

Whose Side Are You On?

By Tom Barry | June 1, 2005

Whose side are you on? That's the question that President George W. Bush asked in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. And he gave the world his answer and warning: "Either you are with us or against us."¹

The president has not retreated from his "them-versus-us" framing of international affairs. At home, restrictionist groups demanding a clampdown on legal and illegal immigration are framing the immigration debate in the same dualistic terms. They insist that U.S. political leaders tell the public whose side they are on—the side of pro-immigrant groups, or the side of the opponents of "mass immigration," "open borders," and "immigrant terrorists."

The "whose side are you on" question about immigration is sparking political fires across the country—from U.S. border communities in southeastern Arizona, where citizen vigilantes proudly say they are protecting the "home front," to the halls of Congress. An increasingly powerful caucus of Republican representatives is pushing to close the borders to the immigrants that stream across on a daily basis and to deport the 9 – 10 million unauthorized immigrants living within U.S. borders.

Anti-immigrant movements are, of course, nothing new in the United States. Campaigns against new immigrants have generally coincided with the business cycle, rising in intensity with economic slowdowns, declining in times of prosperity. There are two main corollaries to this rule. One, the U.S. public generally views immigrants with more or less hostility according to the color of their skin, their English-speaking abilities, and the degree to which their religions and cultures depart from Judeo-Christianity and what conservative Harvard scholar Samuel P. Huntington calls the "American Creed."² Two, in times of war, immigrants from nations in conflict with the United States are especially suspect.

Grassroots campaigns that blame immigrants for job losses and declining wage levels, as well as charges that fault the immigrant population for crime and public health crises, have coursed through U.S. history, ebbing and surging in response to economic and political circumstances. Certainly, the deepening sense of vulnerability experienced by many U.S. citizens today in the face of downsizing, outsourcing, stagnant wages, labor union decline, and the steady loss of medical and retirement benefits explains part of the rising anti-immigrant backlash.

But now, the restrictionist forces come to the public debate armed with a righteousness that goes beyond per-

ceived economic threats from foreign workers.

Immigration restrictionism is increasingly framed as key to homeland and cultural protection. Most of the allied anti-immigrant forces argue that the War on Terror cannot be successfully fought without gaining total control of U.S. borders, downsizing the resident immigrant population, and severely restricting new immigration.

Propelling the restrictionist movement is an unprecedented nationwide network of anti-immigrant think tanks, policy institutes, and statewide campaigns focused on mobilizing public opinion and lobbying legislators. The leading national restrictionist organizations—both in immigration and language issues—are part of an institutional network that emerged from the population control, environmental, and "carrying-capacity" movements in the late 1970s. In the view of a break-off faction of Zero Population Growth's (ZPG) board of directors, "population control" in the United States suddenly became synonymous with "immigration control."

In 1979, John Tanton and several other former board members of ZPG formed the country's first anti-immigrant policy institute, the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). In addition to being a cofounder and current board member of FAIR, Tanton has been a key figure in establishing and funding a phalanx of anti-immigrant and "English Only" institutes, including NumbersUSA, the Center for Immigration Studies, Population-Environment Balance, U.S. English, ProEnglish, Social Contract Press, and U.S. Inc.³ Other leading restrictionist groups include Project USA, Americans for Immigration Control, and Americans for Better Immigration.

Although these institutes are politically situated on the right and within the umbrella of the Republican Party, they operate outside the political network of the right's leading think tanks and policy institutes, such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation—organizations that are closely associated with corporate interests and therefore opposed to the restrictionist agenda. The restrictionist institutes are, however, linked with these and other right-wing organizations through the main conservative foundations that fund both groups.⁴

Late last year, the increasingly powerful House Immigration Caucus and its allies, working in coalition with the House



hawks, managed to obstruct the quick passage of the Intelligence Reform Bill by tagging immigration restrictionist measures on it. This was a wake-up call to the political establishment that the business-as-usual approach to immigration policy was no longer viable. Then came the resounding approval by Arizona voters of the Protect Arizona Now referendum, which authorized the denial of state services to undocumented immigrants and closer cooperation between all state employees in alerting authorities to the presence of immigrants lacking legal documentation.

