

TODAY'S CLIMATE OF HATE: AN OVERVIEW

In the last several years, nativists and White supremacists have used legitimate fears over the protection of U.S. borders to launch a propaganda campaign designed to build fear and anger over U.S. immigration policy. From their extreme rhetoric, a public policy agenda has been initiated that strays far from securing our borders from terrorists, one that instead spreads fear throughout the Hispanic community, violates our civil liberties, and offends our standards of common decency.

"Together we need to face a blunt reality," Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) stated on the floor of the United States Senate. "Our legitimate desire to get control over our borders has too often turned into a witch hunt against Hispanic Americans and other people of color. Common sense repeatedly loses out to hysteria and agents of intolerance repeatedly jump over the legal protections to which every American is entitled."¹

Thanks to the complicity of many politicians, political figures, law enforcement officials, and members of the media, this campaign has moved sentiments traditionally kept on the fringe of political debate into the political mainstream. In so doing, they have

unleashed a climate of hate that has had real consequences for the Latino community. Today many Hispanics live in fear, regardless of whether or not they are U.S. citizens.

Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric

According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the vitriolic rhetoric that surrounds the immigration debate has its roots in White supremacy and hate.² Traditionally limited to the fringe of American political debate, extremist anti-immigrant groups have seized upon public fears following 9/11 to paint immigrants as a threat to national security. They spread a litany of falsehoods, myths, and exaggerations about immigrants to demonize them as a threat to the American way of life. The Anti-Defamation League reports that these myths take shape in a number of "code words" now regularly heard on television, in town halls, and even at the dinner table.³

These code words describe immigrants as:

- "Third world invaders" who come to America to destroy American heritage, "colonize" the country, and attack our "way of life"

- “Animal-like,” using terminology that describes immigrants as “dumbing down” or “less than” Americans or as part of a “horde” or “swarm” coming over the border
- “Carriers of disease” such as leprosy, tuberculosis, Chagas disease (a potentially fatal parasitic disease), dengue fever, polio, and malaria
- “Criminals,” murderers, rapists, terrorists, and a danger to children and families
- Intent on “*reconquista*,” a conspiracy theory alleging a secret plot by Mexican immigrants to create a “greater Mexico” by seizing seven states in the American Southwest that once belonged to Mexico⁴

According to ADL, this virulent anti-Hispanic rhetoric feeds a broader climate of hate that has contributed to hate crimes directed at individuals on the basis of their Hispanic ethnicity:⁵

“When people are trained to think of immigrants as invading our way of life, trying to rip apart our civilizations, and undermine our values, when we’re trained to think of them as less deserving of rights, less human, animal-like almost... good people will be inculcated to hate and the suggestion is...implicit that maybe communities should take matters into their own hands.”

— Stacy Burdett, Anti-Defamation League⁶

Anti-Immigrant Organizations

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which tracks extremist groups in America, three organizations are at the forefront of the anti-immigration network: the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), and NumbersUSA. All three were created by a man named John Tanton who has been at the heart of the White nationalist

movement for decades. According to SPLC, each of these three organizations has roots in White supremacy.⁷

SPLC lists FAIR as a hate group for:

- Accepting \$1.2 million from the Pioneer Fund, a group founded to promote the genes of White colonials and which funds studies on race, intelligence, and genetics
- Hiring as key officials men who have also joined White supremacist groups
- Keeping board members who regularly write for hate publications and promote racist conspiracy theories about Latinos
- Producing television programming featuring White nationalists⁸

Although CIS presents itself as a scholarly think tank that produces serious immigration studies meant to serve “the broad national interest,” SPLC challenges its objectivity noting that CIS has “*never found any aspect of immigration that it liked* [emphasis added].” SPLC also notes that CIS has frequently manipulated data to achieve the results it seeks.⁹

NumbersUSA bills itself as an organization that operates on its own and rejects racism completely, yet the truth is that for the first five years of its existence, NumbersUSA was a program of U.S. Inc., a foundation run by Tanton to fund numerous nativist groups. Its leader helped edit Tanton’s racist journal, *The Social Contract*, and spoke before the Council of Conservative Citizens, a hate group that has called Blacks “a retrograde species of humanity.”¹⁰

All three have spokespeople who regularly appear on cable news and talk radio and, with the help of other nativist organizations such as Americans for Legal Immigration PAC (ALIPAC) and VDare, have developed an online presence that is extremely active and vocal:

“[They] have infiltrated the mainstream by presenting themselves as legitimate commentators, when, in reality, they were all conceived by a man who is convinced that non-White immigrants threaten America. They have never strayed far from their roots.”

