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The RNC Meets to Draft Their Platform: Sparks Fly on the Issue of Illegal Immigration

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by Shushannah Walshe

Minneapolis—

All eyes may be on Denver this week, but the Republican National Committee began their meetings to draft an election platform today ahead of next week's convention. Sparks flew when delegates got into debate over illegal immigration, which reflected where John McCain originally stood on the issue, but has now taken a more conservative stance.

Delegates were split into different subcommittees and it was in the national security meeting where members got into heated discussion surrounding the issues of amnesty and English as the official language of the United States.

Two delegates wanted to harden the language surrounding the issue of amnesty. The draft read, "We oppose amnesty." But, delegates from North Carolina and Colorado wanted to include opposition to "comprehensive immigration reform" because they believe it is a code word for amnesty. This sparked a heated discussion between members with a delegate from Washington DC who said that the Republican Party is a "not a xenophobic party, not an intolerant party. We are a compassionate party that insists on the rule of law and endorses federal law," said Bud McFarlane. Kendal Unruh from Colorado, who wanted to include "opposition to comprehensive immigration reform" to the draft, seemed to take offense to that statement citing her missionary work and saying that she would "never have the label" of xenophobic "slapped on me." She continued to press that the committee add the tougher language to stop "behind the door tactics" to prevent "amnesty" of illegal aliens.

McFarlane was joined by several other members including from border states such as New Mexico that said if the amendment was added it would give the impression that the Republican Party was not interested in fixing the immigration problems facing the country and the Republicans had "historically welcomed immigrants."

Unruh cited McCain's departure from his original immigration legislation as a reason for adding the opposition to comprehensive immigration reform, "Our nominee has tried to use this language and he has now backed away, Unruh said. "If he has backed away from it then I think it is OK to put it in writing." Unruh was referring to McCain's original immigration legislation last year that called for reforming the immigration system by tightening the U.S. borders, while providing a path to citizenship for twelve million illegal immigrants. The legislation did not pass and McCain now rejects that stance. After much debate the amendment was not adopted and the

language will remain as, “We oppose amnesty” without a mention of comprehensive immigration reform.

The immigration debate continued when the topic of English being the “accepted” language of the country opposed to the “official” language of the United States. The draft stated that English is the “common” and “accepted” language. The delegates from North Carolina and Colorado again wanted stronger language to make English the “official” language of the country.

Sam Winder from New Mexico wanted to add language that welcomed other languages, but did state that English was the official language of the country. Disagreement between the two sides continued, but a compromise was agreed on and put into the draft.

The debate was filled with words such as a “friendly debate” and “respectful disagreement” but it was clear that behind the friendly terminology there was real dispute among the members, especially with the thorny issue of illegal immigration.

Another topic under national security was how strong the language in the platform should be concerning Iran. The delegate from Illinois, Rich Williamson took a swipe at Barack Obama with an amendment to pledge that there be no discussions with Iran until they suspend uranium enrichment and end their support of terrorism. He said this is one of the “clear contrasts” with Obama and John McCain and it shows the “substantial experience” that McCain has on the issue of national security.

One change from the 2004 Republican platform is there is no mention of President Bush in the document after the preamble. In the 2004 platform document Bush was mentioned over 200 times. The committee says this is not to distance itself from President Bush and his low approval ratings, but rather that the document was more of a “state of the union” that praised and approved the first term of President Bush. The committee also wanted a shorter document than the last platform draft—it is half the size of the last document.

The RNC calls this platform drafting process the most transparent and open in their history. They received over 12,000 submissions from the public via YouTube addressing concerns people wanted to see in the platform. Over the next two days the blueprint will be written and they hope to finish the document tomorrow night before it is voted on the convention floor Monday.