

John Tanton, Citizen Activist

ALLAN WALL

John Tanton, a native of Petoskey, Michigan, died on July 16, 2019, at the age of 85. His death generated coverage in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, NPR, and other major media outlets.

How did these news organizations report his death?

The headline of *The New York Times* obituary noted: “Dr. John Tanton, Quiet Catalyst in Anti-Immigration Drive, Dies at 85.”¹ *The Los Angeles Times* obituary by Gustavo Arellano (“the child of two Mexican immigrants, one of whom came to this country in the trunk of a Chevy”), was similar in wording and tone: “John Tanton, quiet architect of America’s modern-day anti-immigrant movement, dies at 85.”²

It was surprisingly even-handed.

The Washington Post published two articles. The paper’s obituary, by Matt Schudel, was titled “John Tanton, architect of anti-immigration and English-only efforts.”³

Schudel noted in his first paragraph that Tanton “was the architect of a national anti-immigration movement that found expression in the policies of the administration of President Trump and who was labeled by watchdog groups as a thinly veiled white nationalist.” The article ended by quoting Patrick Burns, a “former associate who turned against Dr. Tanton.” In 2017, the disgruntled former associate Burns had said, “It’s like a dead cat in a well. It poisons a lot of good water. Tanton has been that cat for 30 years.”

But even before that, on July 18, 2019, *The Washington Post* had published a “Perspective” piece by Carly Goodman, titled “John Tanton has died. He made America less open to immigrants—and more open to Trump,” subtitled, “The nativist helped make anti-immigrant politics mainstream.”⁴

The *Detroit Free Press* published a more even-handed article, titled “Anti-immigrant leader Dr. John Tanton of Michigan dies at 85.”⁵ The article includes a quote from Greg Siskind, “an immigration attorney who is a member of the Board of Governors of the American Immigration Lawyers Association.” (No agenda there!) Siskind continues, “Most of the horrible ideas on immigration being implemented today originate from groups this man founded. History won’t treat him kindly;” that might depend upon what culture writes the future history books.

“John Tanton, the Fountainhead of Modern Anti-Immigrant Bile” was the unsubtle title of an opinion piece by Mary Sanchez, published in the *Palm Beach Post*.⁶

Sanchez describes John Tanton as “a key figure for the most restrictive voices on immigration during the last 40 years. And the nation will continue to be affected by Tanton’s ideals through the organizations that he helped found. And not for the better.”

Over at the so-called “America’s Voice,” the Tanton hit piece was less subtle: “John Tanton Has Died. Unfortunately, His Racist Legacy Lives On At FAIR and CIS.” This article alleges that Tanton “is in part directly responsible for the Trump Administration’s fear-and-cruelty approach to immigration. Unfortunately, Tanton’s legacy will live on.... Tanton’s awful ideology will continue to be implemented as policies that hurt millions of Americans, unless we do something about it.”

Over at the *Daily Beast*, Mark Potok’s article was melodramatically headlined: “The Dark Legacy of John Tanton, the Anti-Immigration White Nationalist Who Set the Stage for Trump,” July 23, 2019.⁷

Potok, then at the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) contends that Dr. Tanton, “over 40 years almost single-handedly built the American anti-immigration movement around a core of rancid white nationalism... [and] left a legacy of racist opposition to immigration that, among other things, has been fully embraced by the president of the United States.” Instead of emphasizing the positive attributes of a citizen activist, who for years tried to protect local communities against zealous overdevelopment, contain the environmental impact of population growth, preserve wildlife habitat, cultivate

Allan Wall is an American citizen who has lived in Mexico. Many of his articles and columns are archived at www.VDARE.com and at www.FRONTPAGEMAG.com.

an appreciation of shared responsibilities and civic duties with other like-minded patriots, and leave to the next generation the nation's rich natural resources, the emphasis is nothing but *negativity*. Potok describes Dr. Tanton as the nation's leading "white nationalist" — an effective hater of foreigners and nonwhites who built a network of fascists and other "deplorables," or as Linda Chavez once remarked, "the most influential unknown man in America" — whose effectiveness paved the way for Donald Trump's presidency.

