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Mehlman Tries to Bridge Gap on Immigration

By JON SARCHE

The Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. - Trying to bridge a growing chasm in his party over immigration reform, Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman said Thursday the nation needs both a temporary worker program and consequences for illegal aliens.

Opening the party's annual meeting of state chairmen in this conservative bastion, Mehlman borrowed a page from President Reagan, saying the party must practice "the politics of 'and,'" meaning people on both sides of the debate have to come together to accomplish reform.



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"There has been a lot of rhetoric about this issue over the last few months, but in my opinion, not enough communicating; too much talking and not enough listening," he said. "I want to speak to both sides of the immigration debate, and I am here to say that both sides are right and both sides are wrong, and no good will happen until they come together to discuss the issue, not politicize it."

The immigration debate has split both parties. Democrats differ on how to accomplish border security, while the GOP is trying to walk the line between businesses that need foreign workers and conservatives who want a crackdown. Legislation in Congress has stalled.

Mehlman said the borders must be secured, but mass deportations would be impractical. Stricter enforcement of immigration laws is also necessary, including holding employers accountable for hiring illegal immigrants, he said.

He called for a temporary worker program that would meet the demand for immigrant workers while being fair to legal immigrants working toward citizenship. Consequences could include fines or forcing illegal



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immigrants to return home before reapplying for a visa.



"These are subjects for us to decide together, in a civil discussion as a party and as a nation," he said.

The Republican Party must play a lead role to strengthen its support among the growing Hispanic population, Mehlman said.

"My friends, Hispanics are red-staters, and do you know why? Because we agree on so many vital issues," he said.

Mehlman said polls have shown Hispanics "overwhelmingly" support tax cuts, many prefer private insurance over government programs and 57 percent identify themselves as anti-abortion.

"We have the opportunity right now to reach out, not to pander, but to make sure this growing community knows that on so many of the issues they care about, we are on the same page," Mehlman said.

Colorado GOP Chairman Bob Martinez said of immigration: "We don't need to inflame the rhetoric. We need to listen to the arguments and think about the future impact."

He and Mehlman said Democrats blocked progress on immigration reform in a political move to prompt voters to blame Republicans for a lack of action.

"But 'good for your party' isn't what we should talk about here, 'good for your country' is what we should talk about here," Mehlman said. "We can find a solution that will do our nation and all of its people proud by making sure we always remain a nation of the rule of law and a nation of immigrants."

On the Net:

Republican National Committee: <http://www.gop.com>

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