

Planning the War on Immigrants

By Tom Barry | December 13, 2007

Politics can be an ugly affair, and it doesn't get any uglier than when politicians try to best one another in the politics of hate and scapegoating.

That's what is happening in America, as politicians and political candidates at all levels of government join the anti-immigration bandwagon. Meanwhile, immigrants who do the dirtiest work in America are living in fear as they face a generalized immigration crackdown and stepped-up immigration raids.

The war against immigrants and immigration is being fought on three main fronts: in Congress, in local and state government, and on the campaign trail. While the anti-immigration movement that is coursing through American politics is beyond the control of any individual or organization, the leading restrictionist policy institutes in Washington are setting the policy agenda of the anti-immigration forces at all levels of U.S. politics.

Following their success in stopping a comprehensive immigration reform bill in the U.S. Senate that included legalization provisions, immigration restrictionists have rallied around a common strategy: "Attrition through Enforcement."

Turning Up the "Heat" on Immigrants

"Attrition through enforcement" as a restrictionist framework for immigration reform has been percolating within the anti-immigration institutes in Washington, DC for the last couple of years. But it wasn't until the restrictionist movement beat back proposals for legalization that the strategy has taken hold as a unifying framework for restrictionism in America.

The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) took the lead in developing this strategic framework. In April 2006 this restrictionist think tank published,

"Attrition through Enforcement: A Cost-Effective Strategy to Shrink the Illegal Population," which lays out the main components of a war of attrition against immigrants along with the estimated cost of a multi-front campaign to wear down immigrant residents and dissuade would-be immigrants.

CIS analyst Jessica Vaughn opens the report with this observation: "Proponents of mass legalization of the illegal alien population, whether through amnesty or expanded guestworker programs, often justify this radical step by suggesting that the only alternative—a broad campaign to remove illegal aliens by force—is unworkable."

"The purpose of attrition through enforcement," according to Vaughn, "is to increase the probability that illegal aliens will return home without the intervention of immigration enforcement agencies. In other words, it encourages voluntary compliance with immigration laws through more robust interior law enforcement."

Key components of the war of attrition include:

- Eliminating access to jobs through employer verification of Social Security numbers and immigration status.
- Ending misuse of Social Security and IRS numbers by immigrants in seeking employment, bank accounts, and driver's licenses, and improved information sharing among key federal agencies, including the Internal Revenue Service, in the effort to identify unauthorized residents.
- Increasing federal, state, and local cooperation, particularly among law enforcement agencies.



-
- Reducing visa overstays through better tracking systems.
 - Stepping up immigration raids.
 - Passing state and local laws to discourage illegal immigrants from making a home in that area and to make it more difficult for immigrants to conceal their status.

CIS predicts that a \$2 billion program would over five years substantially reduce immigration flows into the United States while dramatically increasing the one-way flow of immigrants back to their sending communities. According to CIS, the attrition war would require a \$400 million annual commitment—“less than 1 % of the president’s 2007 budget request for the Department of Homeland Security.”

Rather than calling for a costly and morally repugnant mass deportation of millions of immigrants, the restrictionists have united behind a strategy aimed at wearing down the will of immigrants to live and work in the United States.

Without driver’s licenses and without work because of employment-centered enforcement, immigrants will leave the country—as many as 1.5 million annually, predicts the CIS study. “A subtle increase in the ‘heat’ on illegal aliens can be enough to dramatically reduce the scale of the problem within just a few years,” says Vaughn.

War of Attrition

“Attrition through enforcement” represents an aggressive step forward for restrictionism. The

“attrition through enforcement” strategy signals the advance of the anti-immigration advocates from defensive and hold-the-line positions to a long-term offensive aimed at definitively taking the battlefield.

Tasting the blood of their victory over liberal immigration reform, the restrictionist movement, led by Washington, DC institutes including the Center for Immigration Studies, Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), and Numbers USA, has opted for a war of attrition as the best strategy for rolling back immigration.

The “attrition through enforcement” is a strategic framework that builds on tactical approaches. To counter proposals for legalization, restrictionists successfully argued that any proposals for increased legal immigration—either through legalization or guestworker programs—should not be considered until the borders were secured and current immigration law fully enforced.

The “secure borders” and “enforcement first” frameworks for discussing immigration have been largely accepted by politicians of both parties, eliminating approval of any immigration reform initiatives that would address the plight of the 12 million-plus undocumented residents of the United States.

Over the past six months, the restrictionists have moved beyond “enforcement first” to the more aggressive “attrition through enforcement” strategy. And the federal government, state government, and Congress seem to be marching in lockstep with the restrictionists as they all harden their anti-immigration posture.

