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Reluctant Observers

The American Media Take A Wary Look At Immigration

By Ira Mehlman

During the past two years there has been a sea change in the way immigration matters have been covered in the American news media. Immigration has moved out of the realm of human interest and onto center stage with other issues that the gatekeepers of the news deem as important stuff. A subject that just a few years ago was regarded by the media as being taboo or not of interest to the American public has, almost overnight, emerged as one of the hottest items on the media's agenda. In the words of the *Washington Post's* foreign affairs editor, Jim Hoagland, immigration "is fast becoming Topic A across the globe."¹

As recently as 1990, when Congress approved the largest increase in immigration levels in U.S. history, the issue remained barely a blip on the radar screens of the American news media. By 1993, immigration had become, along with the state of the economy, health care and crime, one of the staple domestic issues on the media's agenda. Immigration-related topics have been featured as cover and front page stories in virtually every major news magazine, and countless news broadcasts.²

It seems as though immigration has blossomed almost overnight as an important issue in the eyes of the American media. In fact, that is precisely what has happened.

While the American media have a penchant for the sensational and the prurient, they have a strong aversion to dealing with anything that could be construed as politically incorrect. Even as immigration levels grew steadily during the 1980s, the fear that a frank discussion of the issue could be construed as an attack on racial or ethnic minority groups kept the media (and others) away from most immigration stories. "This is not the 1920s,"³ stated a *Newsweek* cover story in an effort to explain the reluctance of politicians (and, by extension, the media) to look at immigration critically.

The American media also tended to be more interested in individual stories rather than looking at immigration as an important social phenomenon. Immigrants had names and faces and understandable human aspirations. *Immigration*, by contrast, was a dry, boring subject that would put most people to sleep. Thus, immigration coverage until very

recently was limited to high-minded clichés and symbolism with little real analysis of the significant implications of this emerging social phenomenon.

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Events, however, have conspired to force the media to pay attention to immigration, whether they really wanted to or not. It is impossible for the media to report on what seems like an endless chain of immigration-related news events and not begin to take a critical look at the phenomenon itself. Just within the past twelve months the front pages of newspapers and evening newscasts have been filled with stories of Zoë Baird and her illegal alien nanny; murders outside CIA headquarters by a Pakistani asylum claimant; the bombing of the World Trade Center; abuse of political asylum at U.S. airports; and Chinese boat people, smuggled by organized crime rings, landing on both coasts. Immigration was simply forcing itself onto the media's agenda and it had to be dealt with.

A Look There to Talk About Here

The first tentative steps toward making a critical assessment of the impact of immigration had already begun by the time the news events of 1993 forced the subject onto center stage. It began a few years earlier with a phenomenon that journalist Roy Beck describes as "Afghanistanism" (a term coined long before Afghanistan became a central battleground of the Cold War). It is the examination of a touchy problem by the media in some far-off, obscure part of the world, rather than your own. The recognition that a problem exists somewhere else allows the media to look at it from the perspective of an objective, dispassionate observer. Watching someone else grapple with an issue that makes us uncomfortable provides us (and the media) with a certain amount of cover to ask questions we would avoid asking about ourselves.

The American media, when they felt compelled to address immigration after ignoring it for most of the 1980s, began gingerly by looking at disturbing events that were, conveniently enough, occurring in Europe. Questions that could never be raised about the effects of immigration in the United States were more palatable when posed about events taking place on the other side of the Atlantic. Doubts about our own immigration policies could be more acceptably raised when the doubts were attributable to outsiders' analysis of its implications.

A 1991 *New York Times Magazine* cover story examined immigration to Europe in terms that, at the time, would have been unthinkable for an article about immigration to the United States. "Are European societies destined to ... become multiracial and multi-ethnic? Are Europeans willing to accept such a transformation? Do they have the means and power to prevent it, even if they want to?"⁴ These were precisely the questions that many Americans harbored about the future of their own country, but which were never raised in the media. The U.S. media reported about these issues on the American scene with the same matter-of-factness that they reported the weather.

