A New Völkerwanderung?

By John Tanton

In the Europe of roughly 400-600 A.D., there were massive Germanic movements and invasions of the Roman lands south of the Danube and the Rhine, often referred to as the Völkerwanderung (wandering of the people). As historians can best reconstruct the events, these were occasioned by population and climatic "push" pressures to the north, and by the "pull" of weakness of the Romans to the south. This latter vacuum can be traced to political disorders and to epidemics, both of which killed off many Romans. These movements were both the partial cause of, and the result of the demise of the Roman Empire, as famously chronicled by Gibbon in his Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. The Völkerwanderung is still the subject of active historical research.1

Are we, at the end of the second millennium, about to see a new Völkerwanderung, this time on a massive and global scale? If so, might there be causes and effects which parallel the Roman example?2

In my paper, "The End of the Migration Epoch?", I tried to portray the demographic and other forces that will influence human migration over the next few decades. This paper was submitted to a number of people likely to be critical of it, and I am glad for the opportunity to attempt replies to six of them. As one other commentator on this collection of essays remarked, "They see us at the beginning of an era of migration; you see us at the end." Precisely — and time will show which view was more prescient.

These six critiques, though from individuals of widely varying opinions and backgrounds, rely on the following main themes:

1. Population growth is not the problem.

No attempt was made on my part to argue the underlying population problem in my paper, as it has been debated to exhaustion in many forums, including the September 1994 UN Population Conference in Cairo. Rather, my intent was to show that human numbers had grown, and why. Minds are pretty well made up on the significance of this expansion, and are not likely to be changed at this late date.

Among the respondents, the capitalist Fein and the socialist Finkel both see problems with contemporary political and social organization, though from diametrically opposed views. One espouses Adam Smith, the other Marx. My own views, as a biologist, are closest to those of McNeill, who sees the possibility of massive epidemics and believes that nature will limit population growth if man does not. The possibility that the death rate might go up was not even considered at Cairo. Those who wish to explore this idea could well start with McNeill's Plagues and Peoples.3

The polarization of the immigration debate brings to mind C. P. Snow's classic book, The Two Cultures.4 Snow outlined the breakdown of the academic and intellectual world into sociologists, economists, and politicians on one side, and the physical scientists on the other: physicists, chemists, biologists, etc. These two groups seem to live in different worlds and communicate poorly with one another. I side with physical and biological laws governing our globe, which will ultimately trump mankind's more recent social and economic innovations. An impressive list of Nobel Laureates and other renowned scientists seems to agree.5

Several commentators felt I placed too much emphasis on the role of medicine in reducing death rates and engendering population growth. I tried to avoid this error, to which my background as a physician doubtless subjects me. Evidently I did not succeed, and willingly concede that public health measures, the increased material productivity of the industrial revolution, better transportation of food to forestall famines, and many other factors helped cut the death rate. Exactly why the birthrate declined, and what measures might help reduce it today are still topics of intense debate.6 The dynamics of the death and birth rates are not central to my argument. Regardless of how we arrived at today's circumstances, they are clear: human numbers have grown massively in this century, and — absent the plagues and civil disorders that some envision — will expand even more remarkably over the next few decades.

II. Nothing can be done.

A number of the critics feel that the pressures for migration — demographic, political, social, and economic — are so intense that they simply cannot be countered. Others, like Finkel and Ratan, argue they should not be. They hold the United States responsible for many of the world's difficulties, and feel mass migration represents just retribution. Strider worries that humane methods of control won't be found. Fein thinks immigrants could be our salvation, and Nieuwenhuysen that temporary migration will increase dramatically.

"Those who hope for a dissolution of national borders should draw us a picture of how such a world might look."
Those who hope for a dissolution of national borders should draw us a picture of how such a world might look. My view closely parallels that of Robert Kaplan, who sees a breakdown of civil society. Ratan envisions the migration of 98 million people (!) a year, mostly between the less-developed countries. I think that the current residents of recipient areas will see this as invasion. They will not sit idly by, but will resist vigorously, though perhaps too late. While they may be willing to succor some persons temporarily, it's highly unlikely they will accept them for permanent residence, especially if they are of a different race, religion, language, or culture...and higher fertility. People are not stupid; they can read the handwriting on the wall. Do the Zairians intend that the Rwandans and their offspring (average number of children per woman: six or more) will stay and increase forever? I doubt it.

