



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on February 13, 2013

## American Legion Calls Obama's Amnesty Plan a "Bad Sequel" to 1986 Law

Speaking against President Obama's latest proposal for immigration reform, American Legion National Commander James E. Koutz called the ambitious plan a "bad sequel" to President Ronald Reagan's immigration reform measures in 1986. Koutz termed Obama's proposal a shameless form of amnesty that only encourages people to enter the United States illegally, as detailed in an American Legion [press release](#) issued January 30.



"Whether it's called 'Pathway to Citizenship' or some other euphemism, it's still amnesty," Koutz affirmed, adding that those who enter the country illegally should not benefit from the special title of "American citizen." "It didn't work when President Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 and it will be even more disastrous if we repeat that mistake again."

According to Koutz, "amnesty is a deal-breaker" for the country, as it rewards illegal activity and discourages those seeking to go through the legal immigration process of becoming an American citizen. "The American Legion is not opposed to immigration. We are a nation that was built by immigrants," Koutz concluded. "But we also believe in adherence to the law. What kind of message does it send to those who worked hard to become legal immigrants if we offer the same status to those who disrespected the process? 'American citizen' is a special title that should not be bestowed upon people who broke the law to get it."

In November 1986, Reagan signed into law the [Immigration Reform Control Act](#), an amnesty initiative granted to individuals who unlawfully entered the country prior to January 1, 1982 and could make evident that they resided in the United States since arriving illegally. One of the key components of the law was its intent to improve enforcement and services by ramping up security measures and administrative activities for the Border Patrol, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and other federal agencies. The law sought to succeed in these measures by:

- Directing the Attorney General, from funds appropriated to the Department of Justice for INS, to provide for improved immigration and naturalization services and for enhanced community outreach and in-service personnel training;
- Authorizing additional appropriations for wage[s]...;
- Revising the criminal penalties for the unlawful transportation of unauthorized aliens into the United States;
- Authorizing a \$35,000,000 immigration emergency fund to be established in the Treasury for necessary enforcement activities and related State and local reimbursements.

However, as Reagan Attorney General Ed Meese alluded to in a May 2006 [New York Times opinion piece](#), the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 failed to stem the rampant flow of illegal



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immigrants into the United States.

In the mid-'80s, Meese explained, many congressional members — led by the Democratic majority in the House and the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy — pushed for an amnesty program for illegal immigrants who had settled in the United States for specific period of years. Reagan, along with Meese himself, considered the effort reasonable, as it altered the citizenship status of a relatively small population.

In exchange for permitting illegal immigrants to stay, border security and enforcement of immigration policies would be improved — especially through sanctions against employers who had hired illegal immigrants. If jobs were the magnet to illegals, Reagan surmised, then dampening this opportunity would successfully diminish the problem.

Meanwhile, those illegal immigrants who could demonstrate that they lived in America continuously for five years would be provided temporary citizen status, which could then be amended to permanent residency after 18 months; after another five years, they could be eligible for citizenship. While the law seemed reasonable, Meese further noted:

The 1986 act did not solve our illegal immigration problem. From the start, there was widespread document fraud by applicants. Unsurprisingly, the number of people applying for amnesty far exceeded projections. And there proved to be a failure of political will in enforcing new laws against employers.

After a six-month slowdown that followed passage of the legislation, illegal immigration returned to normal levels and continued unabated. Ultimately, some 2.7 million people were granted amnesty, and many who were not stayed anyway, forming the nucleus of today's unauthorized population.

But despite Ronald Reagan's failed amnesty law, President Obama released an immigration reform proposal on January 29 that sanctions a "Pathway to Earned Citizenship." Under the president's plan, illegal immigrants who presently reside in the United States will have to register with the federal government, pass a background check, and pay a number of fees and penalties in order to obtain "provisioning legal status."

But the ideas sifting through Congress fail to address some of the more important problems, such as the array of government benefits currently available to illegals. Critics have pointed out that shutting down government welfare will not only stunt the flow of illegal immigrants, but also lead to self-deportation.

Instead, Obama's proposal largely resembles Reagan's 1986 law, while continuing to ignore the catalyst — that is, what drives illegal immigration in the first place.



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