The U.S. public may have missed these turning points, but it's been near impossible to miss the flood of media reports about the "immigration crisis." The reports resound with escalating alarmism about the threats of immigrants to our national security, culture, and economy. The border is commonly referred to as "Terrorist Alley," and crazed vigilantes in the desert borderlands are projected nationally as voices of reason and patriotism. The main message echoing through the media is that the combination of terrorism, mass immigration, and unprotected borders constitute the country's utmost security threat. Anti-immigrant forces have effectively seized the notion of homeland security in their campaign to transform U.S. borders into barriers, deport all immigrants here illegally, halt all immigration from Islamic countries, penalize firms that hire "illegals," and move toward creating a national ID card.

Anti-immigrant activists have used the terrorist threat to stir up popular xenophobia, racism, and fear of immigrants. Mark Krikorian, for example, president of the Center for Immigration Studies, quotes Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and other high administration officials to bolster his case that the "home front" must be our first defense against terrorism. According to Wolfowitz, "Since last September, the home front has become a battlefield every bit as real as any we've known before."⁵

These activists argue that since we can't defeat the terrorists on the battlefield in conventional warfare, U.S. citizens and their government must find new ways to respond to this "asymmetric warfare." Shutting down the borders and shoving out the "illegals" is the most effective and logical first step. "Immigration control is to asymmetric warfare what missile defense is to strategic warfare," Krikorian asserts. Homeland defense must embrace an immigration-control policy with "layers overseas, at the borders, and inside the country." The militarism of this new immigration/anti-terrorism policy is also on display at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), where DHS Under Secretary Asa Hutchinson described the visa process in September 2003 as a "forward-based defense" against terrorists and criminals.

Republican Kansas Senator Sam Brownback, one of the country's leading hawks, gives the DHS credit for making progress in "securing our borders." Yet more needs to be done, according to Brownback, and all citizens can enlist in the War on Terror. "While the battle may be waged on several fronts," says the Senator, "for the man or woman on the street, immigration is in many ways the front line of our defense."⁶

Based on the immigration-terrorism connection, anti-immigrant groups have made inroads within the traditionally pro-immigrant neoconservative camp. Most of the leading neoconservatives, especially Jews and Catholics, have a strong sense of their immigrant origins. Moreover, the neoconservatives have regarded immigration flows of both cheap and skilled workers as an unmitigated benefit for U.S. corporations and hence the U.S. economy. However, neoconservatives are fierce opponents of affirmative action programs and government-sponsored bilingual education and are also proponents of "Official English" laws. The 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror have caused many neocons to back away from their pro-immigrant posture.

The Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD), a neocon think tank that focuses almost exclusively on promoting an Israeli-centered U.S. foreign policy, includes Richard Lamm on its board of advisers. In an FDD policy paper, Lamm, the former Colorado governor who is one of the country's most prominent cultural nationalists, reframed his restrictionist positions within the new framework of counterterrorism. Asserting that the 9/11 attacks forever changed "the nature of warfare" for the United States, Lamm, who also serves on the board of advisers of FAIR, warned, "America is now the battlefield and every American is a potential target." We ignore this fact, he insists, at our peril. And "if we wish to respond to this new type of warfare," he says, "we must confront the relationship between immigration and terrorism."

Criticizing President Bush's State of the Union address, Republican Colorado Representative Tom Tancredo, who heads the House Immigration Reform Caucus, asked: "Why is it so difficult for the president to integrate the concept of border security into homeland security? Is there anyone on the planet who does not realize that terrorists take advantage of porous borders? Is it possible that any president would put the economic interests of corporations addicted to cheap labor ahead of the safety of American men, women, and children?"⁷

While the anti-immigrant din has grown louder in Washington, even that rhetoric fails to capture the surge of rage, fear, xenophobia, and indignation experienced outside the beltway. Across the country—and especially on the Southwestern border—the concept of a "home front" in the war against terrorism has become a source of vigilante activism. Citizen

militias like Project Minuteman and American Border Patrol believe that the United States is “under siege” by “hordes of illegal aliens.” Emblematic of the rising anti-immigrant rage in the borderlands is Stop the Invasion, which includes as part of its homepage banner a drawing depicting white Texans making the last stand in the Alamo against Santa Anna’s Mexican troops.

