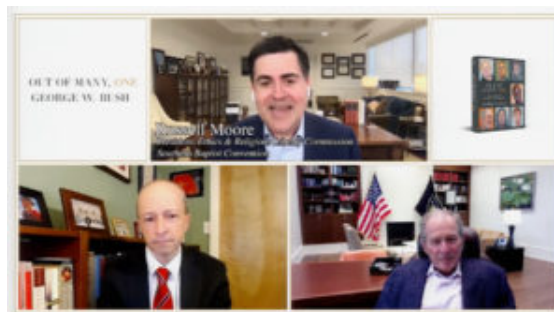


Bush seeks to humanize immigration debate

May 6, 2021

DALLAS—Rather than engage in policy debates about immigration, former President George W. Bush said he wanted to “paint a positive picture”—quite literally—of immigrants that “rises above the noise” and humanizes a complex issue.



Former President George W. Bush was joined by Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, and Yuval Levin of the American Enterprise Institute for an online discussion of immigration. (Screen capture image)

In a May 6 [online event](#) sponsored by the George W. Bush Institute, in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission and the National Immigration Forum, Bush discussed his new book, [Out of Many, One: Portraits of America’s Immigrants](#).

The book features a collection of 43 portraits of immigrants painted by Bush, along with their personal stories. Proceeds from the sale of the book

benefit organizations helping to resettle immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Moderator Russell Moore, president of the ERLC, and Yuval Levin, director of social, cultural and constitutional studies at the American Enterprise Institute, joined Bush for the online forum.

Bush described the basic principle informing his views on immigration—and more particularly, on immigrants: “All life is precious, and we’re all God’s children.”

“If that’s how you view immigration, then you don’t view people with a hostile eye. You view them with a loving eye,” he said.

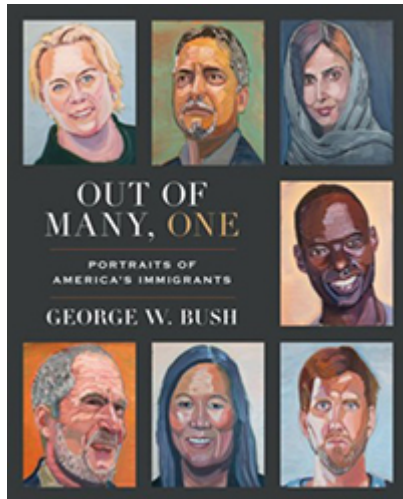
Bush characterized the immigration system in the United States as “broken” and “fractured,” but he offered hope of “bringing people together” to seek solutions—even in incremental steps—to the problems surrounding immigration.

“I campaigned on immigration reform in 2000 and 2004, and nothing got done. ... And nothing’s been done since,” he said.

In the years since he left office, immigration debate grew increasingly acrimonious due in large part to “a populist streak ... that turns nativist at times,” he observed.

‘Immigrants enhance our culture’

People who “view immigration with alarm” forget about the benefits immigrants have brought to the United States, he added.



Bush said Ken Mehlman—former chair of the Republican National Committee and director of the White House Office of Political Affairs—approached him saying, “We need your voice” to speak about immigration. Bush declined, saying he purposely avoided criticizing those who succeeded him in the Oval Office.

However, when he proposed the idea of painting portraits of immigrants, Bush recalled saying, “That’s a really good idea.” In the process, he also told the individual stories of each of his subjects and how they have contributed to American society.

“We should not fear the erosion of a culture. Immigrants enhance our culture,” Bush said.

How the United States responds to immigrants not only is an issue revealing the nation’s character, but also is an issue with serious economic implications, he added. The “freedom to succeed” and the “freedom to realize potential” attracts immigrants who are creative, hard-working and entrepreneurial, he insisted.

“We benefit economically when people come to do work that needs to be done or when people bring an innovative sense of tomorrow with them,” he said. “And yet, the system doesn’t recognize that now. It’s antiquated, it’s broken, it’s complicated, and it’s confusing. And there’s too much anger.”

Move beyond anger and fear

Moving beyond anger and fear directed toward immigrants requires

leadership, Bush asserted.

“It takes leaders willing to stand up and make the case of why one shouldn’t fear but one should welcome. ... Frankly, there’s been a lack of leadership on the issue because it’s become too politicized,” he said. “It is a very hot political issue. And once an issue becomes politically hot, it’s very difficult to paint a positive picture that rises above the noise.”

Bush suggested reform of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals—a program that allows work permits for individuals who were brought to the United States illegally when they were children—as a first step that could gain broad-based support.

Likewise, a “rational labor policy” that would provide a way for migrants to enter the country legally to work would enhance border security, because they no longer have to “sneak across the border,” he said.

Turning to the issue of asylum, he also recommended appointing more judges capable of granting asylum, as well as working on ways for asylum-seekers to receive that status at consulates within their countries of origin.

Immigration reform “ought to be an issue dear to all religious people,” Bush said.

“It seems to me in the recent past that churches—particularly white evangelical churches—have become political instruments,” he said, calling for “a religious awakening” and “revival of mission.”