Potok, who left the SPLC ahead of the mass firings of the organization's top executives over racial and sexual discrimination claims, led the group's muckraking "intelligence" operation. It's unclear to me what the SPLC, despite its purported concern about Poverty, has done to help poor people while amassing millions of dollars in offshore banking accounts. The obligatory article about Tanton's death posted on their website is part of their website's "Hatewatch" section, under "John Tanton's Legacy."

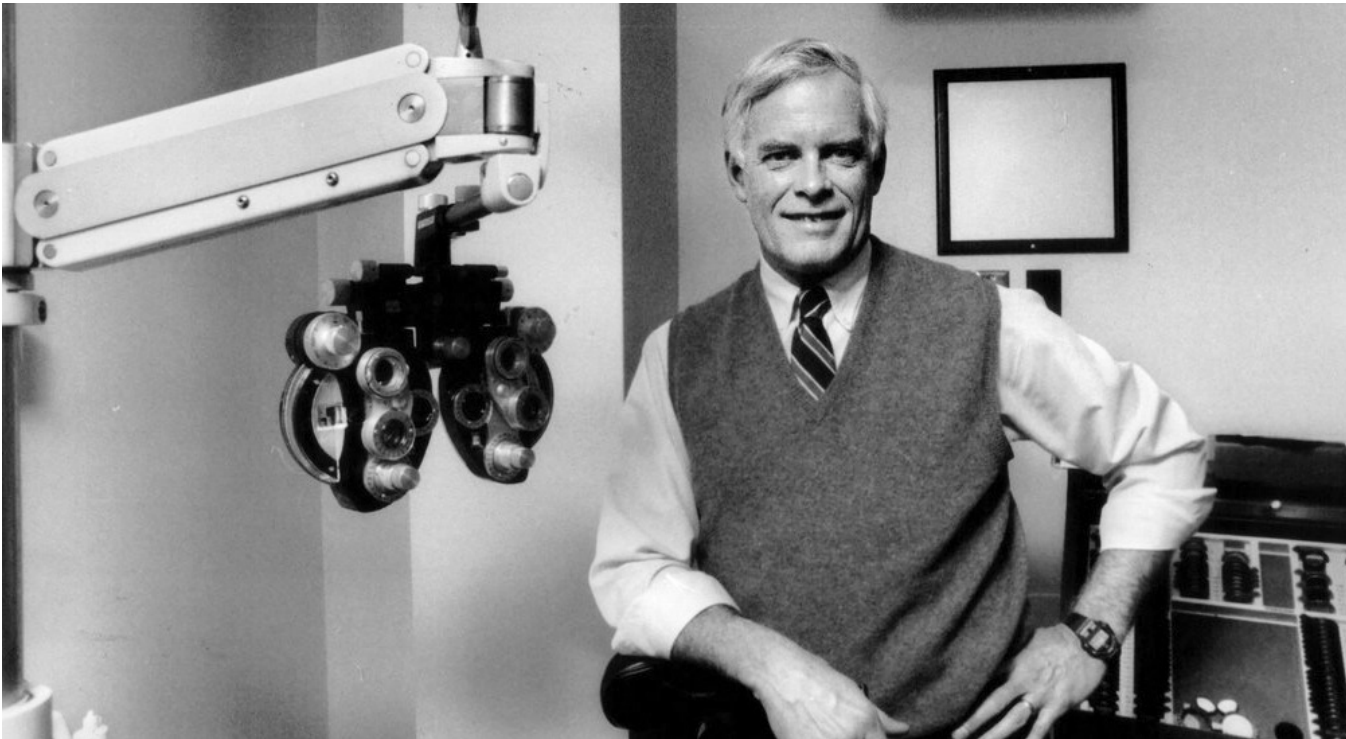
They depict Dr. Tanton as the allegedly racist architect of the modern anti-immigrant movement, who had left behind a legacy of more than a dozen nativist organizations, driven an anti-immigrant agenda for four decades, and found friends in the White House. His life's work is portrayed, not as the product of citizen-activist groups, think tanks, and grassroots lobbyists, but of a hateful propagandist who targeted nonwhite immigrants. Any positive contribution to

President Trump's immigration policy, of protecting Americans against drug and human trafficking and violent alien criminals, is turned inside out by the SPLC and mass media coverage. These multiculturalists push the narrative of Tanton as a "puppeteer" and master manipulator, hell-bent on oppressing others. Readers of the *The Social Contract* know better, and are much more familiar with (and supportive of) the work of the journal's founding editor and publisher.

