

How a Rural Ophthalmologist's Vision Changed Our Lives

BY DONALD A. COLLINS AND SARAH G. EPSTEIN

COLLINS: For both Sally and me, our association with John Tanton and his wife Mary Lou has proved to be something of a family affair, defined by our innate trust of each other and a steadfast devotion to urgent policy issues in which we all believe. Here almost by accident came a person into our lives who profoundly influenced us, but cast a vision that has indeed embraced the World. Not many rural ophthalmologists do that!

Introduction to the now urgent immigration reform issue began for me in the early 1970s when I was serving as the volunteer program chair for the Pittsburgh World Affairs Council. At a PWAC luncheon then, I sat next to our distinguished speaker, Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., who was in his retirement serving the head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). He had a distinguished military career, capped as a four-star general when he served from 1968 until 1972 as the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps. He told me personally and then in his speech to a group of Pittsburgh civic leaders that day about the disturbing, uncontrolled surge in U.S. immigration he had observed. We all later realized this had resulted from the unfortunate immigration legislation of 1965, which opened the doors to what has since been over 50 million immigrants, legal and illegal, and their children. Immigrant birth rates far surpass those of native-born parents.

I first met John and Mary Lou Tanton in about 1980 when I was living in San Francisco. A friend from Pittsburgh suggested we meet. We thus dined together one evening with them in a restaurant on Polk Street, which I still remember as having a colorful canopy over our heads. My late wife, Joan, and I were quickly convinced that the earlier concern expressed to me by Gen-

Donald A. Collins, a population activist for more than 40 years, having served on the National Board of PPFPA, is a founding board member of the Guttmacher Institute, Family Health International and Ipas. Now, as founder and president of the International Services Assistance Fund (isafonline.org), Collins helps foster wider use of a permanent female contraceptive, and Sarah G. Epstein serves on the boards of several non-profit organizations, including Pathfinder International.

eral Chapman had indeed blossomed into a full-blown immigration invasion.

John has a quality of credibility which comes across instantly to his listeners. As our friendship ripened over these many subsequent years, I have often personally seen that quality in action, one which no doubt has made it possible for him to enlist so many voices to pursue immigration reform in various ways. While some of those voices have expressed thoughts which vicious political enemies have used to try to defame this renaissance man, his guiding principle remains that American democracy can stand a variety of opinions and indeed must hear them for the fulsome debate that this issue demands.



John and Mary Lou Tanton, Higgins Lake, Michigan, 2004

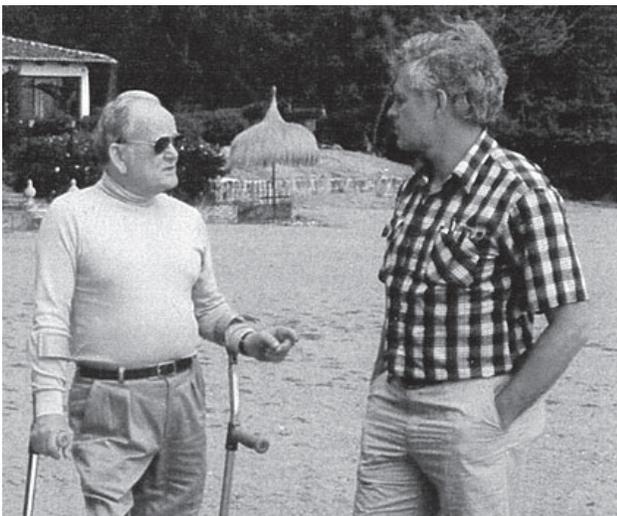
For example, while I was living full time in San Francisco, John sponsored a series of Witan seminars [see sidebar next page], several of which I attended. One, held at a modest hotel in Santa Barbara, California, involved bringing in a noted academic ethicist to talk about the morality of immigration reform. Those of us advocating less immigration based on the Rule of Law were buttressed by that perspective, despite the drumbeat of Open Border (“America is a nation of immigrants”) rhetoric. This phrase, so often used by Open Border proponents, and powerful business, ethnic, and religious advocates, has served to rationalize adding 50 million new immigrants. This lozenge pill was able to keep too many average Americans asleep on the immi-

gration crisis until it became too obvious to ignore.

Because of my interest and participation in these Witan events, John asked me to join the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) board. In the early 1980s, he had arranged for me to visit the Mexican border to observe the crossings at Tijuana into the U.S. I was not sure about the honor of such a treat when flying above the so-called Mixing Bowl through which many illegal aliens scurried as nightfall progressed, but which I could spot with my floodlight beam from the two-man helicopter in which I was riding. When gunfire was reported there on the copter's radio, that privilege seemed even less attractive. But then, so characteristically, John always quietly, softly, but endlessly asks his friends to test ideas and be involved in what he stimulates as a self-learning process based on facts, not rhetoric.

Let's understand that being visionary means taking constant rhetorical body blows. The second and really only remaining argument for failing to bring real reform to American immigration policy is now the ad hominem attack, calling anyone who seeks a rational dialogue on real immigration reform a racist, nativist, or xenophobe.

The lead agency in this spurious "hate" field, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), naturally singled out John Tanton as its primary target. The SPLC also labels as "hate organizations" any advocacy agency that seeks rational dialogue on immigration reform, which differs from a call for another amnesty law for illegal aliens like the one that failed in 1986. All of these organizations from the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), FAIR, NumbersUSA and others are, per the SPLC's propaganda, being controlled and manipulated by this retired optometrist, beekeeper, and environmentalist as the immigration reform movement's evil "Puppeteer."