Migration doubtless cannot be controlled absolutely, any more than can, for example, the counterfeit of money. Both must be kept down to levels with which society can live, or we will have to live with the consequences. Neither the wide-spread use of bogus money, nor massive, unending migration are compatible with civil society, in my view.

There are three classes of measures that can control migration: First, those within the receiving country, such as sanctions on the employment of illegal aliens, or deportation of persons overstaying legal entry visas. Second, measures at the borders and ports to prevent illegal entry in the first place. Third...everybody's favorite...measures in the countries of origin to help reduce the migration pressures. Doubtless some action in all three categories will be needed. Those who would like some greater detail on these proposals may wish to read Chapter 11 of The Immigration Invasion.

III. Economics

Fein reads into my fifth principle (that each nation should train its own technical and professional personnel) that I call for government management of the economy. Just the opposite: I'm arguing for giving our own citizens rather than just passing them by in favor of foreigners. Fein apparently wants both our high-skilled and low-skilled jobs done more "efficiently" (i.e., cheaply) by immigrants (but doubtless not including his job).

What are we to do with our own citizens thus passed over? Fein would certainly not want to see them supported by some government safety net. In the course of this cut-throat global competition, wages and conditions will be driven down to world levels, which are very low indeed. In Bangladesh, one can hire a pair of hands for less than ten cents per hour. Fein also objects that I did not define drudgery work, but then lists gardening, clerical work, and painting as his ideas of this category. To these must be added all of the other things it takes to keep him going:

- growing food, manufacturing clothing and shelter, producing his energy and disposing of his waste, transporting him on the Washington, D.C. metro, cooking his food, waiting the tables and busing and washing the dishes for those "power lunches" in our nation's capital, and so on. Fein's coddled circumstances bring to mind a childhood Sunday school lesson: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." 10

All of these services require on-site labor — they can't be done by foreign workers unless they move here. And while the immigrants themselves might appreciate these bottom-of-the-line jobs, their children will not, having been corrupted of their virtue by moving to our country. Thus we set the stage for future civil rights battles, while at the same time increasing the competition at the bottom of the economic ladder — doubtless to the benefit of Fein and his collaborators at the top.

Finkel classifies as a myth the assertion that immigration takes away jobs. This point has been endlessly analyzed by both sides without the other conceding. I doubt that either side will ever carry the day. To this non-economist it seems that adding workers will affect the wages and conditions more than it will the demand for labor. At least the socialists at the turn of the century thought so, when they backed controls on immigration for this reason. 11 Employers wanted to bring in more immigrants to help break the power of the unions.

Finkel, as a socialist and Marxist, would like to argue the virtues of socialism versus capitalism, but that goes beyond what we can cover here. I was taken aback, though, when he wrote of human exploitation, mass murder, and ecological destruction. I thought he was describing not capitalism but the failed socialist experiments of Eastern Europe and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and Stalin's purges and slave labor camps. 12 (Perhaps I should include Nazi Germany in the indictment — after all, they called themselves "National Socialists.")

IV. Immigrants will save us.

Fein and Finkel argue this point, as have many others: immigrants are hard-working and entreprenural, they bring family values, and are willing to do jobs that Americans won't do, and for low pay and benefits, and so on.

The strange thing is that all of us are also of immigrant stock. What happened to those values when our forebears came to the United States? Is there some miasma here that erodes them after the first generation? If so, will the children of today's immigrants also "go to pot" (figuratively if not literally)? Perhaps their parents should take this into account in deciding whether or not to expose them to our degenerate society.

If there are problems with our social milieu and mores, they need to be attacked directly. These were the concerns I tried to address in my principles III, IV, V, and...
VI: the need for each nation to provide for its own citizens, and to look first to its own nationals for provision of its essential goods and services, rather than simply hoping that solutions can be imported.

