

## LEGISLATIVE AGENDA OF THE POLISH AMERICAN CONGRESS

The Polish American Congress, with the joint efforts of our national member organizations and State Divisions and Chapters, has many accomplishments throughout its 60 years. Since being founded in May, 1944, the Polish American Congress has always supported and championed the cause of immigrants and points to the following successful programs: establishment of the Displaced Persons program in 1948 (permitting more than 200,000 immigrants from war-torn Europe to enter the U.S.), the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (which granted amnesty for undocumented aliens who entered the U.S. before 1979), the Family Unification Act, the Diversity Visa Program, reform under section 245(i) and with Congressman Lipinski's efforts, a law permitting Polish and Hungarian parolees permanent residency in the US.

### I. Immigration Reform-Assessment of President Bush's Policy Statement

On January 7th, 2004 President Bush spoke of the need for immigration reform and outlined the broad principles of reform that his Administration would support. In his own words; „ We see millions of hard-working men and women condemned to fear and insecurity in a massive, undocumented economy... the system is not working ...”

The Polish American Congress concurs that the immigration system is in desperate need of being fixed and welcomes the challenge ahead on this in working with the US Congress and with the Administration. But the outline proposed by the President does not address the core issue - which is, the 8 to 10 million of undocumented aliens living in the USA. The announcement by President Bush appears at best to be a „guest worker” program aimed to fill the needs of agricultural workers, hotel and restaurant workers. This program expects temporary workers to return permanently to their home countries after their period of work in the US has expired.

The Polish American Congress endorses an immigration proposal that would provide an „adjustment of status” for permanent residency for those who are already here undocumented or who may have overstayed their visas. During the 1980»s thousands of Polish nationals arrived in the USA, but were ineligible to apply for asylum or were ineligible to get green cards or ineligible under any other provision of the immigration law.

Any immigration reform must begin with addressing the legal status of those already here. They have jobs, started businesses, purchased homes, raised families, educated their children and have paid into the social security system. Yet they await the work place raid or the knock on the door awaiting deportation. Their insecurity is also an economic one-even though they have paid into the system, they would be ineligible for social security benefits upon retirement nor for Medicare benefits in the event of illness. Our challenge today is to craft an immigration system that reflects migration realities, recognizes the needs of employers, respects the US workforce and builds public confidence in our nation's security and our immigrations laws. To do so, we need the united effort of the Bush Administration, Congressional leaders and ethnic constituencies to work together on developing sound policy over politics.

Sound policy should encourage immigrants who want to settle in the US to maintain legal status rather than go underground. It should also address U.S. Labor needs that are not temporary in nature, but long term.

Sound policy should address the needs of employers in search of a stable workforce yet balance it with the needs of U.S. workers and immigrant workers with equitable wages and decent working conditions. Visas should be portable to better balance the

needs of employers so immigrants can be flexible and not beholden to a single employer.

Sound policy should factor family unity as it currently takes many years (and sometimes more than a decade) for U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents to be reunited with their family members under current immigration laws. There are those who overstay their visas or even risk being smuggled into the US to be with their families.

There should be a legal channel that rewards those waiting in line, we must rapidly clear out the backlogs-as these are the incentives for illegal immigration.

Sound policy means effective law enforcement that patrols the borders with professionalism; that cracks down on smugglers and sets penalties against unscrupulous employers.

The Polish American Congress believes that a legislative start to immigration reform already exists in the US Congress. The DREAM Act (S 1545 and HR 1684) is bipartisan legislation pending in Congress which would clear up immigration status and federal barriers to higher education confronted by young adults who were brought here as undocumented children. They are currently precluded from applying for the legal status they need to finish school, work and fully contribute to our nation.

Another bipartisan proposal-the AgJOBS bill (S1645, HR 3142) is designed to modernize our nation's failed agriculture immigration policies.

Both of these proposals address the same problems that President Bush has identified and are consistent with his broad principles.

## II. The VISA question and its administration

The Visa issue and US immigration policies are both the flip side of the same coin when viewed by the Polish American community. Poles are frustrated and unhappy with the process as it exists currently at US Consulates in Poland. Rejections for visas at the consulates appear arbitrary and are at a high consistent rate, greater than one-third.

The frustrations have raised tensions to the point that there are calls for visa waivers and travel cancellations due to this issue and of the recent fingerprinting requirements.

Arguments in favor point to Poland as America's ally in the war on terrorism, in the Iraq conflict and leadership in the peacekeeping zone with 2,500 soldiers.