But suppose that you didn't know anything about John Tanton. What would your impression be if these articles, especially the more hostile ones, were all you had to go on? Consider the warped depiction of Tanton in *Border Wars: Inside Trump's Assault on Immigration*, by Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael D. Shear. It describes Tanton as "a retired Michigan ophthalmologist and white nationalist who had founded FAIR [Federation for American Immigration Reform] in 1979 and begun a crusade against immigrants, warning about what he called a coming 'Latin onslaught.'"⁸

This is the power of the mainstream media, which is why independent media, such as *The Social Contract*, are under attack. But if you think about it, these attacks on John Tanton form a sort of backhanded compliment.

For years, the big guns of the mainstream media and the multicultural left have attacked Dr. John Tanton. They have set the politically correct narrative for the public when contemplating his work and legacy.



As a small-town ophthalmologist from Petoskey, Michigan, John Tanton helped his local patients recover and improve their eyesight, and worked to protect his local community around Lake Michigan from overdevelopment. His contributions to the cause of immigration reduction remain despite the vitriolic rhetoric and falsehoods of his detractors.

Why?

Because John Tanton was effective, he was influential, and he was building a legacy.

Consider that Dr. Tanton began his activism, not in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, or Washington, D.C., but in Petoskey, Michigan.

Petoskey, Michigan?

According to the 2010 census, Petoskey had a population of under 6,000. Wikipedia calls it “a city and coastal resort community” (located on Lake Michigan Bay). According to WikiVoyage, Petoskey is “annually rated as one of the best small towns in America.”⁹

Petoskey sounds like a pleasant place, but certainly is not considered one of the most influential cities in the country. Especially from the point of view of today’s East and West Coast elites.

Nevertheless, it is where John Tanton began his grassroots campaign to fight for immigration reform. He was an ophthalmologist by profession. After all, nobody has a childhood ambition of becoming an immigration reduction activist, but rather is pushed into it by life circumstances and observations.

In Tanton’s case, he was concerned about the environment, which led to concern about the population, which led him into the field of immigration reduction. Not finding any organization that was really opposing mass immigration, Tanton founded FAIR in 1979, and the rest is history.

He went on to found, fund, and support various other organizations, including the Social Contract Press itself. The various organizations that he founded and their influence, as even hostile critics point out, now reach even into the Trump administration.

Considering all this, wasn’t John Tanton a prime example of a civic-minded American citizen who should be admired, not excoriated?

Think about it: an ophthalmologist in Petoskey, Michigan, helped initiate a national network and movement that has had, even critics would agree, a national impact on immigration policy. Even if one totally disagrees with everything Tanton stood for, isn’t his record impressive? One individual was able to make a difference by taking a stand as a civic activist.

If Tanton had espoused some other cause more popular with the mainstream media, he probably would have received a lot more favorable coverage, and might be celebrated as a great citizen activist.

But since he promoted immigration reduction, which has become ever more politically taboo, especially of late as the nation has changed demographically, he will not receive such credit from the media.

Yet even Tanton’s critics, including the SPLC, have to admit that he was very influential. They just don’t agree with his cause.

One such critic, Carly Goodman, ends her previously mentioned *Washington Post* hit piece with this begrudging acknowledgment of Tanton’s influence:

One person can make an enormous difference. Tanton’s life’s work made severe immigration restriction thinkable, then mainstream. His organizations persist, and alumni from Tanton’s groups now staff the Trump administration, advancing their radical vision in the halls of power. Tanton’s legacy will be with us for some time. But perhaps a new vision — one that recognizes the humanity of everyone and treats immigrants with dignity and respect — can displace it now that he is gone.”¹⁰

Obviously, Carly Goodman would consider a more open borders approach to immigration policy (which she confuses with “the humanity of everyone”), but she has to admit that Tanton accomplished a lot. In the *Daily Beast* article about Tanton’s “dark legacy,” Mark Potok admits that Tanton’s network stopped amnesty.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Tanton and the movement he built is the level of prominence his organizations achieved despite their ideological portrayal as far-right nativists. These grassroots efforts were largely credited for killing “comprehensive immigration reform” in 2007. FAIR has testified more than 100 times before Congress. And some key advisers affiliated with groups that John Tanton helped to establish have now joined the Trump administration.¹¹

So you see, these people just can’t get around John Tanton. They can’t ignore him. Though they wouldn’t admit it, their obsession with Tanton implies a certain sort of “respect,” in that they recognize the importance of his work while opposing it.