V. There are other causes of migration. Certainly there are other direct causes of migration pressure beyond growing populations, improvements in transportation and instant communications. Ratan cites political and economic upheaval — much of which I see as engendered by rapid population growth. For instance, a rapidly growing population has a larger number of those notorious trouble makers — young males — which is one of the causes of political instability. My main theme: the time has passed when any significant proportion of the world’s population can simply pick up and move away from its troubles. A few may still be able to escape, but the many will either have to deal with the problems at home, hard as that may be, or live with them.

"Legal immigration is one of the chief causes of illegal immigration."

Professor McNeill mentions that "successful transplants tend to bring others after time." This is facilitated by a system of "networks," described by Professor Philip Martin of the University of California at Davis. This unseen (because it flows away from, not toward, us) and poorly measured phenomenon consists of remittances, goods, letters, and information sent back home by migrants. These network flows are an important cause of migration — of the decision either to go or not to go. Incidentally, what constitutes legal and illegal immigration is a distinction of law in the receiving countries, one of not much consequence to the prospective migrants themselves. Persons coming illegally would have a hard time believing that illegal status is significant to the United States as they are met at the border by immigrant-service groups; are fed, clothed, sheltered, allowed access to jobs by our government; are provided with health care and political rights; and, in the end, are given amnesty for having broken the law. The counter flow of goods and information through immigrant networks is the chief reason why illegal immigration is unlikely to decline without our first reducing legal immigration, and thus the volume of messages sent back home. Legal immigration is one of the chief causes of illegal immigration.

VI. Racism, xenophobia, and nativism. All six responses were refreshingly free of the argumentum ad hominem, though Finkel in his third footnote wonders why no concern is expressed over "white illegal immigration from Israel and the Irish Republic." We have opposed both of these flows, and the lottery for (chiefly Irish) visas set up in the 1990 Act, at other times and places. Finkel also states in his second footnote that the actual differences among Italians, blacks, Koreans, and whites in Brooklyn are greater than the differences between Serbians, Croats, and Muslims in Bosnia. He must mean the physical differences as viewed by an outsider — clearly, the Bosnian people themselves consider the differences in language, culture, religion, and history of sufficient import to kill one another over them. The differences are greater than in Brooklyn.

There have thus far been three stages in the immigration debate:

1. The Statue of Liberty Phase. During this initial phase, whenever the immigration topic came up, recitation of Emma Lazarus’s poem was considered a sufficient answer any problem.

2. The Caveat Phase. In this secondary stage, thoughtful people began to have some doubts and questions, but still felt the need to excuse their concerns by interjecting such phrases as, "Now I’m not a racist, nativist or a xenophobe, but...." They would then state their proposition for discussion.

3. Free Speech Phase. In this last and mature stage of the immigration debate people will be able to discuss the issues as legitimate ones of public policy, without first excusing themselves, or having their motives, morals or character challenged.

We can hope that the absence of such attacks in these six replies signals the opening of this mature phase of the immigration debate.

VII. The nation-state may not hold. This was the most startling assertion of the lot. It was made by Professor McNeill, who has written extensively on the origins of the nation-state. McNeill’s viewpoint has the weight and maturity that comes from a lifetime of study and writing on world history.

Certainly many regimes have come and gone. Transition from one to another has often been violent — consider the French Revolution. What might a world look like that had little respect for national boundaries? How would we function without the ability to assign rights and responsibilities to political units? Without a nation-state to look after their interests, will people transfer their loyalty up to some form of world government or down toward their own racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, tribal, or other group? This latter seems the more likely as we look around the world today. That type of "brave new world" has the look of Kaplan’s world of anarchy.

"If the nation-state fails there are tumultuous times ahead."

In my original paper, both the proposed paradigm shifts and the "New Decalogue for an Increasingly Crowded World" rely heavily on the nation-state as the chief means for ordering human affairs. In Paradigm IV.,
I cited the famous phrase from *Mending Wall* by Robert Frost: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." But Frost was actually in favor of national borders and distinctions. Another time he wrote, "I'm a terrible nationalist myself … and I can't see how one can be international unless there are some nations to be 'inter' with, and the clearer and distincter the better." 

If the nation-state fails, there are tumultuous times ahead.

