

Which Side Are the Republicans On?

By Tom Barry | March 8, 2006

The anti-immigrant tide, stirred up by policy institutes like the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and the Center for Immigration Studies and by right-wing populists like CNN's Lou Dobbs, caught the Republican Party leadership unawares. A surge of restrictionism in the House of Representatives, led by Rep. Tom Tancredo, resulted in a harshly anti-immigrant House bill last year that threw down the gauntlet, essentially challenging Senate Republicans and the president to stand with the restrictionists or against them.

One of the first to point out the potential divide in the party was neoconservative pundit and author David Frum who in late 2004 in a *National Review* cover article titled, "GOP Be Warned," made the case that "no issue, not one, threatens to do more damage to the Republican coalition than immigration." He added, "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."

Restrictionists like Tancredo have openly criticized the president and his administration for filling the slot as the Republican wing of the "Open Borders Lobby" that comprises the leadership of both political parties, the liberal immigrant advocacy groups, the *Wall Street Journal*, and Corporate America.

So although the immigration restriction agenda has made great gains over the past year, it still does not constitute a Republican consensus. Nor does it have a real comprehensive agenda. If the restrictionists were the anti-elite populists they make themselves out to be in their rhetoric, they would have to take on the favoritism toward big business and the wealthy in issues such as tax cuts and loopholes and not just immigration. Instead they have consolidated an anti-immigrant lobby that has forced the president to back away from his initial proposals to find joint solutions with Mexico, as he promised to do in the first months of his presidency.

The restrictionist cause has been so successful that the party leadership no longer talks in terms of "amnesty" or legalization but rather has made common cause with the restrictionists on border security and anti-immigrant law enforcement. On right-wing and social conservative web sites and blogs, Senate majority leader Bill Frist (R-TN) is

pictured in a flag-draped ad sponsored by the Volunteer Political Action Committee urging readers to "Help Me Secure Our Borders" by supporting him in his effort to fight amnesty proposals, strengthen border controls, and enforce existing immigration legislation.

From Nashville, Senator Frist is leading the Republican Party's campaign to outflank the restrictionists by raising the level of fear-mongering that links immigration to terrorism. Describing immigration as a "dangerous national security threat," the senator warned that the "scariest part" of illegal migration across U.S. borders is that "we have absolutely NO idea what they'll do tomorrow on U.S. soil."

In a Feb. 21 op-ed in the *San Diego Tribune*, Senator Frist warns: "The situation along our border with Mexico now ranks as a national security challenge second only to terrorism." He calls for a "vast enhancement program" that guarantees that we have "physical or electronic barriers covering every inch of our 1,951-mile border with Mexico." According to the Republican Party leader, "Our insecure, leaky southern border presents a clear and present danger to the safety and welfare of all Americans."

Proposals for new guest worker and other temporary worker programs continue to surface in Congress but are being quickly beaten back by restrictionists who believe that law enforcement and new punitive legislation aimed at immigrants is the only way to address what Senator Frist terms the "clear and present danger." Their success in framing the immigration debate has pushed even limited guest worker proposals off the table for now and succeeded in characterizing them as fronts for immigrant legalization.



One more sign of the extent that the restrictionists have shifted the immigration debate toward the right is the newly proposed compromise bill introduced by Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA). In addition to tough border enforcement measures, the bill calls for the expansion of the crime “alien smuggling” to include those who shelter unauthorized immigrants. And rather than address the labor-market issue through legalization or guest worker programs, Specter proposes a new six-year visa that would be issued to current immigrant workers in “essential occupations” such as meatpacking, hotels, and restaurants. This H-2C visa offers no path to permanent legal residency or citizenship. Quite the contrary, immigrants issued these visas would be required to return to their country of origin after the visa expires.

The GOP is taking the restrictionist resurgence seriously. Rather than confronting the complex reality of immigration as both a border control issue and a labor-market issue, the Republican Party—along with many Democrats—seems to have decided that appealing to fear and hate, whether about immigrants or terrorists, is the safest political option when talking to U.S. voters.

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Volunteer Political Action Committee
<http://volpac.org/index.cfm?FuseAction=About.Volpac>

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