In looking at Europe, the pros and cons of immigration-generated diversity could be discussed more freely because any conclusions we came to had little meaning. Americans could not control what happened to European societies. The media were not yet ready to ask these same questions of American society because a conclusion that increasing diversity was not in American interests would suggest that we ought to do something about it. Better not to ask the question unless you're ready to accept the answer.

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Whatever apprehensions the U.S. media had about the direction of American immigration policy were best expressed by assigning them to outside observers. They could accomplish this by reporting about how others viewed the United States. "The future, Europeans boasted, lay not in deficit-plagued, drug-ridden, ethnically and racially divided America. It belonged to Europe, whose social cohesion, booming economies and strong governments" gave them an advantage.⁵ In other words, it was not the *Times* that thought America was plagued by ethnic and racial tensions, people in Europe did. The *Times* was merely reporting what foreigners thought about the state of our society.

The acts of violence against foreigners in Europe, primarily in Germany, gave the U.S. press another opportunity to practice the art of "Afghanism" in their examination of the immigration issue. While reacting with obvious repulsion over the attacks against asylum-seekers in Germany, the American media also found room and time to look at the underlying causes of the tensions erupting in Europe, namely the massive numbers of people seeking asylum in Germany and elsewhere. While they could not yet acknowledge that high levels of immigration were causing problems in the United States, they were able to see that it was a problem in Europe.

Before it became widely acceptable editorially to assert that immigration was becoming a social and financial burden to the United States, major media outlets by 1992 were prepared to take a critical look at conditions in Europe. In an editorial condemning the attacks against foreigners in Rostock, *The New York Times* acknowledged that part of the problem stemmed from the fact that hundreds of thousands of people were pouring into Germany each year, filing false claims of political asylum and straining an already overburdened social system. "That's social dynamite in the conditions of 1992,"⁶ stated the editorial. Moreover, tightening asylum regulations was, in the paper's opinion, a "reasonable" step. (It took evidence of massive fraud and outright terrorism before the same conclusions could be drawn about asylum policy at home.)⁷

Sensational Events in the U.S.

On the domestic scene, the American media limited its critical examination of immigration matters to the most flagrant forms of illegal immigration. This was particularly true for television news. Scenes of large numbers of people breaching U.S. borders made for dramatic video footage, long the staple of television news. In contrast to the dry, difficult (and often taboo) subjects of the social and economic costs of immigration generally, a trip to the border with a video camera guaranteed exciting, easily understood pictures for the evening news or magazine shows.

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Equally important, however, was the perception that large-scale illegal immigration was a safe subject. The media, ever sensitive to charges of "immigrant bashing" or being anti-Hispanic, knew they had more or less a free ride when it came to showing scenes of chaos along the border. Though ethnic advocates might be displeased by those reports, there was little

they could say to defend illegal immigration. It is difficult to accuse the camera of lying or making value judgements. All the networks had to do was turn them on and let them roll.

In January 1992, two of the major U.S. networks, CBS and ABC, devoted their weekly news magazine shows, "48 Hours" and "20/20" to the subject of America's uncontrolled border and the costs of illegal immigration. Without actually having to editorialize themselves, graphic scenes of illegal aliens wantonly crossing the border, laughing derisively at the Border Patrol, said more to the American public than any commentary the network could have provided. Likewise, scenes of thousands of illegal immigrants lined up for free health care in the United States or to deliver their babies at enormous cost to the taxpayers, could not help but evoke outrage among viewers.

When it came to light in early 1993 that America's political asylum laws were being flagrantly abused (and that the abuse had been a factor in acts of terrorism in the United States), it was also relatively easy for the media to deal with that phenomenon. In the aftermath of the World Trade Center bombing in February 1993, America's highest rated television program, "60 Minutes,"⁸ felt free to run a story critical of lax political asylum regulations without feeling compelled to balance the report with the views of those who supported existing asylum policies.

The media have had a much harder time figuring out how to deal with the economic and social issues associated with immigration. These issues were a lot less clear cut and infinitely more controversial. Perhaps even more significant than the sudden attention the media have given the subject of immigration has been the beginning of a real debate about what the phenomenon means to social and economic stability of the United States.

