

News

## Esther J. Cepeda: Lies deserve no sympathy



covered presidential politics and the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings in a high-profile reporting job at The Washington Post is going on network television to announce he is an illegal immigrant. (AP Photo/Define American)

By **BAY AREA NEWS GROUP** |

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In retelling last week's revelation that Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas is an illegal immigrant, civil rights metaphors have been trotted out to describe the plight of a talented young man who got caught up in an immigration mess but, through his shocking confession, has become to some people a new American hero.

But if a charismatic reporter with good intentions and the capacity to commit many different kinds of personal deceptions and federal offenses is the latest poster boy for the sad state of the melting pot, America's in big trouble.

Anyone with an ounce of compassion who read Vargas' essay "Outlaw: My life in America as an undocumented immigrant" from last Sunday's New York Times Magazine couldn't have helped feeling the heart stir with sadness. A 12-year-old child was given up by a mother who only wished for her son to have a decent life. Until Vargas tried to get a driver's license, he believed that he was a legal U.S. resident.

The rest of Vargas' story makes the stomach ache.

His grandfather, a legal resident of the United States, smuggled Vargas into California under a false name with a fake passport and used it to obtain an authentic, but restricted, Social Security card that they later altered at a local Kinko's copy center to look as though Vargas was U.S.-born and thus a citizen.

Despite Vargas' anxieties about being an imposter, guilt over his web of lies, and his ever-present fear of getting caught, he excelled in high school as a choir member and journalist. The academic success led to his first flirtation with "coming out" of the illegal-immigrant closet: with the assistance of his scholastic "underground railroad" of school administrator friends who even considered adopting him, an immigration lawyer was consulted. He learned that the only way to get right with the law would have been to go back to the

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He didn't consider returning to his family a viable option and instead went to the neighboring state of Oregon where, with the help of friends, he obtained the driver's license that would allow him to use a car, travel by airplane, and take jobs in media, some of which included reporting on illegal-immigration issues.

A journalistic rock star, his full complement of fake IDs even got him past the Secret Service and into the White House to report on a state dinner and interview senior aides.

What the public was supposed to take from Vargas' "heroic" admission is that illegal immigrants generally are people who don't mean to break any laws, tell any lies, or hurt anyone's feelings but are forced to do so because of the draconian and unjust immigration laws in this country. And they're not just janitors, nannies or grass-mowers, but also professionals who make many great contributions to society.

Here's what I, and many others, took from it.

Someone can lie to almost every person and institution he's come in contact with while in the U.S., then cloak himself in the American flag and, using the parlance of American civil rights history, morph into a high-profile activist with little chance of being deported.

And never mind that respected colleagues were humiliated. A profession that is already suffering from perceptions of liberal political bias was further tarred. And in newsrooms and offices around the country, Hispanic and Asian professionals may be feeling now, more than ever, that their honesty and residency status are also in doubt. That's supposed to be OK, because immigration reform is such an important issue.

Even for those who have great empathy for the struggles of people who come to this country to work hard, even for low wages, for a shot at the mythical "better life," it's almost impossible to not be deeply disturbed by the self-promotion disguised as sacrifice, the blatant criminal activity and distasteful comparisons to the experiences of African-Americans in their struggle for equality.

This latest attempt at putting a human and familiar face on immigration-policy concerns will go largely ignored or, at worse, backfire because though Vargas is a powerful storyteller, his chronicle isn't really all that easy to commiserate with.

If he meant to inspire compassion for any of the other 11 million illegal immigrants who wouldn't expect to be spared the full weight of legal repercussions if they ran to the media, he has left many unmoved.

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