

**Doctors Aren't Border Agents**  
**Steve Lopez**  
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Steve Lopez

Columnist Steve Lopez joined the staff of The Times in May 2001, after four years at Time Inc. where he wrote for Time, Sports Illustrated, Life and Entertainment Weekly as editor-at-large.

While at Time, he helped establish the Bonus Section, a series of narrative news features. His first story in the series, about the French capture of Philadelphia hippie guru and suspected murderer Ira Einhorn, won a Society of Professional Journalists Award for national magazines.



He also was the author of Time magazine's "Campaign diary," a road journal filed during the 2000-01 presidential campaign; and of the weekly, "American Scene" column, for which he traveled the United States.

Prior to joining Time Inc., Lopez was a columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he won the H.L. Mencken Writing Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing and a National Headliner Award for column writing. During his 12 years at the Inquirer, he filed dispatches from Iraq, Bosnia, Colombia and the Soviet Union.

His earlier newspaper jobs were at the San Jose Mercury News, the Oakland Tribune and three other daily newspapers in Northern California.

He is the author of three novels, "Third and Indiana," "The Sunday Macaroni Club," and "In the Clear." A collection of his columns is published in the book "Land of Giants: Where No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

Lopez is married and has two sons.

I camped outside Congressman Dana Rohrabacher's house in Huntington Beach the other day to make sure no illegal immigrants showed up to mow the lawn.

It wouldn't have been good timing for the congressman if they did. A vote is due this week in Washington on a bill by Rohrabacher that would require doctors and nurses to report suspected illegals for deportation.

Why should MDs do the dirty work? Seems to me that if Rohrabacher really wants to drive out illegal immigrants, he should have introduced a bill imposing fines on neighbors who hire undocumented gardeners. I saw lots of trimming and leaf-blowing as I approached his house.

The congressman and his wife just had triplets, by the way. If they hired a nanny, I wondered, did they ask to see her papers?

Not much was happening outside the Rohrabacher home, so I decided to get a feel for the neighborhood and check back later. Within minutes, I found three illegal immigrants.

Julio was with a crew of four that was landscaping a house three blocks from the congressman's. He said he had been in the country just a month after paying a coyote \$2,200 to get across the border.

I asked the crew chief, a legal resident, if he ever asks employees for papers.

Nope.

And how about the homeowners who hire them? Do they ask for papers?

Never, he said.

Of course not.

We've got a don't-ask, don't-tell policy because we know the price is right. And it seems to me that if we're going to enjoy the benefits of cheap labor, we shouldn't tell an immigrant to get lost when he gets his hand caught in the hedge trimmer and needs a doctor.

In an alley behind Rohrabacher's house, I found a young couple washing their cars. Brian Grasela and Aleta Thompson said laborers knock on the door all the time looking for work, and they assume many are illegal.

"They do a good job and the price is good, so it works," said Brian. "I'm

going to go into horticulture, so I'll be working with a lot of illegals."

Aleta said she works at a restaurant where many employees are illegal, but nobody says or does anything about it. There's just a wink and a nod, because that's the unstated national policy, despite the charade at the border.

The young couple pointed down the alley to three guys who were landscaping a yard almost directly behind Congressman Rohrabacher's house. Two of the workers told me they were illegal.

I'm sure Rohrabacher would say this only supports his argument. But in fact, it tells us how dated he's become.

"Rohrabacher is like the last Japanese soldier on the island who still hasn't heard the war is over," said Frank Sharry of the National Immigration Forum, one of the leading foes of Rohrabacher's bill.

Most of Rohrabacher's colleagues in the GOP have moved beyond the Dark Ages of the immigration debate, Sharry said. Even President Bush rolled out a legalization plan for illegals, even if it was short on details, dead on arrival, and a transparent come-on to Latino voters.

Fortunately, the chances of Rohrabacher's bill passing in an election year are the same as the chances of the congressman quitting Capitol Hill and running away with a mariachi band.

Not that we shouldn't have an honest chat about immigration policy, which is absolutely zany. We spend millions of dollars guarding the border and chasing immigrants to their deaths as they cross, and then we look the other way when employers hire those who make it into the United States.

But if the discussion keeps getting framed by those on the fringes, left and right, we'll never have a policy that makes sense. There's no substantive proposal, said Sharry, that would provide a steady, legal supply of needed workers with a realistic plan of enforcement.

Back at Casa Rohrabacher, the congressman came out to chat with me on his front porch. He told me he insists that laborers at his house be U.S. citizens, and he even checked with the nanny service to make sure they sent certified Americans to help out with the 3-week-old triplets.

You're consistent, I said.

People ought to be sending their lazy kids out to mow the lawn instead of hiring illegal immigrants, Rohrabacher said. He might have a point there, as he did when he said wages are being driven down. And he noted that his bill would require employers to pay the medical bills of illegals who are found out and deported.

But then he began to go off the deep end.

"Illegal immigration will bring down this country," he claimed. And if you take away benefits like healthcare and education, he argued, people will stop coming.

If all that's true, I asked, why don't law-and-order Republican colleagues back him up?

Because they're owned by corporate titans and wealthy Americans who want cheap labor, Rohrabacher said.

All right, so he's not completely off his rocker.

But a bill requiring doctors to call Homeland Security when a busted-up immigrant gets carried into the ER on a stretcher is more than mean-spirited. It's also entirely impractical, because doctors don't have time to play Border Patrol agents, and illegals can either lie or produce false

documents.

So all we've got, in the end, is Rohrabacher throwing a bone to knuckle-dragging constituents. Most of whom, I'm guessing, don't ask to see the gardener's green card before he starts mowing.

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