of information that the government could withhold. The number of exemptions has since jumped to 24, thanks to these amendments.

It is obvious that lawmakers are adding open-records limitations to administrative laws because it's easier

to get them passed that way. They're going behind the backs of consumer and media associations who would oppose such measures.

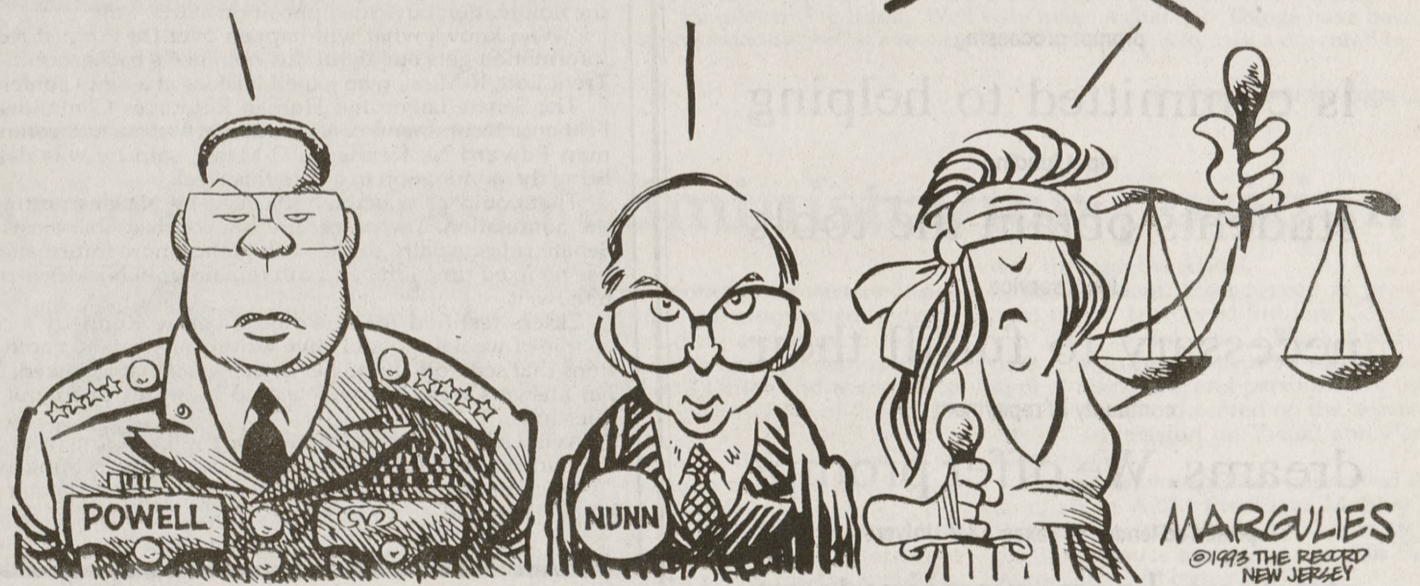
For example, during this past session lawmakers expanded confidentiality to include additional records maintained by the Texas Department of Insurance. But rather than amend the closely monitored Open Records Act, they changed the administrative statute that governs day-to-day operation of the insurance department through an amendment to a law that is well-known only to insurance industry insiders.

All of this follows an investigation by The Dallas Morning News that local government agencies throughout the state routinely ignore the state's open records law. The newspaper's survey found that the public may have less access to government documents now than when the law was passed in 1973.

A Dallas Morning News poll in 1991 found that more than 20 percent of the police departments and 15 percent of the state's school districts refused to comply with their request for documents whose access is guaranteed by the state's Open Records Act.

Texans are having a hard enough time dealing with agencies who illegally refuse to release information. We don't need sneaky legislators trying to restrict freedom of information even more. Texans deserve an Open Records Act free of these "undercover" limitations.