VIII. Other arguments.

While I cannot in the space available answer every issue raised, I hope the above collection of arguments from right and left, from men and women, from academics and activists will give the reader a good feeling for the range of debate. Here are some observations on a few other points raised by the critics.

Dr. Strider is justifiably concerned that the measures needed to control illegal immigration might be "Draconian and inhumane." I believe it is possible to reduce illegal immigration to tolerable levels with a combination of measures within our country, at our borders and ports, and in the countries of origin, and to cut down on the network flows from back home by reducing legal immigration. But we are in a tight situation, and it's tightening daily. It is rather like failing to seek treatment for lung cancer in the early stages. The longer it's let go, the more drastic, expensive and uncomfortable the treatment will be, with a corresponding decrease in the chances for success. Had we acted in the 1960s or 1970s, immigration reform would have been much simpler. And if we wait until 2000, even more stringent measures will be required.

Dr. Strider is also concerned that any limitations be fair. What is fair in immigration policy is hard to say. Fair to whom? At least these parties are at interest: 1) the migrants themselves, 2) those they leave behind, 3) the people in the recipient country — especially the lower economic classes that feel the competition most acutely, and 4) future generations.

On point four, what would it be like for our progeny to live in a country of 400 million people by 2050, as opposed to 250 million in 1990? For example, if we were to keep our total resource consumption at today's levels, how much would resource consumption per capita fall? Taking 100 units per person as the baseline for 1990, we have:

\[
\text{in 2050} = 400 \times \frac{250 \times 100}{400} = 62.5\% \\
\text{in 1990} = 250 \times 100 \\
? \text{units = 62.5%}
\]

Thus: resources available per capita would fall by 37.5%. Alternatively, if per capita consumption stays the same, overall consumption will grow to:

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400 \div 250 = 1.6\text{ times what it is at present. Where will these extra resources come from? Keep in mind as a single example that we already import 58% of our petroleum.}
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Rather like a person who finally admits he has reached middle age and must give up some youthful activities, so mankind has also matured in its relationship with our planet. International migration worked tolerably well in the past and was a solution to human problems, but it is no longer workable for the vast majority of mankind. While honoring the past, we must devise new approaches to our new problems. Simply playing the same old game will not work much longer.

Perhaps I'm a decade or two early in my predictions, but then how much difference does it make to us today whether the Black Plague arrived in Europe in 1346 or 1356 or 1366? Looking back from, say, the year 2500, will historians much care if the migration epoch closed in 1990, 2000, or 2010?

Dr. Strider also challenges my concept that the world is "fully occupied," and suggests that more people could fit into some of the globe's more sparsely populated areas. This is a common viewpoint heard from persons who fly coast to coast, look down from 35,000 feet and see "empty space." Many of the sparsely populated areas of the globe are that way for very good reasons. This is where our food and fiber are grown — they can't be developed and still fulfill this function. Others are too cold, dry, or short of useful resources to support much human population. Also, if one asks those living in Montana or Colorado, who often like low density living, you will find they do not often want more neighbors. Their point of view is: let the newcomers pile into Manhattan, Los Angeles or Boston.

In this same vein, Fein approvingly cites Hong Kong and Japan as examples we might emulate. For many who share my values (Finkel rightly sees that values are at the bottom of this exchange), jampacked Hong Kong and Japan are the "future" to be avoided. Both rely on the centrally directed economies and tight social controls that Fein and many others find repugnant. Both also require vast, sparsely populated outbacks dedicated to producing needed food, fiber, raw materials, and energy, and to absorbing their waste.

Fein rightly notes that I have not urged the United States to enact such drastic measures as forced sterilization and abortions, or numerical limits on childbirth. Fortunately such actions are not needed, for the people of the United States on their own in the 1970s and 1980s reduced their total fertility to less than replacement. Had immigration also been at replacement levels (i.e., immigration equal to emigration), we would now be well on our way toward stabilizing our population.
In his final sally, Fein sees me condemning millions to genocide, persecution, or hellacious conditions abroad. That's the problem: there are millions; tens and even hundreds of millions. I still envision temporary admission of a relatively small number of bona fide refugees, not people like the ones Finkel cites who are actually practicing Orthodox Christians, but who claimed Jewish ancestry to get exit visas from the former U.S.S.R. We have not yet reached The End of History and the Last Man. 9 Jefferson put it this way: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." 20

We have not yet reached the point where progress comes without sacrifice. Life is hard. Finkel cites the Salvadoran janitors in Los Angeles organizing to win union rights. He's probably unaware of a study by the General Accounting Office on how immigrants displaced blacks from janitorial jobs in Los Angeles and how wages fell from $12.00/hr. to $4.00/hr. in the process. 21

"I believe Ratan is right in saying that attempts to limit migration by fiat alone are not likely to work..."

