14th Amendment is too important to be repealed

The Founding Fathers intentionally made it difficult to change the U.S. Constitution. Proposed amendments require approval by two-thirds of both the House and Senate and their adoption requires ratification by three-fourths of the states. Thus, the Constitution is rarely amended, only 27 times since 1789.

Nonetheless, a growing group of influential Republican lawmakers, GOP Senate whip Jon Kyl of Arizona and Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, to name two, are saying the 14th Amendment should be repealed or rewritten. The idea was given greater credenza last week when Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky said, “that’s something we clearly need to look at.”

The 14th Amendment was ratified in 1868 to clean up some of the legal mess left by the Civil War. The amendment has five sections, some of them now archaic — the federal government was not responsible for debts incurred by the Confederacy in the course of the Civil War and former slaveholders would not be compensated for the emancipation of their slaves.

It is Section 1 that preoccupies some Republicans. That section states that “all people born or naturalized in the United States” are citizens of the United States. The section also guarantees to all people “the equal protection of the laws.”

Constitutional historian Richard Beeman writes in his newly issued Penguin Guide to the Constitution: “Perhaps the most significant and far-reaching amendment to the Constitution, the Fourteenth Amendment is viewed by many scholars and jurists as the provision of the Constitution that has brought the principles enunciated in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence into the realm of constitutional law.”

In other words, equality, life, liberty, property and pursuit of happiness were now constitutionally protected rights.

Repealing the right to equal protection of the laws does not seem like particularly smart politics, but the proponents of repeal are after the clause that makes all people born in the U.S. citizens of the United States. Absent that protection we can deport the U.S.-born children of illegal immigrants along with their parents.

There are anecdotal tales of rings that, for a large fee, bring pregnant women to the U.S. so their children born here can claim citizenship. What if, in the future, the children of all those children are born to parents in the U.S. but with no legal rights? A better solution would be a comprehensive immigration reform, perhaps like that proposed by Sen. John McCain of Arizona and Sen. Richard Durbin of Illinois.

The program’s multi-disciplinary approach will merge academic coursework with hands-on construction and housing rehabilitation. CVYB will show young people how to build new homes for people in need and new lives for themselves. Interestingly, many of the homes that they will build or renovate will be in their own neighborhoods.

A viable CVYB will help all of us. The program’s strong emphasis on education, community service and leadership development will enhance each participant’s economic self-sufficiency and self-esteem by providing them with opportunities for meaningful work and service to our local communities.

CVYB will help low-income individuals and families by expanding the supply of permanent affordable housing in their neighborhoods. CVYB will also enhance our local economy. The Concho Valley Workforce Development Board, for example, estimates that the program will directly lead to 39 new jobs and a direct economic effect of more than $1.1 million on our local communities by the end of its second year of operation.

I am optimistic that CVYB will expand the capacity of San Angelo to advance our community’s quality of life. Plenty of studies show that strong families, engagement in school, encouraging friends and a safe environment make a difference for youth. Community actions and collaborations, not just individuals and agencies, create these qualities of life and spread them throughout the community.

As a community, however, we must work together to transform common perceptions of at-risk youth from social burdens to untapped resources by showing our strong support and interest in CVYB, financially and otherwise. For example, we can promote in-school dialogues and use other community venues to learn about the needs of local at-risk and out-of-school youth.

Together, we can spread the word about the critical need for, and benefits of, alternative education programs such as CVYB. We must work to strengthen local partnerships that seek to refocus our attention on our young people and continue to make San Angelo a great place to raise a family.

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