Garrett Hardin and John Tanton, 1985

Having for years and years been present at what are often lengthy FAIR board meetings and then enjoying many genial social times with John and Mary Lou, neither Sally nor I have ever heard one single statement that would identify either as having anything to do with racism, nativism, or xenophobia. If people around the U.S. could have known earlier at first hand as I have the enormous reach of John's interests, based on his understanding of biology, medicine, history, culture, religion, and politics, this Socratic man likely would be elected to high office.

Let me confess a shared personal bias, however. My many personal contacts with John over so many years have been stimulated and enlarged by our exchanges about an issue which has failed to be factored into the immigration debate enough and into urgent action by government leaders around the world. It is this issue and its effect on environment that has been at the root of our mutual motivation for immigration reform: The dangerous growth of human numbers well beyond the sustainability of our planet.

As my May 5, 2010 op/ed in the *Pittsburgh Tribune* ["Make that 'population bombs,'" http://pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/opinion/s_679487.html#]:

The Population Bomb, Paul R. Ehrlich's 1968 best-selling book that warned of mass starvation in the 1970s and '80s, was wrong, but only on its time prediction. His famous bomb has already detonated! Only instead of being one bomb, the rise of population has caused multiple detonations that will continue now and in the years ahead.

Adding 2 billion to 4 billion more humans to our current 6.7 billion won't help, but the real

'Witan' and John Tanton's Circle of Friends

The "witan" was the council of wise men of an Anglo-Saxon king and is an abbreviation of the longer term "witengemot" or assembly of wise men. The late Garrett Hardin suggested that John Tanton and their circle of associates call themselves "The Witan." They intended to poke fun at their powerlessness and inability to provide counsel to the high and mighty. After a while, the media picked up on the name and misrepresented what they were doing when they held annual conferences to discuss population, environmental, and related concerns. It became distracting, so the Witan was re-named the Writers' Workshop, held every fall.

impact of population growth is the main story, a dire situation that we must treat urgently. Human numbers remain the elephant in the living room — consistently and dangerously ignored by most leaders of both developed and undeveloped nations.

Family planning programs remain greatly underfunded. We spend billions on disease control, but far less on birth control.

John came to this underlying issue years ago, as an environmentalist, before he got involved with the immigration issue, and this remains a driving motivation for both of us.

In sharing this highly personal piece on a trusted, honorable, personal friend, let me mention that despite his continuing difficult battle with a degenerative disease, he continues to spur his colleagues to action.

For example, a note arrived to me in the mail from John on May 7, bearing this request: “Don, How about an article on what the underlined means?” He attached a card which refers to Article IV, Section 4 of the U.S. Constitution, which states,

The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of government and (underlined part) shall protect each of them against invasion; and on Application of the Legislature, or of the Executive (when the legislature cannot be convened) against domestic violence.

That’s our John! Always for the Rule of Law and looking for the facts to support effective policies! As Sgt. Friday opined on Dragnet, “Just the facts, Ma’am.”

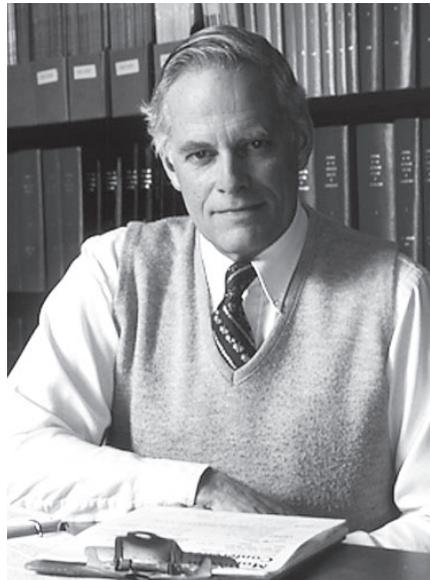
EPSTEIN: I cannot think of John and his wife Mary Lou without thinking of their love of the outdoors and knowledge of the plants and creatures that abide in the wilder places of our country. They have always been steadfast environmentalists in wanting to preserve such places.

Their support of Planned Parenthood and all those who would endorse reproductive freedom showed their keen understanding of the need to help women and their families regulate their fertility, which would lead to sta-

bilization of the world’s fast growing population.

Realizing how rapidly U.S. population was expanding after the 1965 legislation, John founded among several, a non-profit organization that focused on developing a U.S. population policy about how many and under what conditions would immigrants be allowed to come here. Thus the FAIR was born in 1978.

John immediately knew its headquarters needed to be in Washington, D.C. And this is where my personal connection with John, Mary Lou, and FAIR began.



Dr. John Tanton in 1989

My Aunt Betty Gamble summered in Harbor Point, Michigan, not far from John’s Petoskey ophthalmology clinic. She went to John for her eye care. John had already appointed a young lawyer with strong ecological views, Roger Conner, to be Executive Director of FAIR.

Knowing through Aunt Betty of my strong interest in family planning work with Pathfinder International and Planned Parenthood, John insisted that Aunt Betty phone me, saying Roger Conner was coming to D.C. and that I was to take care of him!!! This included helping him find appropriate office space. I did indeed help find a small office on P Street,

N.W. and before long was invited to be a FAIR board member.

Over these intervening years, John and Mary Lou and I have been together at many meetings, we have talked fervently about our population and immigration reform issues, and on non-issue matters such as his hobby of beekeeping and their insatiable curiosity about so many interesting subjects related to our natural world which was energized and expanded during their many travels.

Having such friends who share mutual interests and are willing to take up the work of helping improve our troubled planet has proved a special inspiration to me and Don as we plough forward with our work in family planning. This quality of inspiring others to join and help his important vision will certainly be remembered as a primary legacy of John Tanton. He seeks to engage people from many walks of life, helping them with his broad knowledge to a wider understanding of not only the immigration reform issue, but the quality of planetary life that has been so endangered by human numbers. ■