

A Citizen Who Took Up Arms for His Country

A foot soldier in the immigration trenches reflects upon John Tanton's true nature: a capable, courageous conservationist; the gentleman and gentle man as warrior

PETER BRIMELOW

Shortly after John Tanton's passing, two *New York Times* writers, Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael D. Shear, published *Border Wars: Inside Trump's Assault on Immigration*, in which they casually referred to John as "a retired Michigan ophthalmologist and white nationalist." Of course, on one level this ridiculous smear is just yet more evidence of the bigoted bubble that Ivy League mainstream media journalists inhabit. But on another level, it illustrates the polemical ploy used against John, particularly in his latter years, that neither he nor his key supporters were ever able successfully to counter. This was unfortunate in terms of the public debate on immigration, and deeply frustrating to those of us who urged a more radical response. But it was to his credit as a human being: besides being a great man—in terms of his capabilities, courage, and creativity—John Tanton was a gentleman, and a gentle man.

Needless to say, John was not remotely a "white nationalist." I believe my testimony on this matter must be accepted as dispositive: to adapt Lloyd Bentsen's notorious attack on Dan Quayle in the 1988 vice-presidential debate, I (no doubt unlike many readers of *Social Contract*) am prepared to acknowledge that I know "white nationalists" (in the sense of people aiming to defend the interests of American whites—as

they are absolutely entitled to do in the era of identity-group politics that the post-1965 immigration disaster is inexorably creating). I regard some "white nationalists" (who, until the 1965 Immigration Act would have been known as "American Nationalists") as my friends. John Tanton was nonetheless no white nationalist.

He was, in fact, an environmentalist—genuinely, passionately in love with birds, trees, etc. "He thinks the bees are dying," FAIR's Dan Stein once told me, exasperated because he wanted John to focus on the latest immigration legislation crisis.

But, unlike many environmentalists, John was deeply rational. He saw that population growth was antithetical to the conservationist cause. Accordingly, he became interested in population control. He decided this required the legalization of abortion and campaigned for it in Michigan—where it lost, in a referendum. But he later told me, to his great credit, that he regretted the U.S. Supreme Court's arbitrary imposition of nation-wide abortion, because it left the issue unsettled and festering.

In an era of center-right government, John's interest in population control was unscrupulously invoked by the neoconservative *Wall Street Journal* Editorial Page in a clumsy attempt to stampede conservative Catholic readers against immigration reduction. But now, in the current era of Woke Trump-Deranged Leftism, "white nationalism" has become the smear *du jour*. Transcending both, John once told me that he and Mary Lou had voted for Patrick J. Buchanan in the 1992 Michigan GOP primary—because their support for his immigration skepticism, which they had come to share, outweighed his much-publicized Right To Life commitment. But very few are capable of this level of dispassionate discipline.

John Tanton, though not, like Robert E. Lee, a professional soldier, was, in Lee's wonderful phrase, a citizen who took up arms for his country. This had both good and bad consequences. Among the good: no professional politician would have selflessly devoted so much time to building organizations that others would get to

Peter Brimelow is the founder of VDARE and author of: Alien Nation: Common Sense about America's Immigration Disaster; The Worm in the Apple: How the Teachers Unions Are Destroying American Education; The Patriot Game: National Dreams and Political Realities; and Wall Street Gurus: How You Can Profit from Investment Newsletters. He is a former senior editor at Forbes (1986-2002) and National Review. He served as an aide to Sen. Orrin Hatch (1978-1980) and as a writer and editor for the Financial Post and Maclean's magazine.

run, not always gratefully. Nor would a professional politician permit himself (or be capable of) John's tireless innocent curiosity, which did indeed duly get him into trouble when he strayed into Politically Incorrect areas.

Notoriously among the bad: donating his private papers to the University of Michigan, naively not realizing that his enemies would ransack them for out-of-context quotes in the hope of embarrassing not merely John himself, but also his many trusting private correspondents. (Such as, for example, me. For the record, I thought John's papers contained nothing embarrassing at all. But he unquestionably gave these enemies yet another opportunity to lie.)

John also lacked a professional politician's thick skin. I remember him being genuinely distressed because some girl had started screaming at him in a Petoskey store about his alleged "racism"—part of the demography-driven collapse of public civility that has subsequently become so common in the Trump years. I told him he should have replied that he'd rather be a rac-

ist than a traitor—which, of course, is what immigration enthusiasts ultimately are. But that idea distressed him even more.

John Tanton was a great quartermaster rather than a great general. He had none of the ruthlessness, even cruelty, of the true battle leader. This was just as well for that boorish girl in the Petoskey store, and certainly made life easier for his numerous colleagues who claimed careers in the movement he built, although I believe it limited its effectiveness in the end.

Accordingly, whereas Lazare Carnot famously became known as "The Organizer of Victory," because he assembled the citizen armies that defended the French Revolution from external attack, it cannot yet be said what exactly John was "The Organizer" of—because the immigration battle is not yet won, nor even really joined.

But he was the Organizer of something. I personally, and what the Founders in the Preamble of the Constitution called our posterity, will remain deeply in his debt. ■



John Tanton — a quintessential outdoorsman and avid beekeeper for more than five decades (above); picking cherries on his ancestral farm in 1979 (upper left); and as a young farm boy (below left). Tanton's appreciation for nature, and vigorous work as an environmental preservationist, influenced his activism to curb population growth and limit mass human migration. The impact of overdevelopment, and its devastation of pristine wilderness areas fueled his goal of achieving a "stationary state," respecting the finite limits of our natural resources, and noting that "the growth of both human numbers and material consumption must eventually end."