The Polish American Congress recommends several administrative changes in addressing these concerns:

1) The payment process for visa applications-whether the person obtains a visa or is denied, is the same equal amount. The Polish American Congress proposes a two-step payment process which would at first provide for an „initial application fee” for everyone and if a visa is approved, then a „processing fee”. This would eliminate concerns being raised in Poland that all they (the US) want is „our money” and would permit counselor officials the proper opportunity for adequate review.

2) Another issue is the humane treatment of Poles when they arrive in the USA, most notably at airports in New York and in Chicago. Too often we hear of horror stories (subsequently reported by the press) of inhumane treatment of Poles chained and handcuffed prior to their return to Poland on the next plane. Examples include pregnant women who are not given bathroom privileges and the elderly who are not given access to their medicines and water to drink. They are treated as terrorists even though they may only have irregularities with their visas or, difficulties with the language, do not understand questions being asked of them as they fumble an answer in broken English. The Polish American Congress proposes that the American government establish a „pre-clearance” procedure at appropriate European airports - in Warsaw, in London, in

Paris and elsewhere-to process boarding passengers prior to take-off. If there are questions or irregularities, they would be taken care of prior to boarding and not wasting time and money in return flight. The benefits to American good-will would be enormous.

3) It is suggested that Poland as a good ally request the US to waive the visa requirements altogether for entry to the USA. If Polish citizens can travel, it's argued, throughout the EU upon entry next May 1, 2004 without visas, why not to the USA? The Polish American Congress realizes the legal and diplomatic concerns which visa waiver entails, but calls upon the American government to review towards Poland its procedures and establish a timetable and the requisite requirements which must be met for this procedure to be adopted.

### III. Iraq, the war on terrorism and in supporting an ally

At the beginning of 2003 when the issue of international assistance in the conflict in Iraq was raised, Poland felt it had an obligation to the USA as a good ally and in the war against terrorism. Poland just said yes and joined the coalition by sending special forces to fight alongside US and British forces. These courageous decisions were made at a time when Poles stood up to predominant anti-war France and Germany. And recall that French President Jacques Chirac gave strong objections to countries joining the American coalition by hinting that they could find their bids for EU membership opposed. These statements were made only weeks after Poland had selected the F-16 fighter plane rather than the French bids.

Since then Poland has taken on the leadership by deploying 2,500 of its best soldiers and was selected to command and staff the multinational peacekeeping sector in Iraq. Poland has sent \$64 million worth of its newest equipment - which will be ruined while in Iraq. A Polish major general commands a total of 12,000 troops from 22 nations replacing US marine forces nearly twice that size. The Polish performance throughout these months has been flawless.

Surely America must recognize this great contribution from a strategic, yet economically struggling ally. One must recognize that Poland does not shrink when it comes to military support as it also has sent peacekeeping missions to Afghanistan, to the Balkans and to other countries as needed

The reward-\$12 million in annual FMS/FMF in 2004. This is at a time when Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt and a string of others get billions.

The numbers sadly speak volumes. The Polish American Congress position is that the US government can and should do better. It is high time that the US develop a new vision with its ally Poland, one which will more adequately support the war on terrorism and the peacekeeping functions in Iraq. Military assistance should be increased to several hundred million dollars per year and there should be supplemental grants, loans and loan guarantees and surplus military equipment.

This vision with Poland would partner its further development and modernization. It would be disastrous if Poland would be forced to leave Iraq because of lack of funds. It is, after all, to America's national interests that Poland continues to provide peacekeeping operations not only in Iraq, but in other countries.

Leading up to the Iraq military action, expectations were raised that those countries who joined the US led coalition would participate in some fashion in the post-war Iraq reconstruction. Poland, during the Cold War, built much of Iraq's infrastructure - from electrical power plants, heavy housing and industrial projects, to roads and bridges - money, for which Iraq owes Poland billions of dollars. The expectations were real based on certain expertise, knowledge of language and customs that would benefit both sides.

But since then, what has been the result? Not a single reconstruction contract has been awarded.

The natural reaction in Poland and in the United States is a growing skepticism. Is America holding up its end? The point that the Polish American Congress is making is this: by engaging Polish companies in the rebuilding effort, it would solidify the political, economic and military triage of America's roadmap for European security.

The Polish American Congress believes that both military assistance and economic assistance in the form of contracts to Polish companies-coupled with a liaison relationship assisting Polish businesses in this manner would benefit our Polish allies who have taken a costly and principled stand for freedom and democracy in Iraq.

This issue is not only about Poland, but also with the 10 million strong Polish American community. It's also about the Polish Americans who were there in Iraq among the first fighting units and in the frontlines on Bagdad. Polish Americans-fulfilling the old Polish credo - FOR YOUR FREEDOM AND OURS.