This critical assessment of the overall impact of immigration to the United States did not begin in earnest until 1992 in the wake of the Los Angeles riots and California's state budget crisis. In trying to make sense out of the mindless destruction that occurred in Los Angeles in late April and early May of 1992, the media had no choice but to examine the role immigration had played as a factor in creating the explosive conditions in that city.

For the first time, the mainstream media were willing to consider the possibility that immigration might be having a negative effect on the economic prospects of many Americans, particularly African Americans. Two remarkable op-ed pieces, in two of the country's most influential newspapers, laid at least part of the blame for the urban tension in Los Angeles (and by inference, other major cities) at the feet of U.S. immigration policy. National security expert Edward N. Luttwak wrote in *The New York Times*:

[W]hat happened in Los Angeles can be more fundamentally explained as the outcome of a

*purely economic phenomenon — the loss of traditional underclass jobs to... immigrants.... Thus, it is not the riots that are surprising but rather the semblance of tranquility in most places, most of the time,*⁹

Similarly, Otis Graham and Roy Beck, writing in the *Los Angeles Times* asserted that, "It is immigration, currently running at unprecedented levels, that exacerbates the economic and social forces behind the riots."¹⁰ Even analyses of the riots by the newspapers themselves could not overlook the impact that massive immigration had had in Los Angeles. "Enormous waves of foreign immigrants arrived [during the 1980s] and began to push blacks out... One of the most disturbing aspects of the disorders... was the raw hostility between blacks and Koreans,"¹¹ *The New York Times* wrote in its analysis of the causes of the riots.

And Then the Pocketbook

The Los Angeles riots also coincided with another seminal event in California — namely that the "Golden State," the land of endless opportunity, was in dire fiscal straits. During a protracted budget crisis that extended through the entire summer of 1992, the local and national media searched for reasons why California was such a mess. That massive immigration, legal and illegal, was a prime factor could not be ignored either by Governor Pete Wilson or the media.

For the first time, the media, both in California and nationally, began to question whether immigration was really the unmixed economic blessing they had assumed it to be. The uncritical acceptance of the assertion that immigration is absolutely an economic benefit has been extremely difficult for many in the media to overcome, even in the face of mounting empirical evidence that immigration is bankrupting some parts of the country. Nowhere was that sentiment more evident than in an irate response by Steven V. Roberts of *U.S. News & World Report* to criticism of his reporting by Dan Stein, executive director of FAIR. Roberts, one of the most prominent journalists in Washington, in a memo to his editor, asserted with almost religious conviction that "All studies — and I mean all of them — indicate that 'In the long run, immigrants benefit the economy with their energy and productivity.'"¹²

Notwithstanding the strongly held views of journalists like Roberts, the media have been unable to ignore the growing body of evidence emanating from California that immigration was becoming an enormous financial burden to the state and its counties and cities. Reports issued by San Diego County in August, 1992 and by Los Angeles County in November, 1992 — which documented billions of dollars in taxpayer costs to attend to the needs of

immigrants in those counties — received widespread coverage in both the California and the national press.

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Even the *Wall Street Journal*, an unabashed booster of unlimited immigration,¹³ has been forced to acknowledge that problems exist. Tim W. Ferguson, a regular columnist for the *Journal*, who was once the most doctrinaire of libertarians on the immigration issue was forced to concede that "A foreign influx has a mixed effect on the economy, but few deny it causes short-run strain on taxpayers."¹⁴

When California Governor Pete Wilson took the unprecedented step of placing full-page ads in several national newspapers this summer to complain about the cost of illegal immigration in his state, he was severely criticized by the media for being intemperate, even while they acknowledged that he had a legitimate beef. "Avoid Knee-Jerk Responses to Immigration Problems,"¹⁵ read the editorial headline in *USA Today*. "California Scapegoats,"¹⁶ was the accusatory headline in *The New York Times* editorial on the same subject.