— Mark Potok, Director of SPLC’s Intelligence Project¹¹

All three organizations have been active in communities advocating harsh anti-immigrant policies, including Suffolk County, NY, Maricopa County, AZ, Manassas, VA, Hazelton, PA, and Shenandoah, PA.

Media Complicity

In January 2008, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) documented the complicity of several cable news networks in giving these nativists, hate groups, and vigilantes access to the nation’s airwaves. Over a three-year period, NCLR cataloged the appearance of six spokespeople, many with ties to White supremacy, as regular guests on cable news and talk radio. Rarely were their histories with hate and vigilantism acknowledged. Rarely was there an opposing point of view offered. In total, the following six “suspect spokespeople” have appeared on cable television more than 120 times commenting on immigration policy:

- Dan Stein, President, FAIR
- Chris Simcox, Co-founder, Minuteman Civil Defense Corps
- Jim Gilchrist, Co-founder, Minuteman Project
- Roy Beck, Executive Director, NumbersUSA
- Glenn Spencer, Founder, Voices of Citizens Together
- William Gheen, President, ALIPAC

Later that same year, Media Matters for America issued a comprehensive analysis of immigration coverage on cable news called *Fear and Loathing in*

Prime Time: Immigration Myths and Cable News. The report charged that talk show hosts Lou Dobbs (formerly of CNN, now radio talk show host), Glenn Beck (formerly of CNN, now on Fox News), and Bill O’Reilly (Fox News) “serve up a regular and steady diet of fear, anger, and resentment on the topic of illegal immigration.”

Media Matters found that a full 70% of the 2007 episodes of *Lou Dobbs Tonight* contained discussion of illegal immigration. And although Glenn Beck was less consumed with the issue, at 28%, his show presented the most inflammatory claims.

Dobbs, O’Reilly, and Beck, through sheer repetition, help propagate myths about immigrants. For example, by airing dozens of segments on individual cases in which an undocumented immigrant committed a crime, Dobbs and Beck feed the misperception that these immigrants are responsible for a disproportionate share of crime in America—even if their comments don’t stray from the facts.

Lou Dobbs Tonight viewers were told about a mythical explosion of leprosy cases and voter fraud due to illegal immigration, and all three show hosts have presented as fact the “reconquista” myth of Mexicans trying to take back the American Southwest for Mexico. Dobbs discussed the fictional North American Union and a “secret plan” to construct a “NAFTA Superhighway” running from Canada to Mexico on at least 52 separate programs.

The report also found that cable news talk show hosts often parrot the arguments of the hate groups and vigilantes who appear as their guests, adding the authority of their role as journalists to fan the flames of hysteria.

Their political clout is considerable. Many credit cable news and talk radio with torpedoing the Bush administration’s 2007 bipartisan bill on comprehensive immigration reform:

"Spurred by discussions on talk radio, callers flooded the Capitol switchboard demanding their senators oppose the bill, and many Republicans credited that phone traffic for killing the measure."

— Kara Rowland, *The Washington Times*¹²

"Talk radio is running America."

— Senator Trent Lott (R-MS)¹³

Real Consequences

Such public actions combined with the persistent propaganda surrounding immigration affects more than the public policy debate; it fosters a climate of hate that prompts members of the public to take matters into their own hands:

"There is a direct connection between the national policy debate and the atmosphere surrounding the daily lives of immigrants. Extremist groups are seeking to exploit the flow of foreign workers into this country to spread a message of xenophobia, to promote hateful stereotypes, and to incite bigotry and violence against Hispanics, regardless of their status as citizens."

— Abe Foxman, Anti-Defamation League¹⁴

In 2008, 31-year-old Jose Sucuzhañay, a legal resident and father of two, was beaten to death in Brooklyn, New York by four men because of his ethnicity and a suspicion that he was gay. In Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, teenagers yelled racial epithets at 25-year-old Luis Eduardo Ramirez Azvala, saying "go back to Mexico" while beating him to death. In Patchogue, New York, several teenagers killed 37-year-old Marcelo Lucero after they spent a day targeting Hispanics.¹⁵ The case has been labeled a hate crime and has prompted an investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice.¹⁶

Lucero's murder was the second in as many years of an Hispanic resident of Suffolk County and

follows a string of attacks against immigrants, including the kidnapping and brutal beating of two Mexican day laborers in 2000 and the burning of a Mexican family's home by five teenagers in 2003. Since Lucero's murder, dozens of Hispanics in Suffolk County have stepped forward to report similar crimes.

