

# Has Immigration Reform Lost the Liberals?

*They seem to be on the wrong side of the debate*

by Otis L. Graham, Jr.

One does not have to agree with every turn of the arguments in the essays by Edward Levy and Miles Wolpin to recognize the immense importance of their central point — that American liberalism has somehow got itself on the wrong side of the immigration debate, betraying its constituency and values. Levy offers a substantial argument for the latter point, failing to find any real benefit — and much harm — in mass immigration's impact upon American society, politics, economy. “Why don't they see?” he asks in understandable frustration at the liberal collaboration in an immigration policy designed for, if not only, by Big Business and Big Agriculture. “They are prisoners of the past,” he offers, a powerful idea that deserved a fuller development.

Enter Wolpin, whose focus is on “why they don't see!” Separating liberals into elites and the “mass base that currently supports Liberal elites,” he finds that the former “don't see” because they have converted to an anti-nationalistic (and thus anti-American) cosmopolitanism anchored in a confused, ill-considered but passionate Multiculturalism. Wolpin apparently finds them hopeless, and he has my sympathy. For every Dick Lamm or Michael Lind who argues for immigration restriction so that the social and environmental objectives

of liberals can at least be placed within reach, there are the deep and unthinking ranks of labor union and Sierra Club elites who want either to keep immigration off the agenda or, with the AFL/CIO and many church officials, open the borders permanently.

But he sketches, without full clarity, a plan for mobilizing the “mass base” on which liberal elites stand and claim authority. The program seems to consist of a left-of-center package of labor and consumer protection measures with a more generous (though, of course, purged of “excesses”) welfare state, to include health insurance — plus “defensive nationalism,” which must mean immigration curbs and a “non-aggressive foreign policy.” The idea is to launch a populist

Dr. Graham comments on the essays by Miles Wolpin and Edward Levy concerning the involvement of liberals in the push for immigration policy reform.

movement, carried forward by a “broader patriotic and regenerative nationalist party.” He rightly directs our attention to the European continent, where parties and positions are being re-shaped around the stresses of mass immigration, as Levy describes them, and the “defensive nationalist” sentiments around which Wolpin would mobilize a reform movement.

This is enormously interesting, but these articles end too soon. Wolpin may have given up on the current generation of liberal elites, but political movements need leadership — elites, by definition. A new, defensive nationalist reform movement resting on the votes of the alienated liberal-Democratic masses would require leadership, ideas, and language that are nowhere to be seen in the U.S. These are now stifled beneath the PC blanket kept in place by media and opinion-shapers, be general timidity, and by the stupefying vapors of post-Cold War and post-business cycle euphoria. Even tentative thoughts in this direction frighten into contemporary minds the memories of Hitler and Peron

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*Otis L. Graham, Jr., Ph.D. is a Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. He is the author of A Limited Bounty: The U.S. Since World War II. (McGraw Hill College Division, 1995).*

and Haider (whatever he is) abroad, Huey Long at home. Immigration is assumed to belong to the Right side of politics, though the early, inchoate stirrings of immigration restriction-tinged political movements in Europe give mixed signals.

It would steady our nerves, and broaden our sense of the possible, to “Have We Lost the Liberals?” recall the careers of reformer Theodore Roosevelt, and that other nationalist Roosevelt a generation later. The first was a vocal immigration reformer who was never called a “nativist” because his message was never anti-immigrant, and he aroused and led a multi-faceted progressive political mobilization that is now understood to have been the first phase of modern liberalism.

The second, Hyde Park Roosevelt’s 13-year, regenerative presidency dealt reasonably well with America’s problems with virtually no immigrants at all to do the nation’s low-paid work. Their nationalism took the form at home of a commitment to mending America and Americans first, with an equal emphasis upon conserving the natural environment.

Why, in light of such careers, do contemporary liberals assume that the desire to limit immigration cannot find a home and be an integral part of a center-left politics? You were right, Ed Levy — a lot of people are prisoners of a mis-remembered past and un-nourished by a past they have forgotten. •