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

By Jeffrey Kaye

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 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.

HAZLETON, PENNSYLVANIA: NOW

About 200 miles to the east of Metcalfe's home district is the city of Hazleton, which, four years ago,

like Arizona, tried to adopt its own immigration policy, and so doing also received its 15 minutes of fame.

On July 13, 2006, the Hazleton City Council, frustrated at what they saw as Washington's inaction—and led by the town's outspoken mayor, Louis J. Barletta, who wore a bulletproof vest that he explained was necessary for his safety—adopted the Illegal Immigration Relief Act Ordinance. It made English the official city language, imposed fines on landlords for renting to illegal immigrants, and revoked business permits of employers who hired them.

The new law put Hazleton in the forefront of a movement. For more than a century, the power to regulate immigration was assumed to be a federal prerogative. But in 2006, states, counties, and cities took matters into their own hands, passing hundreds of immigration laws.

"Illegal aliens are a drain on our resources, and they are not welcome here," Barletta warned at the time.

The influx of Latinos into the area was striking. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the number of Latinos in Hazleton's county, Luzerne, more than tripled between 2000 and 2007. Among counties with more than a thousand Hispanics, Luzerne had the eighth fastest-growing Hispanic population in the United States.

The growth began slowly in the late 1980s and picked up after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, when the area witnessed an economic resurgence and a population shift. Urban Easterners, many of them Latinos from New York and New Jersey, found country living, affordable housing, and jobs.

Newcomers started businesses and obtained work on farms and in factories such as Pocono Knits, Chromatex, and the meatpacking plant Cargill. The influx of people and businesses reversed a trend. The city had been in decline, a demise that began in the 1940s after nearby coal mines began closing.

"The economy was good," remembered Ana Arias, a local activist who works at Catholic Social Services. Like many of the town's arrivals over the past couple of decades, Arias is a native of the Dominican Republic who moved to Hazleton from New York City.

"You could put a house up for sale and two weeks later, it would be sold," she said. In addition to the cheap housing and available work, Arias explained, Hazleton reminded her and fellow Dominicans of their homeland. "This area was quiet and pristine. It was in the mountains like where these people came from originally."

For old-timers, the demographic shift and rapid population increase came as a shock. Newcomers brought a new culture and language. School enrollment escalated. Housing became more crowded.

"You've got to get in the frame of mind of what we were dealing with in a small town and how this was affecting our services," Mayor Barletta, told me over breakfast. Gregarious, immaculate, and distinguished in a starched white shirt, Barletta resembled an Italian Mitt Romney.

Over coffee and omelets, Barletta and two of his closest associates, council president Joseph Yannuzzi, the owner of a computer firm, and pharmacist John Keegan, described their frustration with the town's transformation.

"People were moving in; people were moving out," said Barletta, explaining that longtime residents were constantly complaining to him. "So you had a nice home, modest home that you've taken care of your entire life, and all of a sudden next door all of a sudden someone new buys it, now there's fifteen people in the house. You call City Hall to complain; we're sending people down for violations time and time again."

"It was obvious, you'd ride down the street and see a home with ten [satellite] dishes, five on each side, which meant that in every room in that house was somebody living there, as a family. That's

code violations right there," added Yannuzzi.

As complaints mounted, Barletta said he felt compelled to act. "Believe me, I didn't just wake up one day and say, 'I'm going to start picking on illegal aliens.' This has happened over *years* of seeing what was happening in our neighborhoods."

What really spurred him, he said, was crime. "We had more and more cases of incidents involving illegal aliens; our violent crime was beginning to rise. We started noticing more gang activity and more need for a greater police presence and for more money [for law enforcement]."

In discussing immigration, Barletta was somewhat circumspect—carefully sticking to issues involving crime and the demands on a cash-strapped city. But he was also short on facts. He was unable to document how many illegal immigrants live in Hazleton or their impact on city services. And while crime definitely increased as more people moved into town from big cities, in the six-year period between 2001 and 2006, Hazleton police identified no more than thirty crimes involving illegal migrants.

"I never say that illegal aliens commit all the crimes," Barletta explained. "I never attribute all these problems to illegal aliens. What I do say is that the drain on this city's budget, this very fragile city budget, affects the quality of life and our ability to protect the people of this community."

"The final straw for me was May 10, 2006," he said. "We arrested a fourteen-year-old for shooting a gun into a crowded playground. He was here illegally. That night, twenty-nine-year-old Derek Kichline was working on his pickup truck and was shot between the eyes by two individuals." Two illegal immigrants were arrested in connection with the shooting, but the charges were later dropped for lack of evidence.

"Our police worked thirty-six straight hours in apprehending those who took Kichline's life. Our police department spent over half of our yearly budget for overtime on that one homicide. Our overtime in the police department was 150 percent over budget and we still don't have enough police on the streets to handle it now."

