

Interview

Cutting Immigration Red Tape

An Interview with Emilio T. Gonzalez, Director, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Washington, DC



Emilio T. Gonzalez

EDITORS' NOTE An international affairs specialist, Emilio Gonzalez has spent most of his professional career involved in foreign affairs and international security policy issues. Gonzalez completed a distinguished career in the U.S. Army that spanned 26 years, during which time he served as a military attaché to U.S. embassies in El Salvador and Mexico, taught at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and headed the Office of Special Assistants for the commander-in-chief of the U.S. Southern Command. He has additionally served as director for Western Hemisphere affairs at the National Security Council in Washington, DC.

A graduate of the University of South Florida (Tampa) with a B.A. in international studies, Gonzalez holds M.A. degrees in Latin American studies from Tulane University (New Orleans) and in strategic studies and national security affairs from the U.S. Naval War College (Rhode Island). He was awarded a Ph.D. in international relations from the Graduate School of International Studies, University of Miami, where he also received the graduate school award for academic achievement. A knight of Malta, Gonzalez has been awarded numerous decorations from the United States, El Salvador, Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

How do you foresee current immigration legislation changing in the future?

There's a call from many constituent communities, particularly along the border states, for Congress to do something new in the area of immigration. I commend President Bush for embracing this difficult issue, because it's complex and it provokes a lot of passion. He clearly wants something done now, and for the long term, not just a band-aid fix. The truth is, he didn't have to take on this debate right now. This is his second term – he could very easily have rested on his laurels. After all, there's more than enough on his plate right now. Yet he decided to step up and say, "This is important." He comes from a state where immigration is clearly an important issue and so his attitude has been: Let's face this issue head on. Let's look for solutions and then let's move on.

So the White House has been working with Congress to convey what it would like to see in any immigration reform package, particularly with regard to a temporary-worker program. The Senate is picking up the mantle now. The House of Representatives has already discussed its version of the reforms, and I think that, at the end of the day, some sort of compromise will be found.

Corporations will also be able to weigh in on this topic. What will the immigration reforms mean for business?

There are around 11 million people living illegally in the United States, and the vast majority of them are working somewhere. In some cases, corporations are not even aware that they are employing illegal workers. Often, these corporations will not want to lose those workers, so we are expecting the new act to contain a provision that will enable corporations to keep these workers, but on a legal basis under the provisions of the guest worker program.

What is the H1B program?

The H1B program is a vehicle that corporations use to bring in talented individuals from overseas, to meet certain needs that they have. It's a competitive program – there's a ceiling on the number of visas

available. We expect this to remain part of immigration legislation going forward.

You're a very unusual director, in that you often make unexpected trips to field offices. Because you are new on the job, people usually don't know who you are when you show up unannounced. That must lead to some amusing experiences.

It does. This is just my style. I visit places because I care and because I want to learn. My purpose is not to inspect. I don't want to show up some place and find out that it has been freshly painted and the rug is new just because I'm coming. Rather, I want to see people working in their natural environments, and I want to see what works and what doesn't. If I can be helpful, I will be, because I'm a strong believer that an agency headquarters exists to serve those in the field. Our job in Washington is to get the personnel resources and equipment down to the field, so people are able to do their jobs in an effective and efficient manner. If I can see to that personally, so much the better.

My leadership philosophy is simple: I lead from the front. You can't lead from behind a desk 200 – or 2,000 – miles away. So I try to be as proactive as I can, and I intend to visit as many places as time will allow.

You have a reputation for being a gentleman, particularly with the press. Are you always polite, no matter what they say?

I have to be able to answer questions accurately and dispassionately, because the immigration debate stirs up so much passion. It's important to try to get away from the hyperbole, the generalizations, and the stereotyping. So I try to talk about things the way they are, not the way people would like them to be, or the way people have been reporting them to be for a long period of time.

The only way we can move forward is by having a serious debate about immigration. And I believe that this immigration debate should not be just about how many people are crossing the border illegally, or how many people have overstayed their visas. There's also a good-news component,

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which is that the United States is a nation of immigrants, the majority of whom are hard-working, honest, and productive citizens. Right now, the words “immigrant” and “immigration” seem to have taken on negative connotations. In fact, some people don’t understand the difference between an illegal immigrant and a legal immigrant. All of a sudden, immigration is something that you don’t really discuss in polite company. I want to elevate the debate, and I want people to understand that immigration is what this country is all about. Once they understand that, they will understand that immigration is a subset of a bigger issue, which is security. There’s a reason this agency is within the Department of Homeland Security. It’s because what we do contributes to the national good. Essentially, we are the final arbiters of everybody who wants to stay here permanently, and we take our jobs very seriously. Border security is important, internal enforcement is important, and what we do at USCIS is equally important.