While numerous newspapers and commentators castigated Wilson for publicly complaining about the cost of immigration, every editorial assessment of California's predicament also included mention of the fact that the state was being unduly burdened by enormous costs associated with immigration. The message the media were sending to Wilson went something like this: "Okay Pete, we agree that you have a problem, but trust us, it will all work out in the end. So for God's sake, quit making such a fuss."

On the issue of immigration-related costs, the American news media seem to have lapsed into a state of denial. They have managed, on the one hand, to report that state and local governments are being overwhelmed by the costs of immigration, that reputable economists consider immigration to be an economic drain, while continuing to cling stubbornly to Steven Roberts' assertion that "All studies — and I mean all of them," show that immigration is good for the economy. They seem to be oblivious to the obvious contradictions.

"[Authors] Brimelow and Miles [have] forced their colleagues to acknowledge that restrictionism is a legitimate viewpoint."

Clearly old myths and deeply-held beliefs about the economic effects of immigration die hard among the reporters who write about this subject. But as any good public relations professional will attest, there is no such thing as bad publicity. The mere fact that the debate rages about whether immigration is a net economic plus or minus constitutes a major breakthrough. Just a few years ago those who argued that it harmed the economy got about as much respect and attention as those who contend the earth is flat.

Which Way Culture?

A second major area of new exploration by the media is the examination of social and cultural consequences of immigration. Terms like multiculturalism and diversity have become part of the American lexicon in recent years, and immigration is the driving force behind the changing ethnic and cultural composition of the United States. Oddly, while multiculturalism has long been a hot topic in some of the more sophisticated national publications, the immigration angle was rarely raised.

That began to change in 1992. Leading opinion magazines representing mainstream conservative and liberal thought, *National Review* and *Atlantic*, each ran ground-breaking pieces exploring the social and cultural implications of current U.S. immigration policy. Coming at the issue from distinctly different points of view, Peter Brimelow and Jack Miles built meticulous arguments against the current trends that instantly gave the restrictionist point of view credibility and intellectual cover among other journalists.

For reporters who cover immigration in the daily newspapers or weekly news magazines, and who do not have the luxury of being able to devote a great deal of time thinking about it, Brimelow and Miles have provided convenient handbooks for under-standing the restrictionist position. By early summer of 1993, immigration had become one of the two or three hottest political issues around and the media could no longer discount the restrictionist point view as mere xenophobia.

Time and again, as the media scramble to make sense out of a hot issue they have long ignored, Brimelow and Miles are cited in order to define the issues and the players. "The political consensus that led to the last reforms [i.e., the immigration increases of 1990] has broken down," assessed *U.S. News & World Report*.

[F]issures have grown on every side. Last summer, the conservative National Review blasted current pro-immigration policies that tilt toward Third World immigrants.... Moreover, an Atlantic Monthly cover story last year by liberal journalist Jack Miles called for a moratorium on immigration to help poor black Americans get

ahead.¹⁷

Arguments that publications like *U.S. News* were not prepared to raise on their own, could now be discussed and safely attributed to others.

While continuing to describe the changing political climate in negative terms as a backlash,¹⁸ the intellectual framework for limiting immigration set out by Brimelow and Miles has forced their colleagues to acknowledge that restrictionism is a legitimate viewpoint. Conservative columnist George Will, among the most widely respected political pundits in the United States, has clearly had his thinking on the subject influenced by the arguments set forth by Brimelow and says so explicitly in his columns. Until very recently a supporter of open immigration, Will now questions the wisdom of such a policy based on the cultural arguments made in the Brimelow essay:

*America is not just an economy; it is more than an arena for wealth creation. It is a culture. The high rate of immigration since 1960, combined with the high fertility rate of immigrants relative to that of native-born Americans, is producing rapid change in the nation's ethnic and cultural balance.*¹⁹

The same concerns about the effect of immigration on American culture can be heard from more liberal commentators as well. Opening his Sunday morning news discussion program, which was devoted to the subject of immigration, David Brinkley, one of the deans of television journalism, raised the same concerns expressed by Will:

*A middle-aged woman wrote to us as follows: "Will I or my children see the end of our United States as we have known it? Will we see the end of our 350-year-old legal and social system, and our language washed away in a flood of immigrants, legal and illegal, while we who have lived here for generations have nothing to say about it?"*²⁰

While still a mine field that most journalists and columnist would just as soon avoid, it is no longer absolutely taboo to raise the cultural concerns associated with immigration. Because the cultural arguments resonate so powerfully with the American people and appeal to their emotions (where most political battles are fought and won), the ability to address those concerns in the media represents a sea change in how immigration is likely to be dealt with.