Showing that politics can make strange bedfellows, I agree with Finkel on the likely effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on migration pressures to the United States. We opposed it in two issues of The Social Contract. 22 As to his view that the United States is responsible for the conditions in such places as El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, and Mexico, I simply don't accept this patronizing Marxist view of recent history. The world has always been a rough and tumble place. People must organize along national (and other) lines to look out for their best interests. If they don't, a U.S.A. — or a U.S.S.R. — may interfere. For the record: I oppose both the embargo on Haiti and Cuba, and our invasion of either (and their on-going invasions of us).

Dr. Nieuwenhuysen writes of two other forms of migration. The first is temporary which, if the U.S. experience is applicable to Australia, will in many cases ultimately prove to be permanent. Second, he writes about intra-national migration, which is a different problem than the international migration that is the focus of my article. While this phenomenon merits its own discussion, this is not the place.

Ratan's view of our migration future is that it is essentially needs-driven. Tens of millions of people around the world live in dire circumstances, and their situations are steadily worsening from political, economic, and intra-national migration pressures, such as the rural-to-urban ones seen in many less-developed countries. Where we differ is in Ratan's apparent view that the residents of other countries, both more- and less-developed, will simply and quietly move over to receive these newcomers — as many as 98 million a year, she writes. This seems unlikely, especially when one looks at the ruckus raised in countries such as Germany and France by the migration of fewer than a million a year, or at the turmoil in such places as Assam state in northeast India over incursions from Bangladesh. I believe Ratan is right in saying that attempts to limit migration by fiat alone are not likely to work: as pointed out under heading No. V above, legalisms are not a prime consideration for intending migrants. The actual problems must be addressed — and legal migration must be reduced to stem the network flows that stimulate further migration, whether legal or illegal.

We must say to those who are dissatisfied with conditions at home, "Stand and fight; don't cut and run. Follow the examples of Nelson Mandella and Lech Walensa." If we don't take this position in the 1990s, then surely we will need to in the 2000s or 2010s when there will be another 1 or 2 billion more souls on our planet looking for a place in the sun.

Reprise

After thousands of years, mankind has finally fulfilled the Biblical injunction to multiply and subdue the earth. 23 Every nook and cranny of the earth's surface is now explored, mapped, and occupied, albeit to varying densities. Each part of the globe — even Antarctica — is now claimed by some nation and/or owned by some entity or individual. To enter any area peacefully one needs to ask permission. Increasingly, the answer to such requests will be:

No, we already have all the people we can handle.
No, we could take more people, but we prefer a less-crowded mode of living.
No, we are looking to the future, and wish to conserve our space and resources for our own children.
No, we have a homogeneous population and wish to stay that way. Our strength is in our uniformity. (This is the Japanese viewpoint.)
No, we have already taken in many strangers and are sufficiently heterogeneous. Now we need a breather to fully incorporate past migrants into our society and economy.
No, if you don't like conditions where you are,
fix them, don't just run away. We'll be glad to help with this if you wish — and if we actually can.

In dealing with migration, we must recognize the key role of momentum, as in all demographic matters. It is very difficult to stop the growth of a rapidly expanding population, for even if fertility rates drop to replacement levels, it requires roughly 50 years and will result in a further 50 percent population increase before the expansion of human numbers stops. This is due to the large percentage of young people in a growing population. Even if they limit themselves to two children per couple, they will produce far more new individuals than there are old folks who will be dying. The result: further population growth.

The same is true of migration. Strongly established streams are very difficult to interrupt, thanks to the networking factor. Like stopping a car — and unlike turning off a faucet — one must anticipate the future and act well in advance of an accident.

