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JOSEPH PHILLIPS: Hello NAACP! Is Anybody Home?

by Joseph Phillips
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The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has finally released a statement concerning the issue of illegal immigration. It is a rather anemic outline of certain principles the organization feels should guide immigration policy. These principles include "Support of protections for agricultural workers and a path to legal permanent residency and citizenship for college age students;" "Opposition to any efforts to require, encourage or deputize state or local police to enforce federal immigration

laws;" and "Opposition to mandatory detention of undocumented immigrants without individualized consideration of whether detention is necessary."

The issue of immigration is the political equivalent of the Gordian knot, an intricate interweaving of security concerns, economics, social policy and race.

There are approximately 11.5 million illegal immigrants in this country -- 81% of them from Mexico and Latin America. The cost to the federal government is more than 10 billion dollars annually. The cost to local economies is significant as well. Illegal immigrants strain municipal resources for schools, healthcare and emergency services. At the same time, 31% of illegals are part of mixed families (one or more family members are American citizens) and they make up 5% of the civilian labor force. Clearly, this is an issue that suggests a bit more nuance than walls and mass deportation.

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What's on the mind of Oprah Winfrey, Michael Eric Dyson, Minister Louis Farrakhan, Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr., Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and authors Robin Stone and Lyah Beth LeFlores? Click here to listen!

But the NAACP's position is not nuanced. It lacks substance and doesn't nearly address the concerns of Black workers, who are impacted directly by the prevalence of black market labor.

The plain math is that the abundance of illegal labor puts downward pressure on wages and in the words of Carol Swain, professor of political science and law at Vanderbilt University "diminishes opportunity for low-skilled American workers who compete in the same sectors as the illegal immigrants." For those in the back of the room that means young Black men.

The four industries or sectors that rely most heavily on illegal labor are: construction, food preparation, cleaning and farming. The great lie of this debate is that illegals are doing jobs Americas will not. The obvious rejoinder is: Who filled jobs in these sectors before 11.5 million illegal immigrants crossed our borders? The answer is Americans -- specifically Black Americans. The rub, as Professor Swain points out, is that these American workers must now compete with an influx of labor that has the advantage of under-pricing their services. In Los Angeles during the 1980s for example, the percentage of Black janitors and hotel workers in the workforce plummeted as immigrant workers who accepted lower wages replaced them.

Black America looks to the NAACP for leadership on this issue.

Unfortunately, all the organization has to offer is a one-page outline filled with the odd notions that law

enforcement officials should not enforce the law, people who break the law should not be detained and people who have disregarded our nations sovereignty should be protected and receive amnesty.

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The Congressional Black Caucus has also been absent on this issue, but I suppose we can forgive their timidity. Many members of the CBC have large Latino populations in their districts and must tread lightly when it comes to the issue of immigration. The district of Maxine Waters (D-LA) for instance is home to one hundred thousand more Latino residents than Black residents. Similarly, Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX) represents an almost equal number of Black and Latino voters. The NAACP, however, suffers no such burden. It seems plain that an organization that purports to be for the advancement of "Colored People" should be out front in advocating immigration policy that makes sense for a Black community that is growing increasingly frustrated at being displaced by workers who are in the country illegally, consuming jobs and services, and more significantly accumulating political clout.

To sit quietly on the sidelines waiting to see how things shake out is not irresponsible leadership. It is an absence of leadership.

Joseph C. Phillips is an actor/writer based in Los Angeles. His column appears regularly in several newspapers and he is a regular commentator on News and Notes with Ed Gordon on NPR and has a book due out from Running Press in April. Contact him at josephc@josephcPhillips.com.