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California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has placed himself at the center of the latest controversy between Mexico and the US over immigration. In early April, the governor angered Mexican officials, immigration advocates and opposition politicians in California when he called for the federal government to "close the border" to immigrants, referring both to the California border with Baja California and Sonora as well as the entire US border with Mexico.

The governor's statement, which he made during an address to newspaper editors and publishers in San Francisco, created an uproar both in California and in Mexico. California is home to an estimated 2.4 million undocumented immigrants, the majority of whom are Mexican nationals.

The negative reaction forced Schwarzenegger to issue a follow-up statement, in what was seen as an attempt at damage control. "The bottom line is, I misspoke and I'm sorry if that, you know, offended anyone," Schwarzenegger said at a news conference. "But it was a language problem, because I meant securing our borders rather than closing our borders."

Schwarzenegger, who is an Austrian immigrant, also emphasized that his statement should not be interpreted as an anti-immigrant position. "I think the most important thing to note is I am a champion of immigrants," said the governor. "I promote immigration. I am an immigrant myself. I think it's extremely important that we do it in a legal way."

Indeed, Schwarzenegger used the speech to the newspaper editors and publishers to endorse proposals that are considered by some as friendly to immigrants, such as US President George W. Bush's plan to offer temporary work permits to workers in the agriculture sector and other industries. This proposal has not advanced because of opposition from members of Bush's own Republican Party (see SourceMex, 2005-01-12).

Some critics contend Schwarzenegger has made his anti-immigrant stance evident through his policies, which have sought to reduce funding for programs that primarily help the immigrant community. For example, they say, the governor has proposed elimination of a state office that coordinates local health agencies along the California-Mexico border and ending a US$1.5 million program that provides assistance to immigrants who want become citizens. In both cases, he has cited a lack of state money. Earlier this year, Schwarzenegger endorsed congressional legislation authorizing the expansion of a fence along California's border with Mexico (see SourceMex, 2005-03-30).

Critics on the opposite end of the spectrum say Schwarzenegger has not been supportive enough of initiatives to overturn existing benefits for undocumented immigrants. One initiatives sought
to deny drivers' licenses for undocumented immigrants. Another initiative would have required undocumented immigrants to pay out-of-state tuition when registering at California colleges and universities.

**Schwarzenegger endorses Minuteman Project**

While Schwarzenegger's apology appeared to ease some criticism of his anti-immigrant stance, the governor's positions came under scrutiny again a week later when he issued a statement in praise of a private citizens' group called the Civil Homeland Defense (CHD) and its Minuteman Project.

Under the project, the CHD recruited hundreds of volunteers to patrol a section of the Arizona-Sonora border during April to discourage illegal crossings and to assist the US Border Patrol in detaining undocumented immigrants (see SourceMex, 2005-03-30). "I think they've done a terrific job," Schwarzenegger said of the Minuteman Project volunteers. "They've cut down the crossing of illegal immigrants a huge percentage. So it just shows that it works when you go and make an effort and when you work hard. It's a doable thing."

CHD organizers welcomed Schwarzenegger's support. "It's gratifying to see that elected officials are responding to the will of the people," said Chris Simcox, an organizer with the Minuteman Project. While supporting the CHD, which plans an operation similar to the Minuteman Project in California this June, Schwarzenegger also took a swipe at federal immigration policy. "It's just that our federal government is not doing [its] job," said the governor. "It's a shame that the private citizen has to go in there and start patrolling our borders."

Critics say the California governor's statement on closing the border and his support for the Minuteman project represent an attempt to use a growing anti-immigrant sentiment among some California citizens to bolster his sagging popularity. According to the Los Angeles Times, some polls indicate that Schwarzenegger's approval ratings have fallen about 20 percentage points since January.

Schwarzenegger's tactics, critics say, are reminiscent of those employed by former Gov. Pete Wilson, a proponent of Proposition 187, which sought to deny basic services to undocumented immigrants (see SourceMex, 1994-11-02). The measure was approved by California citizens but later overturned by the courts.

Some analysts said there is good reason for the similarities between Schwarzenegger's and Wilson's positions on immigration. Many of Schwarzenegger's top advisors previously worked in the Wilson administration. "They have played this card before," said Bruce Cain, director of the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California.

Cain was quick to note, however, that political strategy may be only a small part of Schwarzenegger's tough stance on illegal immigration. "It's possible this is a conscious strategy, but I also believe this is true to his heart," he told the Los Angeles Times.
Other California Republicans have taken offered their own proposals to crack down on illegal immigration. One initiative, drafted by Assemblyman Ray Haynes, would ask California voters to approve the creation of a state border patrol of more than 1,000 officers and volunteers. "The federal government has proven itself incapable of securing our borders, so it is time for Californians to step up and take matters into our own hands," Haynes said. Haynes and his supporters, who want the measure on the ballot in 2006, face an uphill battle to collect 600,000 valid signatures.

A previous anti-immigrant initiative, which would have prohibited undocumented immigrants from obtaining drivers' licenses and qualifying for public benefits, failed to gain enough signatures to qualify for the ballot.

**Immigration issue could highlight border governors’ meeting**

Another criticism of Schwarzenegger's tough stance on illegal immigration is the potential damage to relations with Mexico. The issue is likely to become a major point of contention at the upcoming meeting of border governors in Torreon, Coahuila state, in August.

Chihuahua Gov. Jose Reyes Baeza criticized Schwarzenegger's endorsement of the "barbaric" actions of the CHD and the Minutemen Project, which he said could overshadow efforts by border governors to forge economic, political, and social agreements. "For Mexican governors it is not easy to discuss these issues if we have to first deal with a much more serious and contentious problem such as immigration," Reyes Baeza told reporters.

Sonora Gov. Eduardo Bourc Castelo said he has asked governors of Baja California, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Chihuahua, to join with him in signing an official statement criticizing Schwarzenegger's support for the CHD. Other critics say Schwarzenegger's has done very little to expand economic and trade relations with Mexico, which is California's top trading partner. Mexico imports an estimated US$17 billion in computers, electronics and other products from California.

Schwarzenegger's predecessors Pete Wilson and Gray Davis made official trips to Mexico during their respective terms in office, but the current California governor has yet to travel south of the border in an official capacity. "[There] is a definite message that he sends to the public and to Mexico, that they are not a factor and the people who come from Mexico are not a factor to be considered," said Nativo Lopez, president of the California-based Mexican American Political Association.

Schwarzenegger aides point out, however, that the governor has met with visiting Mexican officials, including Baja California Gov. Eugenio Elorduy Walther and Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Ernesto Derbez. The California governor also insists that California remains on good terms with Mexico. "We have a terrific relationship with Mexico," Schwarzenegger said. "I filmed four movies in Mexico; I love to go on vacation to Mexico. We have a great trade agreement with Mexico." (Sources: Associated Press, 04/19/05, 04/20/05; El Universal, The San Jose Mercury News, 04/21/05; The San Diego Union-Tribune, 05/05/05; Los Angeles Times, 04/21/05, 04/29/05, 04/30/05, 05/05/05, 05/06/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 04/09/05, 05/06/05; La Jornada, 05/03/05, 05/06/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 05/06/05, 05/09/05)