

Re-Living Our Immigrant Past: From Hazleton to Arizona and Back Again



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The intent of Arizona’s SB 1070, the “Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act,” is to chase illegal immigrants out of the state. Or, as the new law puts it more formally: “to make attrition through enforcement the public policy of all state and local government agencies in Arizona.” The stern new law quickly made Arizona the target of international news headlines, boycotts, demonstrations, and lawsuits—most recently by the ACLU and a coalition of civil rights groups. While the spotlight has been on Arizona, however, copycat legislation has been brewing in at least 16 other states, supported to one extent or another by two organizations that have made a cause of providing legal and political assistance to lawmakers similarly intent on “attrition through enforcement.”

The two groups, which work together, are the Washington, D.C.-based Immigration Reform Law Institute (IRLI), an affiliate of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and the lesser-known State Legislators for Legal Immigration. IRLI lawyer Kris W. Kobach, who was a chief adviser on immigration issues to Attorney General John Ashcroft following the attacks of 9/11, has consulted with lawmakers around the country, helping frame and defend state and local legislation targeting illegal immigrants. (At the Justice Department, Kobach engineered a controversial program that aimed to register visitors from certain Muslim countries).

The founder of State Legislators for Legal Immigration is Pennsylvania State Rep. Daryl Metcalfe, a Republican who has introduced his version of the Arizona legislation, House Bill 2479, which he calls the “National Security Begins at Home” package. Metcalfe who represents Butler County, a district 30 miles to the north of Pittsburgh, is to Pennsylvania what his Arizona counterpart, State Sen. Russell Pearce, the main sponsor of SB 1070, is to the Grand Canyon State. Both men have made crusading against illegal immigrants, or, as Metcalfe calls them, “foreign invaders,” a political priority.

“This is about protecting American lives, liberty, and property from illegal alien invaders that are here within our state stealing jobs, tapping into benefits that they shouldn’t be tapping into, and committing other crimes against Pennsylvania citizens, everything from ID theft to murder,” Metcalfe recently told Fox News interviewer Neil Cavuto. “We have to protect the lives of Pennsylvanians.”

An admirer described Metcalfe as “Pennsylvania’s Modern Day Paul Revere,” a sobriquet Metcalfe has eagerly embraced. Never mind that Revere’s famous ride was to warn about British military movements; even if the purported historical parallels don’t quite match, invoking a patriotic legend

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makes Metcalfe's cause seem just so American.

But if Metcalfe is really interested in the past, and specifically his state's immigration history, his views may be tempered by taking a cold, hard look at historical fact rather than trying to hitch a fanciful ride on Revere's horse. The facts reveal that Pennsylvania is, in a sense, reliving its past. Present-day patterns of economic opportunity, ensuing migration, and the reactions to the influx of newcomers are recycled versions of old stories.

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