

Diversity in Immigration Reform

Liberals and Conservatives Coalesce around Immigration Issues

BY PETER B. GEMMA

Sensationalist headlines and political screeds often distort any reasonable discussion of the immigration issue. An observation by economist Thomas Sowell applies to both the left and right on the issue: “Self-preservation used to be called the first law of nature. But today self-preservation has been superseded by a need to preserve the prevailing rhetoric and visions. Immigration is just one of the things we can no longer discuss rationally as a result.”

Consider these examples of how inflammatory the issue has become: Phoenix, Arizona, Mayor Phil Gordon asserts that “extremists have seized control of the immigration issue”; the left-wing Anti-Defamation League contends that “Racist Groups Exploit Immigration Issues in Effort to Promote Anti-Hispanic Agenda”; and National Public Radio’s broadcast, “Anti-Immigrant Hate Speech Thrives On Right-Wing Radio Shows,” is archived on their website.

Not to be outdone, the radical Southern Poverty Law Center publishes sleazy tabloid-like stories: “Supremacist Groups Take Up Immigration Issue;” “Blood on the Border;” and “Extremists Advocate Murder of Immigrants and Politicians.”

Leaving aside the provocative (and predictable) ideological indictments, the case against illegal immigration can be identified as a key issue with *most* conservatives, albeit the word “conservative” is impossible to define anymore (witness e.g.,

Fox News vs. *American Conservative* magazine). Certainly former Congressman Tom Tancredo and writer Chilton Williamson strongly support immigration restrictions. However, there are notable exceptions on the right ranging from tax reform advocate Grover Norquist to the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*.

If it is difficult to distinguish between conservative open borders proponents and those who support immigration reform, the left has the opposite problem: liberals are generally—and unfairly—put in the box of pro-immigration advocates. Such assumptions are misleading as the left-of-center agenda (like its conservative counterpart) deals with a myriad of diverse issues, many of which, directly or indirectly, concern immigration.

Consider this statement:

Reading the trend right now we see that we’re moving toward a larger society, faster growing, more diverse, more multicultural, and less peaceful. We’re moving toward a state of steady civil war between the various groups that we’re encouraging to come here. I see nothing but disaster ahead for us if we continue chasing after multiculturalism.

This certainly sounds like something media commentator Lou Dobbs or columnist Michelle Malkin might say. However, those are the words of the late Garrett Hardin, one-time CEO of the Environmental Fund and a well-known crusader against nuclear power and for abortion rights (he received the Margaret Sanger Award from the Planned Parenthood Federation of America). Hardly hard-right credentials.

Progressives who have supported immigration reform range from Yale Professor Paul Kennedy,

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the noted environmentalist and founder of Friends of the Earth, to the late Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, and to Roy Beck, a liberal journalist and author of *The Case Against Immigration: The Moral, Economic, Social, and Environmental Reasons for Reducing U.S. Immigration Back to Traditional Levels*.

The interests of the left and right overlap on a number of concerns regarding unrestricted and illegal immigration policies, including economic issues. Veteran conservative activist and writer Phyllis Schlafly says:

Some liberals are trying to tell us to fight a recession by bringing in more immigrants, but that would only raid the pockets of U.S. taxpayers to support more millions of non-taxpayers. It's hard to say which is more outrageous: The diversion of Americans' personal income into cash handouts to foreigners, or the federal government's policy of concealing the fiscal impact of immigration.

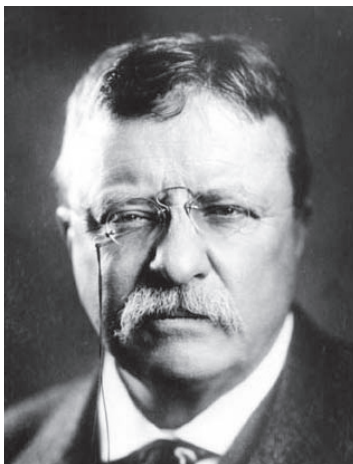
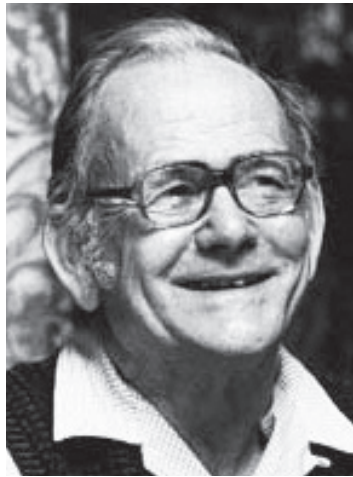
Yes, writes syndicated columnist Froma Harrop, but "this issue does not belong to the right. Or it shouldn't," noting that "illegal immigration hurts most liberal causes. It depresses wages, crushes unions and kills all hope for universal health coverage. Progressives have to understand that there

can be little social justice in an unregulated labor market."

Vernon Briggs, a labor economist at Cornell University and self-described liberal, concurs: "Liberals are so confused on this issue. Immigration policy has got to be held accountable for its economic consequences." Cuban immigrant and Harvard economics professor George Borjas argues that immigration has a negative impact on a wide range of policies involving taxes, welfare, the labor market, the environment, and the poor. He observes: "The children of less skilled immigrants will also be less skilled so the [labor] mismatch will continue. It is much harder for current immigrants to escape their past than it was in the last great wave of immigration 100 years ago."

