

The Right's "War for the Free World": U.S. Immigration Debate Splits Conservatives

By Tom Barry | August 2, 2006

Leading conservatives recently sent an open letter to President Bush and congressional leaders stating that "enforcement first" measures should be central to any immigration policy reform. The conservatives, including such right-wing luminaries as William Buckley, Phyllis Schlafly, and William Bennett, called for the country's political leaders to remember that "we are in the middle of a global war on terror."

The conservative manifesto comes on the heels of another statement on immigration policy by pro-immigration conservatives published in the *Wall Street Journal* on July 10. "The Conservative Statement for Immigration Reform," signed by 33 prominent conservatives including Jack Kemp, William Kristol, and George Shultz, calls for the creation of new legal channels for immigrants "drawn to the jobs created by our economy." That same day a *Journal* editorial titled "Conservatives and Immigration" reiterated the paper's "longstanding position favoring open immigration."

This summer the immigration debate in the United States has heated up as conservatives of all tendencies—social conservatives, neoconservatives, paleo-conservatives, free-market conservatives, national security conservatives, and Republican Party stalwarts—seek to frame the debate in their own terms.

In part, it's a battle over contending right-wing ideologies. It's also a high-stakes race to determine which approach to the immigration crisis will win the most votes for Republicans.

Before Sept. 11, 2001 immigration restrictionists were marginalized in Congress and had little pull in the Republican Party. Immigration received little or no attention from the right's battery of think tanks and policy institutes, except for single-issue

institutes such as the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) and the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR).

The breakdown this spring of bipartisan attempts to pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill demonstrated the new-found political strength of immigration restrictionists. Although a comprehensive bill that included legalization and guest-worker provisions did pass the Senate, it was blocked in the House, where restrictionists, led by Cong. Tom Tancredo (R-CO), have since Sept. 11 succeeded in gaining control of the immigration agenda.

Pro-immigration sentiment runs deep in the Senate, whose members have traditionally reflected the liberal immigration views of Corporate America and the party leadership. But this time around the increasing clout of the immigration restrictionists was quickly apparent as even the proponents of legalization dressed up their bills in the language of "national security" and "law and order."

Seeing the anti-immigration tide sweeping the nation, Republican senators are beginning to adopt the "enforcement first" language of the anti-immigration lobby. Majority leader Bill Frist (R-TN) describes immigration as a "dangerous national security threat," observing that the "scariest part" of illegal immigration is that "we have absolutely no



idea what they'll do tomorrow on U.S. soil." Seeking his party's presidential nomination, the majority leader has founded his own organization called SecureAmericasBorders.com to tap the anti-immigrant surge.

Of pressing concern is the popularity of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is contesting the recent presidential election in Mexico. "Like others of his persuasion, López Obrador's bid appears to have benefited from financing and help on the ground from his soulmates in Caracas and Havana, who clearly relish the prospect of extending their axis to the border of the United States," writes Gaffney.

Together with the leading conservative figures, conservative and neoconservative think tanks and policy institutes have jumped into the immigration fray, creating new ideological divides throughout the center-right. Leading conservative think-tanks, including the Hudson Institute, Hoover Institution, Manhattan Institute, and American Enterprise Institute, that previously never addressed immigration issues now have scholars articulating sharply different positions on immigration policy.

On one side stands a minority who, like Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform, Tamar Jacoby of the Manhattan Institute, and Steve Forbes

of Forbes Inc., take the traditional Republican position that immigration is good for the economy and that the government should open more legal channels for would-be immigrants. These pro-immigration conservatives now lace their arguments with a strong dose of language about the need for border security and assimilation.

But it's the anti-immigration camp that has seized control of the ideological and political debate. Out front in defining immigration as a national security threat is Frank Gaffney, founder and president of the neoconservative Center for Security Policy. After Sept. 11 immigration restrictionists quickly tweaked their anti-immigration message as a pro-security position.

Going a step further Gaffney, who signed the July 19 conservative statement backing an enforcement-first immigration policy, says stopping immigration flows and deporting unauthorized immigrants are among the "ten steps America must take to prevail in the war for the Free World."

In his new book, *War Footing*, Gaffney and coauthors tap Cold War rhetoric about America's role in saving the "free world" from "Islamofascists" to bolster the case of the immigration restrictionists. Gaffney argues that immigration policy should be regarded as part of a world war to protect our national security and freedoms.

The border is the southern front of the war to save the Free World, now threatened according to Gaffney by the rise of the center-left in Latin America, which he says the United States is "losing." Of pressing concern is the popularity of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is contesting the recent presidential election in Mexico. "Like others of his persuasion, López Obrador's bid appears to have benefited from financing and help on the ground from his soulmates in Caracas and Havana, who clearly relish the prospect of extending their

axis to the border of the United States,” writes Gaffney.

Reminiscent of the warnings of the Cold Warriors about the “red tide” rising in Latin America, Gaffney says that the United States should be on guard today as the left gains ground in Latin America. Arguing for a immigration policy that is on a “war footing,” Gaffney warned in a *Washington Times* op-ed that the “implications of such an outcome could be far-reaching for the integrity of our southern frontier, illegal immigration, drug-trafficking, terrorism, trade, and the radical ‘reconquista’ movement (which is intent on ‘taking back’ at least parts of the United States for Mexico).”

The Center for Security Policy together with thirty organizations including Roy Beck’s NumbersUSA, Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum, and Paul Weyrich’s Coalitions of America is spearheading a “Secure America” campaign that asks politicians to sign a pledge to support draconian anti-immigration measures. The Secure America campaign warns that liberal immigration policies “entail real national security, as well as socioeconomic, risks.”

The pledge stipulates that, “Illegal aliens currently in the United States may be afforded a one-time opportunity to leave the United States without penalty and seek permission to reenter legally if they qualify under existing law. Those who do not take advantage of this opportunity will be removed and permanently barred from returning.”

The July 19 “enforcement-first” letter to President Bush from prominent conservatives illustrates the increasingly broad reach of the anti-immigration movement and the large extent to which it integrates immigration policy with the “global war on terror.” It also highlights the degree to which neo-conservatives, who have traditionally been solidly pro-immigration, are joining the restrictionist coalition. Neoconservatives signing the letter included

William Bennett, Peter Collier, David Frum, David Horowitz, Michael Ledeen, and Daniel Pipes.

Joining representatives of the leading anti-immigration policy institutes FAIR and CIS are such conservative luminaries as William Buckley, Robert Bork, and Newt Gingrich. The leaders of national women organizations, including Concerned Women for America and Eagle Forum, also signed the enforcement-first letter as did key figures at the Claremont Institute, Hudson Institute, Hoover Institution, American Enterprise Institute, and the American Conservative Union.

Many conservative thinkers and leaders are joining the anti-immigration bandwagon in an attempt to forge a new right-wing coalition that will win political power by bringing together grassroots constituencies, military hard-liners, neoconservatives, and social conservatives.

Concern about national security since Sept. 11 has enabled restrictionists to move their cause to the center of the political debate. At the same time, many conservative thinkers and leaders are joining the anti-immigration bandwagon in an attempt to forge a new right-wing coalition that will win political power by bringing together grassroots constituencies, military hard-liners, neoconservatives, and social conservatives.

Rallying the anti-immigration forces around national security and populist themes, CSP’s Frank Gaffney

says: “We cannot hope to protect our homeland unless we take steps to remedy our porous border. The first step must be to create a new political reality—namely, a counterweight to the influential special interests whose priorities take no account of national security.”

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Reframing the Immigration Debate: Actors and Issues
<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/2959>.

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