And while Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy claims that his aggressive public stance against immigration has no connection to the murder, he built his public profile as a demagogue against immigration, been an honored guest on *Lou Dobbs Tonight*,¹⁷ and has ties to FAIR.

- Levy's work with FAIR led him to form Mayors and Executives for Immigration Reform, to which he invites representatives of extreme anti-immigrations groups to speak.¹⁸
- He uses nativist language, publicly railing against women crossing the border to give birth here "free of charge." He claims they are here having "anchor babies."¹⁹
- To great fanfare, Levy signed a law requiring the county's 6,000 contractors to affirm that their employees were not undocumented immigrants. After two sweeps of 33 contractors, only one worker without documentation was found.²⁰
- In 2007, Levy asked county police and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to conduct raids in homes where illegal immigrants were suspected to be living. Many people were routed from their homes and, although not arrested, were ordered to disperse without regard for where they went.²¹
- In August 2009, Levy "joked" at an event that he was glad that a Canadian-born attendee was a U.S. citizen or else "I'd have to deport you, like the guys back there in the kitchen."

Led by NCLR, six national civil rights groups have condemned Lucero's murder, calling it a “wake-up call for America” and expressed concern that the vitriol coming from anti-immigrant groups, cable news, and talk radio and out of the mouths of politicians is having a broader impact on the public at large by creating a “climate of hate” that empowers discrimination and violence based on race.

FBI statistics show that hate crimes against Latinos spiked nearly 40% between 2003 and 2007,²² and the Southern Poverty Law Center has documented a dramatic rise (54%) in hate groups, fueled in large part by groups targeting Latinos.²³

“It should give everyone pause to see growing movements in this country embrace the politics of hate. Because when political leaders and the news media demonize immigrants as a threat to our way of life, when they tell us falsely that immigrants bring disease and crime to our communities, when they tell us the fiction that immigrants are subversive and a threat to the sovereignty of the United States, it should be no surprise that people take matters into their own hands. The failure to act on immigration reform has created a climate where anyone who is Hispanic is threatened, whether they are citizens of this country or not.”

— Janet Murguía, President and CEO, NCLR

Endnotes

¹ “Sen. Robert Menendez decries ICE ‘witch hunt’ of Latinos,” *latimes.com*, June 11, 2008, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/laplaza/2008/06/sen-menendez-de.html>.

² Anti-Defamation League, “Extremists Declare ‘Open Season’ on Immigrants: Hispanics Target of Incitement and Violence,” http://www.adl.org/main_Extremism/immigration_extremists.htm, May 23, 2006.

³ We Can Stop the Hate, “Code Words of Hate,” http://www.wecanstopthehate.org/site/page/code_words_of_hate (2010).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Anti-Defamation League, “Extremists Declare ‘Open Season’ on Immigrants.”

⁶ “Code Words of Hate.”

⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Nativist Lobby: Three Faces of Intolerance* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2009), http://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/splc_nativistlobby.pdf.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kara Rowland, “Conservatives rule talk radio,” *The Washington Times*, June 22, 2007.

¹³ Project for Excellence in Journalism, “Campaign for President Takes Center Stage in Coverage,” Quarterly Report on the News, Pew Research Center, August 20, 2007, <http://www.journalism.org/node/7069>.

¹⁴ Anti-Defamation League, “Extremists Declare ‘Open Season’ on Immigrants.”

¹⁵ Joe Torres, “FCC to Investigate Link Between Hate Speech and Hate Crimes,” New America Media, February 3, 2009, http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=53fb0e563bb2e9cb799c8b69600a157a.

¹⁶ “Justice Department probes Long Island hate crimes,” *The Associated Press*, January 12, 2009.

¹⁷ “The Riddle of Steve Levy,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 2007.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Corey Kilgannon, “Feared Sweeps for Illegal Workers Found Just One,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 2008.

²¹ Albor Ruiz, “Rising hate crime a national shame,” *New York Daily News*, November 13, 2008.

²² Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008 Hate Crime Statistics, <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/hc2008/index.html>, November 23, 2009.

²³ Southern Poverty Law Center, “The Year in Hate 2008,” *Intelligence Report*, no. 133 (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, Spring 2009).