Lawrence Fuchs, former speechwriter for President John Kennedy and Vice Chair of the 1997 U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, states: "Immigration policy is no way to fine tune the labor market nor a way to get rid of pockets of underclass life in America." He warns that the lack of a common language and the ignorance of the Constitution and American culture put aliens at odds with their host country.

Fuchs's reference to an underclass is another point that unites liberals and conservatives. The U.S. has always prided itself as being a classless society, but current population pressures are



Progressives who supported or currently support tougher immigration reforms (left to right): Garrett Hardin, Barbara Jordan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Vernon Briggs.

changing that ideal. Legal and illegal immigrants sustain their native roots while retaining the ability to settle abroad, diminishing the idea of American nationalism. The origins of immigrants, primarily from Mexico and Latin America, also limit diversity and prevent assimilation. Huge numbers of Hispanic immigrants are able to retain cultural connections by manufacturing Spanish-speaking enclaves, a concept foreign on such a massive scale up until the last few decades. According to a March 2007 Census Bureau report, there are 37.9-million immigrants in the U.S. speaking 311 languages. In California alone, it costs more than \$2.2 billion annually to provide English tutoring for the 3-million illegal aliens and their children. That's an expensive transition from alien to American.

Expanding and expensive bilingual and multicultural accommodation has forged a coalition of liberals, moderates, and conservatives in support of English as the official language of the United States. President Theodore Roosevelt once said, "We have one language here, and that is the English language, and we intend to see that the [assimilation] crucible turns our people out as Americans." And, as the economist Walter Williams observes:

Yesteryear's immigration and today's differ in several important respects. For the most part, yesteryear's immigrants came here legally...they sought to assimilate and adopt our culture and become Americans. That's not so true today, where Hispanic activists seek to impose their language and culture on the rest of us.

In a recent Nashville, Tennessee, legislative debate over instituting English as the official language, City Council member Jerry Maynard called the proposal "mean-spirited," adding, "It smells of

racism." However, according to a May 2009 Rasmussen survey, 84 percent of Americans say English should be the official language of the U.S. and 82 percent reject the idea that requiring people to speak English is a form of racism. Some 80 percent of U.S. voters believe those who move to America should adopt American culture. Thirty states have enacted laws making English their official language, often by passing citizens' initiatives with vote margins as high as 9-1.



Author, columnist, and pundit Pat Buchanan

Of course liberals and conservatives have each carved out their own niches when dealing with the crises of le-

gal and illegal immigration.

Conservative critics often hone in on permissive U.S. immigration policies that result in shifting demographics and challenge the well-being of hegemonic American identity along the lines of culture, race, language, and other social formations. Pundit Pat Buchanan writes:

If we do not solve our civilizational crisis—a disintegrating culture, dying populations, and invasions unresisted—the children born in 2006 will witness in their lifetimes the death of the West. In our hearts we know what must be done.... Both [political] parties lack the will and fortitude of previous generations to do what is necessary to defend the nation from the Third World invasion.

Liberals who seek immigration reform mostly emphasize economic, environmental, and sustainability issues. Former Democratic Governor Richard Lamm of Colorado wrote in this journal (Summer 1995): "In a world of want, I am arguing we should dramatically decrease our immigration and adopt policies which make sense for our own people." He went on to make this point:

I can think of no public policy reason why we should double the U.S. population. Would it improve our quality of life? Would it improve our own poor? Would it enhance our school systems, or our parks and recreation facilities? Does our economy, with all its current unemployed and underemployed, need more workers? Does our national security need more citizens?

An April 2009 poll of self-identified liberals showed that progressives are concerned about the current levels of immigration into the United States and the harmful effect immigration policies are having on population growth, the environment, and the availability of jobs. Examples of the result include:

- Without a change in immigration policy, the nation's population will grow by more than a third in the next 50 years. If the population where you live were to increase by this amount, would it make the quality of life...

[67 percent A lot or somewhat worse 18 percent No different 14 percent A lot or somewhat better]

- The United States adds nearly 1 million legal foreign-born persons to the workforce each year. Do you believe that increasing the number of foreign workers...

[15 percent Helps availability of jobs for American workers 63 percent Hurts availability of jobs for American workers 19 percent It has no impact on the availability of jobs for American workers]

- Overall, do you think the level of immigration into the United States at the present time is...

[67 percent Much or somewhat too high 24 percent About right 8 percent Somewhat or much too low]

“The results of this poll demonstrate what many on the political left have known for some

time. Immigration is not a partisan issue,” says Leah Durant, executive director of Progressives for Immigration Reform. “It is time to take this issue off the back burner. We need to talk frankly about the effects of immigration and find solutions that benefit both Americans and the global community.”



There will always be critics of those who make the case for immigration reform, either from the right or the left. The National Council of La Raza (“The Race”) is a case in point. One headline on their FaceBook page warns “Progressives Beware: the Dark Side has Come Calling.” Meanwhile, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), in a speech to the radical but politically powerful group, proclaimed that pushing through amnesty for all illegal aliens will “tell the bigots to shut up.”

Be it a culture war, an ecological crisis, or both, the left-right debate and dialogue regarding the issues relating to immigration continue. And consensus must be achieved if for no other reason than this: one-third of all the people ever to move to America, starting from the first Siberian to cross the Bering land bridge, have arrived since 1965. The urgency of the immigration issue, legal and illegal, will not wait. ■