For the immigrants themselves, the “home front” is an increasingly deadly zone. Dehydration, freezing, and armed gangs that prey on immigrants have left a body count of more than 2,000 dead migrants in the U.S. borderlands since 1998 when border walls and intensified concentration of the Border Patrol in California and parts of the Texas border began to force immigrants to take more hazardous routes through vast stretches of desolate desert and rugged mountain terrain.

Soon after the dust settled from the 2004 elections, the most divisive issue to dominate the political landscape—even more so than Social Security—became U.S. immigration policy. Fierce opposition started coming from inside the president’s own party over his promotion of a guest worker program and his refusal to further restrict immigration. Although orchestrated by a small clique of beltway policy institutes, the anti-immigrant emotions pulsing through the country now count on a palpable grassroots base. Restrictionist views have been spreading throughout the country, effectively fanned by the media. They feed on rapidly changing perceptions about national, economic, and cultural security.

The alarmism over immigration has not only clouded the political landscape but threatens to reorganize it. It had been the conventional wisdom within the Democratic Party that by supporting “liberal” immigration policies, such as family reunification and legalization of the undocumented population, they would expand their political base among Latinos. Recognizing the political potential of the expanding Latino population, President Bush initially broached a variation on this theme during the early months of his first administration.

Although neither the Republican nor Democratic Party leadership have yet discarded this political strategy, both parties have been inching away from earlier policy commitments regarding the regularization of the 10 million illegal residents. Given the tide of anti-immigrant backlash and Arizona Latinos’ surprising one-out-of-four support for the Protect Arizona Now legislation, Democrats and Republicans alike are beginning to weigh the political costs of supporting immigration policies that are being described as anti-worker, pro-big business, and weak on homeland security.

The *National Review*’s December 31 cover article, “GOP Be Warned,” by neoconservative pundit and author David Frum, makes the case that “no issue, not one, threatens to

do more damage to the Republican coalition than immigration.” He and others have pointed out that prominent Democrats, notably Hillary Clinton, are bucking Democratic Party political correctness by expressing concern about immigrants overrunning communities in rural New York. According to Frum, “There’s no issue where the beliefs and interests of the party rank-and-file diverge more radically from the beliefs and interests of the party’s leaders.”

The “them-versus-us” framework that the Bush administration has superimposed on its counterterrorism strategy has tapped into some of the most base sentiments in U.S. society—its sense of moral and cultural superiority, its racist characterization of foreigners and their societies, its isolationism and U.S.-centric view of international affairs, and an underlying fear of losing its power and privilege.

Until the publication of Samuel P. Huntington’s book *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, anti-immigrant arguments based on cultural nationalism were relegated to the dark corners of the right-wing’s old guard. There, white supremacists and nativists weaved conspiracy theories and xenophobic fantasies with relatively little mainstream attention. But Huntington, most famous for his previous book *The Clash of Civilizations*, raised cultural nationalism to a new, intellectually acceptable level. “In this new era,” he wrote, “the single most immediate and most serious challenge to America’s traditional identity comes from the immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially Mexico.” Huntington makes the case that unlike previous immigrants, Mexican-Americans are not interested in assimilating. “As their numbers increase,” he observed, “Mexican-Americans feel increasingly comfortable with their own culture and often contemptuous of American culture.”

The resurgence of restrictionist sentiment in the United States underscores the spread of the politics of hate and fear across the land. These anti-immigrant campaigns, whether they win or lose, will divide communities along racial, political, and cultural lines and deepen fissures. Even longtime migrant residents, integrated into daily life on all levels but the formal one, will face renewed hostility in their own homes. As immigration restrictionists advance their agenda, the very act of assimilation that they demand of immigrants will become increasingly impossible in deeply polarized communities.