You are an immigrant, who has given a great deal to this country. Do you find pleasure in public service, because it enables you to give back?

Oh, absolutely. I graduated from college when I was 20 and I joined the army as a way to give back. My goal was to spend just a couple of years in the army and then do other things. But I had a wonderful time, and I don’t regret one day of the public service I gave. I spent 26 years defending this country, and wearing its uniform proudly. When I was asked if I wanted to come back off the bench, so to speak, I considered it to be a very great honor. How do you say no to the president? How do you say no to an opportunity to lead an agency such as this, particularly at a time when immigration is such an important political issue?

You have also served on the National Security Council, so you have been involved in political life for some time. You certainly have a genial manner. They must be very happy to have you testifying in Congress.

I’ve only testified once, at my confirmation hearing, but I’m sure I’ll be called to

testify again as the immigration debate unfolds. I actually look forward to it. I don’t shy away from hearings, because I see them as an opportunity to get information out and an opportunity to hear what’s on members’ minds. There is a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding out there. Even I sometimes find it hard to understand the most complex immigration laws. I can only imagine how hard it must be for somebody who’s that much farther removed from the issues. So I consider hearings to be a necessary part of our political process, and I welcome the opportunity to participate. I was confirmed by the Senate, and when I’m invited back, I’ll go. And I will always answer questions truthfully. You may not like to hear what I have to say, but I won’t lie to anyone who asks me a genuine question. In all my dealings, what you see is what you get.

What frustrates you most in your new post?

Probably the bureaucracy and the knowledge that although there are many things that I want to do, most of them won’t happen nearly as quickly as I would like them to. I have to learn to adjust my priorities.

You are in charge of a large number of civil servants, some of whom must be heroes. However, immigration officials don’t always have the best reputation. Is that unfair?

I’m the biggest cheerleader for USCIS, and when given the opportunity, I always sing the praises of our people. We have a core of fine professionals. These are people who really understand immigration. They get it. They’re in this field because they have a genuinely positive view of what immigration has done for our country, and will continue to do for our country. The incompetent immigration officials you read about in newspaper articles are not the people I work with.

At a recent town hall meeting, I highlighted the work of two of our employees, in front of several hundred of their colleagues. One was Robin Barrett, the section chief for citizenship in our San Francisco district, who had been working with a lady who had been approved for naturalization.

But this lady was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and her physician told her that she would not live until her naturalization date. So Robin took it upon herself to visit this woman at her hospice. She had her take the naturalization test and she passed, so they naturalized her on the spot. This lady died the day I got the letter from her lawyer. That’s the caliber of employee we have.

The other employee I highlighted is Wally Bird, whom I affectionately call “my man in Havana.” Wally is a USCIS employee at the U.S. Interest Section in Havana. He deals exclusively with refugees and asylum seekers. Now, there is no government in the world today, except perhaps that of North Korea, that is as hostile to the United States as the Cuban government. Wally gets the tires on his cars punctured, and his quality of life is absolutely abysmal. Yet, Wally’s the happiest guy in the world, because he’s making a difference. I had a chance to speak with him recently, and he said he couldn’t imagine doing anything else. I like telling those stories, because there are thousands of people like them out there.

You remember all these people?

I do, and in fact I call them up myself. When I got the letter from the lawyer of the lady who died, I picked up the phone and I called Robin. She thought I was kidding when I told her who I was. But I wanted to congratulate her on a job well done. It was the same with Wally. I spent some time with him just to let him know how proud we were of what he was doing. I’ve never met a man so happy who was living in such horrendous circumstances. He’s just proud to serve and he’s happy doing what he’s doing. You’ve got to salute people like that – and you have to take care of them.

After all that you have already accomplished, what are your dreams for the future?

To do my job well. To give the president of the United States a world-class immigration service, and then see what else unfolds in my life. I have no future plans besides waking up tomorrow morning. I believe that every day above the earth is a good day. ●