In a similar fashion, Jack Miles' "Blacks vs. Browns" cover story in the October, 1992 *Atlantic* had the effect of desensitizing the racial aspect of the immigration debate in the press. For a long time the American media seemed to buy into the pro-immigration movement's argument that any discussion of limiting immigration was tantamount to thinly veiled racism. Miles' liberal case for limiting

immigration was like a shot between the eyes for many of his colleagues. In the *Washington Post*, for example, the Miles article was viewed as

*no mere white man's sensitive groping for his own feeling. It is a marshaling of analysis and statistic, as well as his personal experience... that in the end leads him to call for a profound reevaluation of immigration policy.... This leads Miles to conclude, against powerful contrary instincts, that controlling the influx of immigrants may be the only way to rescue the underclass, particularly the black underclass, in the United States today.*²¹

The freedom to discuss the immigration issue frankly, without the dreaded charge of racism hanging over their heads, represented a second important breakthrough for the coverage of the issue in the American press. Opening up the arena of "culture" as one fit for polite discussion and eliminating the automatic cloture that the charge of racism used to carry, has led to a qualitative change in the way immigration is handled in the American media. This has been no less important than the quantitative change in coverage that has occurred as a result of the high profile news events of the past year.

More Reasonable Discussion

In this new, more relaxed media atmosphere that seems to be emerging, proponents of immigration limitation are no longer automatically demonized as Know-Nothings, or worse. This is a hugely important advance in the attitude of the media that will have a great deal to do with how immigration is covered as the issue continues to heat up. Once the media have acknowledged that the proponents of a particular viewpoint are decent thoughtful people, their opinions — even if they are not shared by most of the press — must be treated with respect.

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The most shocking example of this fundamental change in attitude appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, a newspaper that has long been editorially hostile to the notion of immigration limits. Analyzing the sticky political matter that immigration presents for President Clinton, the newspaper was startlingly frank about who the open immigration proponents are and who favors limits. "The advocates of a liberal immigration policy tend to be found on the far left and the far right of the political spectrum, an unusual alliance of civil libertarians and economic conservatives.... But at the

nation's political center, where Clinton's electoral future lies, there is growing anxiety about²² the consequences of current immigration levels.

"Like it or not ... immigration is an issue the American media will be forced to report on and analyze for many years to come."

The New Republic, a leading mainstream liberal opinion magazine, which has traditionally promoted high levels of immigration has also, in recent months, been forced to recognize that although they might disagree with the restrictionists, those in favor of limits can no longer be written off as mere kooks. "The next major post-cold war debate seems to be forming around the issue of immigration, and already the post-ideological ironies are piling up,"²³ stated the magazine. *The New Republic* then proceeded to demonstrate how the political battle lines over immigration do not break neatly according to political ideology. Restrictionists, therefore, cannot be easily dismissed by the media as a fringe element in the political mix. Regardless of the editorial bias of the newspaper, magazine or broadcast outlet, someone whose opinion they hold in high regard seems to be in the restrictionist camp Like it or not (and they probably don't), immigration is an issue the American media will be forced to report on and analyze for many years to come. If the pattern that has emerged to this point holds true in the future, we can expect them to do it in a fairly predictable manner — they will be dragged reluctantly into the fray, but only after others have provided them with the necessary cover.

In one of the more candid assessments of the media's role in reporting about immigration, columnist Jonathan Alter concedes that elitism will inescapably color the media's coverage of the immigration debate. It's easy "for someone like me to tell [American workers] to calm down about [immigration]. Except for a few facile British wordsmiths invading our shores, I don't have to worry about foreigners threatening my job,"²⁴ writes Alter (who then proceeds to tell American workers to quit worrying about foreigners taking their jobs).

Despite its post-Watergate bravado about being willing to take on any issue or any icon, the Fourth Estate is in many respects among the most timid institutions in American society. In reviewing the history of media coverage of immigration in recent years, we discover the coverage has consistently been several years behind the curve. Only after someone, or some group, has stepped out in front and absorbed the initial barrage of criticism for attacking somebody's sacred cow, do the American media step in and begin to look at the issue on their own.

It is a pattern that can be expected to be followed as the debate continues to unfold. Instead of providing a mirror that reflects the mood of the country, the American media are more apt to provide a parabola which picks up echoes of a debate that is growing in intensity around the country. ■

NOTES

¹ Hoagland, Jim, "Toward Zero Immigration," *The Washington Post*, June 10, 1993.

² The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), the nation's largest immigration reform group, has been cited in about 300 newspaper and magazine articles and its spokespersons have appeared on 140 radio and 60 television broadcasts in the first eight months of 1993.

³ Morgenthau, Tom, "America: Still a Melting Pot?" *Newsweek*, August 9, 1993.

⁴ Miller, Judith, "Strangers at the Gate: Europe's Immigration Crisis," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 15, 1991.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ "Combating Racism, After Rostock," *The New York Times*, September 4, 1992.

⁷ An interesting contrast to the way the American media looked at immigration problems in Europe while ignoring them at home, is the way immigration was being covered in some European publications. The respected British news magazine, *The Economist*, consistently views immigration as a problem for Europe, but not for America.

⁸ March 15, 1993.

⁹ Luttwak, Edward N., "The Riots: Underclass vs Immigrants," *The New York Times*, May 15, 1992.

¹⁰ Graham, Otis L., Jr. and Beck, Roy, "To Help Inner City, Cut Flow of Immigrants," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1992.

¹¹ Reinhold, Robert, "A Terrible Chain of Events Reveals Los Angeles Without Its Makeup," *The New York Times*, May 3, 1992.

¹² Roberts, Steven V., Memo to Merrill McLoughlin, editor *U.S. News and World Report*, July 16, 1993.

¹³ A July 3, 1989 editorial by the newspaper called for a constitutional amendment declaring, "There shall be open borders" — a position consistently reaffirmed on later anniversaries of independence.

¹⁴ Ferguson, Tim W., "Enterprising Answers to California's Continuing Crisis?" *The Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 1993.

¹⁵ *USA Today*, August 20, 1993.

¹⁶ *The New York Times*, August 16, 1993.

¹⁷ Glastris, Paul, "Immigration crackdown: Anxious Americans want new restrictions and tougher enforcement," *U.S. News and World Report*, June 21, 1993.

¹⁸ The title of the August 9, 1993 *Newsweek* cover story on immigration was simply, "Immigration Backlash." A sampling of other headlines on the subject reveals consistent use of language ascribing negative connotations to calls for limiting immigration: "California Melting Pot Boils Over,"

Christian Science Monitor, April 6, 1993; "Harvest of Blame: Californians Turn on Illegal Immigrants," *The Washington Post*, June 4, 1993; "On These Shores, Immigrants Find a New Wave of Hostility," *The New York Times*, June 13, 1993; "Send Back Your Tired, Your Poor....," *Time*, June 21, 1993.

¹⁹ Will, George F., "Closing the Golden Door," *The Washington Post*, July 29, 1993.

²⁰ Brinkley, David, "This Week With David Brinkley," ABC News, June 20, 1993.

²¹ Trueheart, Charles, *The Washington Post*, September 18, 1992.

²² Broder, John M., "Immigration Delicate Issue for Clinton," *Los Angeles Times*, September 7, 1993.

²³ Choi, Daniel, "Border Lines," *The New Republic*, September 13, 1993.

²⁴ Alter, Jonathan, "Elitism and the Immigration Backlash," *Newsweek*, July 26, 1993.