With regard to immigration, times and circumstances have changed. Emma Lazarus' 1886 poem and all those heart-warming immigrant success stories we learned back in grade school are irrelevant in today's demographic, political and social climates. Instead, we should say with Abraham Lincoln:

... As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.

"Second Annual Message to Congress," December 1, 1862.

Or perhaps with James Russell Lowell:

New occasions teach new duties;
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still, and onward,
Who would keep abreast of Truth.

The Present Crisis, 1844.

If we're able to disenthrall ourselves, to acknowledge the new reality that the 1990s are different from 1890s, then we will be able to do some fresh thinking on immigration, rather than just projecting the past into the future. Here are some sample innovations of the type that might surface if we give ourselves permission to do some hard thinking:

1. Perhaps refugees should be admitted just temporarily rather than permanently, as at present. If things quiet down or improve at home, why shouldn't refugees go home, so that we can then extend help to the next round of people needing succor?

2. What about allowing U.S. citizens to sell on the open market their right of residence in the U.S.? This is a highly valuable commodity in today's world. It would fetch perhaps a quarter of a million dollars or more. With that kind of money in a trust fund, some of our citizens would be much better off living in another country, many of which would be delighted to add such an affluent citizen. Even at a paltry 4 percent interest, $250,000 would generate $10,000 a year, with which one could live quite well in many places around the globe — certainly better than while sleeping on some city's streets in January.

3. Do we need to offer permanent residence in order to get people to invest in the United States? Evidently not; very few have taken up that provision of the 1990 Immigration Act.

4. In order to have access to foreign intellectual workers for the United States, do they need to move here? Evidently not — growing sections of the intellectual community now work electronically from remote locations via phone, fax, modem, overnight mail, and satellite. Do software programmers need to move from India to the United States in order to give us access to their skills?

5. How about temporary trades of residence? Just as there are now services to arrange the trade of houses between people who would like to experience one another's country, temporary exchanges of residence could be set up, keeping both countries in demographic balance. This sounds like a good business opportunity. I'll volunteer to broker it, along with No. 2 above.

6. Perhaps we should send educators overseas rather than bringing students to our home countries. It would be a broadening experience for the educators, and would avoid introducing students to the attractive conditions of the developed countries, which cannot be duplicated in their homelands. This disparity helps set the stage for their eventual migration. As the World War I song had it, "How're you going to keep them down on the farm after they've seen Paris?"

Summary

In the end, the choices presented by migration can be reduced to three basic questions:

How many people shall each country admit, and what factors should be taken into account in setting this limit?

Who should be chosen to immigrate, and what criteria should be used for choosing among the many candidates?

How can we enforce the rules in a humane fashion?

My answers for the United States to these three questions are:

How many should we admit? I recommend 200,000 a year. This is the resultant number if migration is limited to spouses and children of current U.S. citizens, plus 50,000 (temporary) refugees yearly. Given the dynamics of the situation, the spouses and children category and overall numbers would gradually decline over time. This would allow our population to stabilize.

Who should be admitted? Just the categories listed above.

How to control migration? A combination of international measures such as employer sanctions and
limiting social benefits to just legal residents; measures at the border to interdict illegal entry; better screening and tracking visa entrants, so overstays can be ushered out; and some assistance to the countries of origin to help them address their problems — when and where we can figure out how to do more good than harm with the limited resources we have available.

What are your answers to these questions?

I do not see a new global Völkerverwanderung, with tens and even hundreds of millions of people permanently crossing national borders each year. At a point not far distant, most of the target nations will take whatever steps are necessary to control entry and protect their territory, just as many of us now do individually for our own homes and apartments. Most of us already lock our doors, and for good reason.

The vast majority of the world's people will have to bloom where they have been planted, and will not be able to escape to unoccupied and virgin lands, which in any case no longer exist.

Times have changed, and it's time we adjusted our thinking to new circumstances.

NOTES
5 "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity," Union of Concerned Scientists, 26 Church Street, Cambridge, MA 02238 (April 1993).
9 Private communication from a Hong Kong businessman who contracts for workers in Bangladesh to produce trinkets for the U.S. market.