

John and Mary Lou Tanton: An Appreciation

RICHARD D. LAMM, FORMER GOVERNOR OF COLORADO

The world of ideas is always in flux, but occasionally certain old, deeply established ideas are in need of revolution. “In every age there is a turning-point, a new way of seeing and asserting the coherence of the world,” says Jacob Bronowski in *The Ascent of Man*. Copernicus caused a revolution in how humankind saw the universe, Darwin in how we viewed the human place in the natural order.... These individuals and many more were branded heretics. But John Rohe wisely reminds us of George Bernard Shaw’s statement that “All great truths begin as blasphemies” when referring to the work of Mary Lou and John Tanton.

Giving birth to a new vision is one of the great challenges of history. These new ways of “asserting the coherence in the world,” however logical, do not come easy. Reformers always face entrenched opposition from the status quo and more than a few have lost their lives trying to assert a new coherence. The status quo is always protected by an army of conformists blocking the door. James Joyce observed that “It’s as painful to be awakened from a vision as to be born.”

The Tantons have often asked cosmic questions, forcing us to see the consequences of present change. I remember well when John pointed out that the original U.S. Census in 1790 found four million. John observed that meant in our short two-hundred-year history that we have had six doublings of that original number (4, 8, 16, etc.) and that with only two more doublings, we would be a nation of more than a billion people. He asked, is that what we wanted for our grandchildren? All his listeners knew the immigration reform movement had a new metaphor.

We define the world by the questions we ask and we have too few people like the Tantons asking long-range

questions. These two creative minds saw over forty years ago that “how many” and “who” would soon become controversial issues in most of the world’s nations. John, in his 1975 Mitchell Prize essay, recognized that these would be particularly painful questions in the United States, with its tradition of immigration. Yes, the U.S. could physically absorb more people, but what would that mean to our quality of life? Increasingly, citizens of this nation (and citizens of most states and regions) are asking the following questions: “Why do we want additional population growth?” “Who benefits?” “What public policy reasons are there to double the population of Michigan or Colorado?” “Why would America want to leave its grandchildren a nation of one billion people?”



The Tantons, years before most other environmentalists, saw that our nation’s demographic future had shifted from an unalterable given to an alterable variable—from something we blindly inherited to something we consciously determine.... In one sense, human history can be seen as asserting control over factors once thought immutable.... Growth versus no growth. New ideas versus old concepts. Essentially, the Tantons have been confronting the implications of finitude. They think about the world from a different, but emerging viewpoint. They ask: “Is a given human pattern ecologically possible and sustainable? Is it consistent with the integrity of the world’s biosystem?” I suggest these might well prove to be the ultimate twenty-first-century questions.

Richard D. Lamm, an American politician, author, certified public accountant, and attorney, served three terms as Governor of Colorado (D) from 1975–1987. In 1996, he ran for the Reform Party’s nomination for President. He is currently the co-director of the Institute for Public Policy Studies at the University of Denver and a frequent contributor to The Social Contract.

Increasingly, the whole world has started to ask the type of questions John and Mary Lou Tanton have been asking for over forty years.

This leads to another accomplishment of the Tantons. The only thing harder than changing the status quo is the attempt to change it from an obscure place.* Universities, think tanks, and pressure groups all generate new ideas. Most people feel powerless to effect change, especially if they are not associated with one of the more conventional change agents.

Yet America often has found its leadership in obscure places. Dwight Eisenhower came from a small farm in Kansas, Harry Truman from a small town in Missouri, Ronald Reagan from an even smaller town in Iowa....The challenge of any society is to be open enough to recognize talent and vision, even if they do not arise from the established order.

It is said that “Revolutions are started by one individual, but succeed through the efforts of many.” So now it is our turn. Our turn to take John and Mary Lou Tanton’s creativity, passion, and sense of the future, and help give birth to a new world.”

*John and Mary Lou’s home base for their myriad activities is the Lake Michigan resort town of Petoskey, Michigan (population 5,670 according to the 2010 Census). John was an ophthalmologist at the famed Burns Clinic Medical Center, Petoskey, Michigan until his retirement from his medical practice in 1998. ■

§ § § § §

[This essay is adapted from Richard D. Lamm’s foreword to *Mary Lou & John Tanton: A journey Into American Conservation* by John F. Rohe (Washington, D.C.: FAIR Horizon Press, 2002)]

The Relationship of Legal to Illegal Immigration

JOHN H. TANTON

In the early years of our work on the immigration question, we viewed legal and illegal immigration as fairly separate and distinct phenomena. They seemed to require different measures for their control.

Illegal immigration was, of course, illegal, and hence, easy to oppose. The measures needed for its containment included such things as more border patrol agents, better detection of illegals within the country, employer sanctions, more care at our embassies overseas when issuing visas, repatriation to their country of origin (or, in the case of Mexico, repatriating deep into Mexico, rather than just across the border), and so on.

Legal immigration, in contrast, seemed to require such things as family reunification, education policy for foreign students, economic effects, the brain drain, and the related questions of asylum and refugees. We did not see—or at least I didn’t—that legal immigration per se was one of the major causes of illegal immigration.

This realization came through after reading Dr. Philip Martin’s papers on immigration, in which he characterized the causative factors as demand-pull, supply-push, and “networks.” The “networks” are those informal channels of communication that transport cash, goods, and information from the United States to the country of origin. Since the direction of the flow is away from us, we tend not to see it. It is this counter flow that helps stimulate interest in (and facilitate) emigration.

In the U.S., we tend to look at immigration as either legal or illegal, as outlined above. I contend that in the country of origin, migration is looked at as either go or don’t go. Whether or not it is legal is, I believe, a minor point. If legal spots are available, fine. If not, there are plenty of rationalizations available to justify proceeding illegally: the need to feed family; the irredentist idea that the land was stolen from the migrants’ forefathers in the first place (an idea embraced by some Mexicans); the several amnesties we’ve given to illegal aliens indicating that we are not really serious about enforcing our laws and placing limits on the total number of people allowed to settle in our country; the welcoming reception by employers, welfare workers, immigration lawyers, certain political interests, and church groups; and the back-across-the-border-and-try-again charade forced on the border patrol. Legality in these cases is not a major consideration.

Put simply, high levels of migration, whether legal or illegal, beget high levels of migration, whether legal or illegal, because the network flows back to the country of origin and encourages others to try to emigrate.

Without reducing legal immigration, we are unlikely to succeed in reducing the illegal variety. ■