Anti-immigration groups are propagating “attrition through enforcement” as the sensible, practical “middle ground” or “third way” in immigration reform. Rather than calling for a costly and morally repugnant mass deportation of millions of immigrants, the restrictionists have united behind a strategy aimed at wearing down the will of immigrants to live and work in the United States.

Immigration raids in the interior of the country and imprisonment by immigration officials of those crossing the border illegally combined with pervasive enforcement of the “rule of law” by police and government bureaucrats will slowly but surely drive all undocumented immigrants out of the country. Restrictionists increasingly argue that mass deportation will be unnecessary since an ever-increasing number of immigrants will “self-deport.”

“Attrition through enforcement” also addresses another weak point in previous restrictionist strategy. Having long demanded that the federal government gain control of the southern border, the restrictionists found that as border control increased more immigrants were staying in the United States, fearing that if they left they would never be able to return. Border control has actually increased the number of undocumented immigrants who have opted for permanent residency.

Although still demanding tighter border control with more agents and more fences (virtual and real), restrictionists also have in “attrition through enforcement” what they consider to be a pragmatic and palatable solution to ridding the country of “illegal aliens.” Permanent residency in the United States, if this strategy is fully implemented, will become a permanent nightmare.

Attrition on the Campaign Trail

All the Republican Party candidates have to some degree adopted a restrictionist agenda. Even John McCain, an original sponsor with Sen. Kennedy of comprehensive immigration reform, has said that he now supports an “enforcement first” approach.

Fred Thompson won the plaudits of restrictionists when he released his immigration platform, which explicitly adopts the “attrition through enforcement” strategy. According to Thompson, “Attrition through enforcement is a more reasonable and achievable solution [than] the ‘false choices’ of ‘either arrest and deport them all, or give them all amnesty.’”

This more “reasonable” solution supported by candidate Thompson includes measures such as denying federal money to states and local governments that provide social services to undocumented residents, and ending federal educational aid to public universities that provide in-state tuition to undocumented residents.

FAIR is spearheading the attrition war on the state level, working closely with a new group called State Legislators for Legal Immigration. Formed by right-wing restrictionists in the Pennsylvania state legislature, the group says nothing about legal immigration in its mission statement. Rather, the founders say the group “represents a 21st century Declaration of Independence.”

The war of attrition is already leaving a trail of divided communities and split families in its wake. Detentions and deportations are shattering immigrant communities and families as restrictionists applaud and call for ever-harsher measures.

“Similar to the American Revolution, the personal and economic safety of Pennsylvanians and all American citizens depends upon definitive action being taken by our federal, state, and local governments to end the ongoing invasion of illegal aliens through our borders,” declares the legislators’ organization. By turning back this invasion, they say they will protect U.S. citizens from “property theft, drug running, human trafficking, increased violent crime, increased gang activity, terrorism, and the many

other clear and present dangers directly associated with illegal immigration.”

State Legislators for Legal Immigration and FAIR intend to take the war of attrition to every state. According to this restrictionist group, “Once the economic attractions of illegal jobs and taxpayer-funded public benefits are severed at the source, these illegal invaders will have no choice but to go home on their own.” FAIR says that the legislators’ group “will be teaming up with FAIR to develop state-based initiatives to deal with the national problem of mass illegal immigration.”

The war of attrition is already leaving a trail of divided communities and split families in its wake. Detentions and deportations are shattering immigrant communities and families as restrictionists applaud and call for ever-harsher measures. It is also ramping up the fear and loathing on the campaign trail.

As this war against the country’s most vulnerable population deepens, the American people will need to ask themselves if they feel any safer or more secure, if they have more hope to find better-paying jobs, if their neighborhoods and town economies are more or less vibrant as immigrants leave, and if they are proud of themselves and their country.

Tom Barry is a senior analyst with the Americas Policy Program (www.americaspolicy.org) of the Center for International Policy.

SEE RELATED MATERIALS:

Which Way Immigration Reform? Toward A Comprehensive Immigration Policy
<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3161>

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

Published by the Americas Policy Program, copyright © 2007, all rights reserved.

The Americas Policy Program

“A New World of Citizen Action, Analysis, and Policy Options”

Recommended citation:

Tom Barry, "Planning the War on Immigrants," Americas Policy Program Commentary (Washington, DC: Center for International Policy, December 13, 2007).

Web location:

<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/4816>

Production Information:

Writer: Tom Barry

Editor: Laura Carlsen

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz