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Brimelow Drops "The Big One"

By Ira Mehlman

Alien Nation, Peter Brimelow's new book about the impact of immigration on the United States, has frequently been referred to as this year's *Bell Curve*. It is an apt comparison, in that both books have received an enormous amount of attention, based primarily on one or two chapters that are viewed as highly controversial.

Brimelow actually makes a very broad case against current immigration policies, but not surprisingly, almost everybody has focused on those chapters that deal with race, ethnicity and culture. The chapters that deal with those issues do not pull many punches. The author is quite clear that he believes that the racial and cultural make-up of today's immigration flow poses a danger to the country. By bringing up subjects that had heretofore been considered taboo, Brimelow has scared a lot of people who have been observing the immigration debate from the sidelines into conceding that our current immigration policies don't make economic sense. He has also forced a lot of those at the center of the debate, who have long deceived themselves into believing that the issue could be settled solely on economic or environmental grounds, out of a comfortable state of denial.

Francis Fukuyama, who has very little else positive to say about *Alien Nation*, acknowledges that its author has changed the terms of the debate. "Peter Brimelow deserves praise for going to the heart of the immigration issue, which is not about economics but about the nature of American nationality," writes Fukuyama in a *National Review* essay. Richard Bernstein, who wrote one of two reviews of *Alien Nation* that appeared in *The New York Times*, similarly concludes that Brimelow has touched a raw nerve. "The strong racial element in current immigration has made it more than ever before a delicate subject. It is to Mr. Brimelow's credit that he attacks it head on, unapologetically."

For all the hard data and logic that economists like George Borjas and Vernon Briggs have brought to this issue over many years, they have never been able to win the argument that immigration is a drain on our economy. Economic arguments from one set of PhDs, contending that our immigration policies are an economic disaster, have always been countered by claims from another group of PhDs, who have data to show that they are an economic windfall. For those without a burning passion for one side or the other, the clash of the PhDs provided the impression that the jury was still out on this issue. This gentlemanly argument among economists could potentially go on forever.

The average person is neither equipped nor inclined

to make any sense out of the reams of graphs, charts and formulas which "prove" that immigrants are either shoveling money into our national coffers or that they are an economic black hole to suck up our tax dollars. But it doesn't require some ivory tower academe to tell people how immigration is affecting the national character. That is purely a subjective judgment. Either people are happy with the changes or they are not — and all indications are that most are not.

Advocates for reducing immigration have shied away from making these cultural and racial arguments precisely because they are so powerful. Appeals to people's deepest emotions, particularly their fears, can have devastating consequences. After Oklahoma City, it is evident that there are already too many irrationally angry people running around this country. Culture and race are to the immigration debate what nuclear weapons are to conventional warfare. The immigrant reform proponents have always refrained from bringing up culture and race, cognizant that dropping the "big one" would mean having to deal with the fallout.

In *Alien Nation*, Brimelow seems to have reminded the American intelligentsia of the powerful emotions immigration has the potential to unleash. It frightens them, as well it should. We have reached a point where the public will not sit still while another panel of experts examines the data yet again, only to produce another inconclusive report. The American people seem to be demanding some kind of resolution to the debate and it is in everybody's best interest that it be settled on economic grounds rather than on race and culture. Suddenly, the jury has come in for a lot of people on the economic question, and the verdict is that we have a serious problem.

A review of *Alien Nation* in *Newsweek* is illustrative of this sudden willingness of many in the media (who are a good barometer of the intellectual elite) to choose a side on the question of whether immigration is beneficial or harmful to the economy. Toward the end of his review, Tom Morganthau acknowledges that, "Crucially, the economists' rationale for immigration — seems less and less relevant in postindustrial societies... If an educated work force is the key to prosperity, why should America continue to import cheap labor? These are the real questions about U.S. immigration policy — not race, multiculturalism or even bilingual education."

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In one of the more savage reviews of *Alien Nation*, which appeared in the *New Yorker*, Michael Lind accuses the author of employing the "rhetoric of an after-dinner speaker at a Klavern banquet." But even he grudgingly concedes, "the questions that Brimelow raises about the effects of immigration on national culture are not themselves illegitimate." Unfortunately, Lind never does tell us how these legitimate concerns about culture might be discussed more politely. Instead, he changes the subject. Why play with dynamite, contends Lind, when the "arguments that Brimelow makes against high levels of immigration — arguments based on concern about the economic and environmental consequences — deserve to be taken seriously even by people who utterly reject his reasoning on the subject of race."

Lind has been around the issue long enough to know that those nice arguments against high levels of immigration — its effects on jobs, wages and loss of wilderness areas — generally go nowhere, other than around in circles. Of course, concerns about the economic and environmental consequences of immigration deserve to be taken seriously. But until Brimelow turned up the heat by stating the case in terms that make the political and media elite wince, they seemed destined to ponder the economic and environmental pros and cons of immigration indefinitely.

One gets the sense in some of the reviews of *Alien Nation* that the reviewers are less shocked by what Brimelow has to say about race and culture than they are upset about being forced to come down off their fences. Choosing a side in the immigration debate is one of those unpleasant choices in life that many people would prefer to put off as long as possible. While the dueling think tanks could hold in abeyance the conclusion about whether immigration policy was an economic good or evil, no personal reckoning would be demanded. Likewise, as long as the economic experts could keep their debate going, no one in politics would ever have to face the messy task of shutting down an immigration system that Lind admits has "turned...into an entitlement" program.

Supporters of sharply reduced immigration levels have obviously been quite pleased by the stir *Alien Nation* has created. But just as life will never again be

the same for the comfortable fence-sitters, immigration reform proponents will be forced to deal with an aspect of the debate they have consciously avoided. Each time they have been accused of racism, immigration restrictionists have insisted that race is not a consideration and that they would be equally opposed to mass immigration even if all the immigrants were blond-haired, blue-eyed Nordics.

Race may not be the primary factor in their opposition to immigration, but since race is a factor in just about every aspect of American life, anyone who denies that it matters in immigration policy is kidding himself. True, most advocates for ending immigration would still be arguing for restrictions even if the immigrants were white Europeans. But the additional element of the immigrants' racial and ethnic composition at a time of racial and ethnic hyper-sensitivity in our society cannot be completely disregarded.

In his standard luncheon address that he has been giving on his book promotion tour, Brimelow jokes that as an economic journalist, he is really interested in discussing the economic consequences of immigration. However, he complains, what people want to talk about is race and culture, or, "more precisely, they want *me* to talk about race and culture." While that line is meant to elicit a laugh, it is usually the uncomfortable laugh of people who are forced to confront a truth they have been trying to avoid. Not to worry, Brimelow assures them with his British accent, "It is often said that we need immigrants to do the jobs Americans refuse to do. Well, here I am."

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As vehemently as many immigration reform advocates profess that race and culture should not be factors in this debate, they are the issues on which the outcome will likely depend. Immigration restrictionists have often deceived themselves into believing that because ideally something shouldn't be part of the debate, it wouldn't become part of it. Race, unfortunately, is a factor in every aspect of American life, and to pretend otherwise is, at best, naive.

Even while disagreeing sharply with the book's conclusions, reviewer Nicholas Lemann, writing in *The New York Times*, observes that emotion, not intellect will probably resolve the immigration question. *Alien Nation* "makes it clear why the immigration issue is so difficult: there is often a lot

more in the opposition to immigration than straightforward policy-wonk concerns about whether we are letting in the right number of people," Lemann writes. Brimelow seems determined to force everyone to confront those things that fall under the heading of "a lot more."

Congress may have one last chance to reform immigration policy for intellectual reasons rather than emotional ones. Control of the relevant congressional committees dealing with immigration is currently in the hands of fiscal conservatives, not social conservatives. There is still an opportunity for them to conclude that immigration, at its current levels and given the existing selection criteria, is a drain on the economy, a strain on the environment, a burden on social institutions and should therefore be dramatically overhauled.

If one pays close attention to the media reaction to *Alien Nation*, it is almost a plea for favorable terms of surrender by the policy wonks to whom Lemann refers (and of whom he is one). They appear to be acknowledging, as Nathan Glazer does in a "Week in Review" article in *The New York Times*, that "Undoubtedly, our immigration laws will be undergoing serious revisions again." The only question is in what context those revisions will take place. They can occur because the intellectual elite are finally persuaded that the current policies do not make economic or environmental sense, or because the general public rises up in revolt over policies that they perceive are irreparably altering the racial, ethnic and cultural balance of their country.

The choice should be rather easy. ■

[Editor's Note: *Alien Nation: Common Sense About Immigration and the American Future* by Peter Brimelow is published by Random House, 1995, 291 pages, \$23.00 hardcover. Copies are available from THE SOCIAL CONTRACT PRESS, 1-800-352-4843.]