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Editorial

“Falling Behind the EU.”

Immigration arguments always inspire fears. That has been a constant in this republic since its inception, despite the fact that immigrants have been the secret to the nation's strength, vitality and innovation.

But while Congress has been paralyzed by the fear of zealots who don't want even the slightest acknowledgment that many undocumented workers are good for the economy, lawmakers also have been foolish when dealing with the other end of the spectrum -- the need to help legal, highly educated workers come here.

And while Congress has dithered, the European Union has recognized an opportunity. Last month, the EU introduced a new "blue card," which acts as a temporary work visa for educated professionals. The message it sends is clear. While the U.S. dollar is shrinking in value and American leaders clearly don't want foreigners on their shores, the European Union is laying a giant welcome mat for people who can help its surging economies.

Getting a blue card will take one to three months. By contrast, it can take up to 10 years to obtain a green card from the United States. The irony is that many foreign students are being educated at U.S. universities, but they are being forced to go overseas to work because of the difficulties they encounter.

To stay here, high-tech workers can obtain what are known as H1-B visas. But the United States has an annual quota of 85,000 of these, and that number disappears quickly. In addition, Congress is considering a bill that would dramatically increase an employer's cost to obtain such a visa for a worker.

Fear lies behind these moves. Some people worry that foreign professionals will drive down the wages of American workers with the same skills. They don't understand how companies need the freedom to attract the best and brightest workers in order to keep up in a competitive world. Nor do they see how high-tech giants, such as Google and Microsoft, may simply relocate overseas if they can't bring those workers here.

Critics of immigration reform don't know history. Immigration has been a constant help to this nation from the beginning. Unfortunately, the folks across the Atlantic seem to be learning that secret.