Apart from the severe impact on immigrants themselves, this tide of restrictionism is reinforcing the worst aspects of U.S. isolationist, nationalist, and culturally supremacist attitudes. It has already caused immigrant communities and their supporters to pull back from their creative initiatives to make them more openly participative members of their communities. No longer is there

the political will to support measures that would allow undocumented residents to use their home-country identity papers in the process of opening bank accounts or obtaining loans, for example. The steps taken by communities across the country to grant their non-citizen members stakeholder-status and some measure of legality and respect are now coming under sustained attack.

Equating terrorist threats with immigration has resulted in a steady dilution of immigrant rights and, by extension, increased restraints on the civil liberties of the entire society. The embrace of the “home front” logic of national security has also reinforced the steady militarization of the country’s borders and ports of entry. The anti-immigrant forces believe that terrorism will prove the game-winning trump card. Like the spurious “terrorist” evidence offered to build support for the Iraq invasion, restrictionists are offering their own manufactured proof that the southern border is a “terrorist alley” and the immigrant population represents a clear and present danger. The purported immigration/terrorism link has proved a convenient political vehicle to advance the long-standing agenda of anti-immigrant groups.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Representative Tancredo asked his colleagues: “How many people in this country have to lose their lives before we come to the understanding that the defense of the nation begins at the defense of the borders?”⁸ But not one of the al-Qaida terrorists entered the country through Mexico. Nor did any of them enter as immigrants. Rather they visited the United States on temporary visas. As the Cato Institute’s Daniel Griswold observed: “We could reduce immigration to zero and still not stop terrorists from slipping into the country on temporary, non-immigrant visas.”⁹

Rabid anti-immigration figures like Tancredo, media personality Lou Dobbs, and think tank president Mark Krikorian are betting that they can persuade a credulous U.S. public and Congress to launch a “home front” war against immigrants by casting them as national security threats. Like the war in Iraq, the mounting campaign against immigrants is a dangerous diversion from the real national security task of identifying and dismantling international terrorist networks that threaten our collective security. The “counterterrorism” measures contained in legislation sponsored by House Judiciary Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner, a Wisconsin Republican, of extending the barriers along the U.S.-Mexico border, of

making it more difficult for refugees to gain asylum and of prohibiting illegal immigrants from obtaining driver’s licenses, will prove of little use in capturing Osama bin Laden or preventing another terrorist attack.

The anti-immigrant forces are certainly right, however, in their contention that immigration—legal and illegal—is an issue that needs the urgent attention of policymakers. However, by scapegoating immigrants for so many of the country’s ills—environmental degradation, low wages, tax burdens, crime, social disintegration, and even terrorist threats—the anti-immigration forces are unleashing a vicious backlash movement that’s already deepening the social, economic, and political divides in the nation. In the process, the anti-immigrant groups are diverting popular attention away from the more fundamental causes of the socioeconomic problems that are eroding the substance and spirit of the United States.

“Whose side are you on?” It’s a question that does not merit an answer.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ President George W. Bush, November 6, 2001, White House speech, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011106-4.htm>.
- ² Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).
- ³ “John Tanton,” Right Web Profile (International Relations Center, 2004), <http://rightweb.irc-online.org/ind/tanton/tanton.php>.
- ⁴ The major sources of funding for the restrictionist institutes include the following foundations: Philip M. McKenna Foundation, Jaquelin Hume Foundation, Sarah Scaife Foundation, John M. Olin Foundation, Carthage Foundation and the Scaife Family Foundation.
- ⁵ Mark Krikorian, “Keeping Terror Out: Immigration and Asymmetric Warfare,” *National Interest*, Spring 2004.
- ⁶ “Border Security,” statement of Senator Sam Brownback, <http://brownback.senate.gov/record/BorderSecurity.cfm>.
- ⁷ “Tancredo SOTU Response,” News from Tom Tancredo, February 8, 2005.
- ⁸ Quoted in Daniel Griswold, “Congressman Uses Sept. 11 Terrorism to Advance Anti-Immigration Agenda,” Cato Institute, November 18, 2001.
- ⁹ Daniel Griswold, “Congressman Uses Sept. 11 Terrorism to Advance Anti-Immigration Agenda,” Cato Institute, November 18, 2001.

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