Those of us who fight the fight of immigration reduction are heirs to Tanton’s work, and hope to build on his foundation.

Dr. John Tanton stands as an example of how a determined American citizen in Flyover Country can become a national leader whose legacy is recognized even by his adversaries. ■

Endnotes

1. Nicholas Kulish, *New York Times*, July 18, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/18/us/john-tanton-dead.html>
2. Gustavo Arellano, “John Tanton, quiet architect of America’s modern-day anti-immigrant movement, dies at 85,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/obituaries/story/2019-07-18/john-tanton-dead-anti-immigrant>
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4. Carly Goodman, "John Tanton has died. He made America less open to immigrants- and more open to Trump." *Washington Post*, July 18, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/07/18/john-tanton-has-died-how-he-made-america-less-open-immigrants-more-open-trump/>

5. Niraj Warikoo, *Detroit Free Press*, "Anti-immigrant leader Dr. John Tanton of Michigan dies at 85." July 18, 2019. <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2019/07/18/anti-immigrant-john-tanton-dies/1764377001/>

6. "John Tanton Has Died. Unfortunately, His Racist Legacy Lives On At FAIR and CIS."

<https://americasvoice.org/blog/john-tanton-legacy/>

7. Swathi Shanmugasundaram, "John Tanton's Legacy," SPLC. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/07/18/john-tantons/legacy>

8. Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael D. Shear, *Border Wars: Inside Trump's Assault on Immigration*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019, p. 45.

9. "Petoskey," WikiVoyage. <https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Petoskey#Q2415663>

10. Carly Goodman, *op. cit.*

11. Mark Potok, "The Dark Legacy of John Tanton, the Anti-Immigration White Nationalist Who Set the Stage for Trump," *Daily Beast*, July 23, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-dark-legacy-of-john-tanton-the-anti-immigration-white-nationalist-who-set-the-stage-for-trump>

On John Tanton and *The Camp of the Saints*

MICHELLE MALKIN

Center for Immigration Studies senior research fellow and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jerry Kammer exposed how the SPLC engaged in gross distortions of the founder of FAIR [Federation for American Immigration Reform] and the Center for Immigration Studies, John Tanton, to impute alleged racism on everyone engaged in activism to limit both mass illegal and legal immigration. Tanton, a Michigan eye doctor, espoused zero population growth and sounded the alarm over the demographic and cultural consequences of uncontrolled migrant waves hitting our shores. As the SPLC itself acknowledged, Tanton arrived at his view from the political left and served on the liberal Sierra Club's population committee.

The "hate" police made much hay over Tanton's embrace of Jean Raspail's 1970s dystopian French novel of mass migration run amok, *Camp of the Saints*. Tanton had bought the publishing rights and brought the long-forgotten but prophetic work back into print in 1994. For the SPLC, this was an unconscionable endorsement of a "lurid," "racist," "race war novel" that is "revered by white supremacists." The hate hunters apparently overlooked a 1994 cover story by two mainstream historians in the liberal magazine *The Atlantic*, comparing Raspail's novelistic vision to real-life immigrant floods across the West. In the 8,400-plus word essay, "Must It Be the Rest Against the West?" Yale historian Paul Kennedy and Yale history Ph.D. student Matthew Connelly explained their academic interest in the novel:

Why revisit this controversial and nowadays hard-to-obtain novel? The recovery of this neglected work helps us to call attention to the key global problem of the final years of the twentieth century: unbalanced wealth and resources, unbalanced demographic trends, and the relationship between the two. Many members of the more prosperous economies are beginning to agree with Raspail's vision: a world of two "camps," North and South, separate and unequal, in which the rich will have to fight and the poor will have to die if mass migration is not to overwhelm us all. Migration is the third part of the problem. If we do not act now to counteract tendencies toward global apartheid, they will only hurry the day when we may indeed see Raspail's vision made real. ■

[Excerpt from Michelle Malkin's *Open Borders Inc. Who's Funding America's Destruction?* Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2019, pp. 201-202. See page 58 for Martin Witkerk's review.]