**DON'T ASK**      **DON'T TELL**      **DON'T PURSUE**



### Cigarette taxes, cigarette butts: New tobacco levy won't work

New taxes on cigarettes, recently proposed by the Clinton Administration, could be as high as two dollars a pack to help cover the high cost of the health care plan. The projected cigarette tax plan relies upon conventional anti-smoking arguments susceptible to challenge.



MATT DICKERSON  
Columnist

Because smokers harm themselves and others, why not tax the activity? The higher tax, projected to raise \$40 billion next year, would deter smoking, and the revenues could be used to help others by funneling the tax revenues into the health care system.

Certainly, smokers impose costs on the health care system over and above those of non-smokers. For instance, re-

cent estimates by the National Center of Health Statistics place the lifetime medical costs of the average male smoker 32 percent above non-smoking men.

But smokers will pay much of their own higher health bills through higher health and life insurance rates. Smokers also contribute more to the nation's pension funds and Social Security, and utilize less nursing home services because on average they die earlier than non-smokers. For Social Security alone, by some estimates, more than \$20,000 is paid in and never collected by the average smoker.

The disproportionate net contributions of smokers to Social Security and pension funds represents an implicit income transfer to non-smokers which substantially offsets smokers' costs to the health care system.

When the external costs — those not borne by smokers — of smoking are calculated and net pension and Social Security transfers are subtracted, the total cost comes to about 24 cents per pack of cigarettes. And that sum falls well below most taxes already collected on cigarettes, and is substantially less

than Clinton's proposal.

In short, smokers are not getting a free ride — they are paying their way. But this may not convince many anti-smoking activists. Because smoking is a habit typically picked up during one's youth, the ability to weigh the consequences of taking up risky smoking is questioned. Incorrect perception of smoking risks might be a rationale for a substantial tax.

A 1985 survey of some 3,000 smokers and non-smokers was conducted to see if the risks of smoking were correctly perceived. The study found, as have numerous earlier studies, that smokers and non-smokers consistently overestimate the risks of smoking. Interestingly enough, teenagers were more likely to consider smoking a greater risk than older age groups.

For instance, federal studies of the lifetime risk of lung cancer due to smoking range from 6-13 percent. In the survey, smokers aged 16-21 placed the risk at 45 percent, about three-and-a-half times the upper rate federal studies have deduced. Smokers 46 and older placed the risk substantially lower, at

33 percent, but still well above federal studies' upper bounds.

But why tax adult smoking if the idea is to stop teenage smoking? Better enforcement of laws prohibiting the sale of cigarettes to minors would be more applicable. And if so-called "passive smoking" is to be deterred, why tax private smoking? Restricting the use of cigarettes in some public areas goes more to the point. Tax-based solutions to these problems appear misplaced.

If taxes are raised substantially on cigarettes, a black market will emerge, destroying any substantial tax gains. In Canada, a three dollar increase in the cigarette tax has doubled the price of a pack of cigarettes since 1982. The black market trade of cigarettes reached \$1.03 billion in 1992 in Canada, and for which the government lost some \$1.3 billion in tax revenues. Now the black market is funding such criminal activities as narcotics and gun running.

The cost in lost tax revenues is just the tip of the iceberg. The cost of paying police officers, prosecutors, custom officials and other personnel for cigarette trade enforcement is substantial.

The conventional wisdom for higher taxes for cigarettes falls short of justification. Given Canada's problems with black market cigarette trade, a substantial increase in cigarette taxes would create more problems than it solved.

Dickerson is a sophomore economics major

Editorials appearing in The Battalion reflect the views of the editorial board. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions of other Battalion staff members, the Texas A&M student body, regents, administration, faculty or staff. Columns, guest columns, and Mail Call items express the opinions of the authors. The Battalion encourages letters to the editor and will print as many as space allows in the Mail Call section. Letters must be 300 words or less and include the author's name, class, and phone number. Contact the editor or managing editor for information on submitting guest columns. We reserve the right to edit letters and guest columns for length, style, and accuracy.

Letters should be addressed to:  
The Battalion - Mail Call  
013 Reed McDonald / Mail stop 1111  
Texas A&M University  
College Station, TX 77843