Keegan added that many Latino migrants were prone to violence. "How they dealt with conflicts in their country is what they brought in dealing with conflicts here, and it's not the way we deal with conflicts," he said. "I don't know if 'terror' is the right word, but [it's] the concern of the community because you didn't bring out a knife and gun to settle a conflict."

The men complained new migrants had not made an effort to become part of community life. "They tried to establish their own Hispanic Little League, when our Little League was more than willing and continues to be open to every child," said Keegan.

"The first thing they did, was they started their own Chamber of Commerce," Yannuzzi added. "The Latino Chamber of Commerce. I think that's wrong."

In the minds of all three men, from high crime rates to the disproportionate use of public resources to the failure to assimilate, this wave of migration is unprecedented. And they should know. Barletta's grandparents came from Italy, as did Yannuzzi's. Keegan's father's family was Irish. His mother's was Italian.

"They came here to become American," said Yannuzzi. "They came here to assimilate! The grandparents spoke Italian only when they didn't want you to know what was going on. 'We're in America! You speak English!' That's what was told to us by my grandmother and all, and that was the difference. Today, they're immigrating here for the benefits and I can't blame them, but they're looking for more than just the benefits."

"What do you think they're looking for?" I asked.

"They're looking for the programs, free medical, that kind of stuff," he answered.

HAZLETON, PENNSYLVANIA: THEN

Such generalizations about Pennsylvania's new arrivals are evidence of a resilient echo:

"*Perhaps the most obvious result of the racial mixture is to be seen in the incapacity of the local government, and the wasteful administration of public funds.*"

"*Among the Italians, violence is more the result of quick temper than intoxication. . . . The Italians resort most often to the use of knives in their acts of violence.*"

"*The fact is there are some respected citizens in all the races except possibly the Italians. The average English-speaking person regards all of the immigrants as purchasable, ignorant, and vicious in a high degree.*"

"*The large number of Germans in Hazleton in 1880 made it almost a bilingual town. Attorneys and doctors advertised their ability to hold consultations in either English or German.*"

The first three quotations come from a 1911 U.S. government report on immigration to a town near Hazleton. The fourth is from a book by the historian Harold Aurand documenting life in Hazleton in the late nineteenth century. The hysteria surrounding immigration today is an old story in Hazleton.

European migration to northeastern Pennsylvania propelled America's Industrial Revolution. It followed the development in the early nineteenth century of new technology that turned anthracite, a hot-burning coal, into the country's premier source of fuel for factory steam engines and for the home stoves of growing urban populations.

Northeastern Pennsylvania had the world's largest deposits of anthracite, but getting the mineral out of the ground and moving it to market were labor-intensive businesses requiring armies of men and boys who worked in construction crews and in the mines. Those were jobs for migrants. Experienced miners poured in from coal regions in England, Scotland, Wales, and the German states. Later, they were joined by Irish immigrants — men who had earlier built the U.S. canal system that connected landlocked anthracite fields to inland rivers and eastern cities.

But around 1875, the composition of the workforce started to change. Instead of coming from English-speaking and northern European countries, they moved from southern and eastern Europe. They were hungrier, willing to work more cheaply, do more dangerous jobs, and put up with the increasingly decrepit conditions in the overcrowded, company-owned "patch towns" around the collieries. Poles, Lithuanians, Slavs, and Slovaks came first. They were followed by Russians, Hungarians, Croatians, Slovenians, Italians, eastern European Jews, and Italians. Between 1880 and 1900, the percentage of settlers from eastern, southern, and central Europe jumped from 2 to 46 percent of all immigrants.

Social and ethnic conflicts flared. Old-timers derided the "filthy habits and queer languages" of the "foreigners." Coal operators exacerbated the tensions by offering newcomers lower wages and providing worse housing than the first arrivals, who were rising socially and economically.

It turns out that the present-day depiction of old-time Hazleton ("They came here to assimilate!") as *kumbaya,* well-integrated migrant communities, is pure fantasy. In Hazleton, the Germans clustered in the southeastern and northwestern sections of town, the Irish in the south, the English in the central and northern parts, the Poles and Slavs mostly on South Vine Street, the Polish Jews on North Church, and the Italians and Slovaks north of Diamond Avenue. Ethnic divisions led to undisguised conflicts and hostilities. Hazleton newspapers called Slavs and Hungarians "peculiar," described Hungarians as "an ignorant, immoral and filthy race who create disgust wherever they locate," and labeled Italians as "the most disreputable."

Divisions and resentments among migrant communities were aggravated by dangerous working conditions and low pay—especially for new immigrants. Tensions rose when times were tough and had particularly tragic consequences in 1897, a bad year for the anthracite industry and for newly

arrived southeastern European immigrants.

The nation was at the end of the "Long Depression." Longtime residents blamed newcomers for depressing coal miners' wages. In response, Pennsylvania legislators came up with two laws to protect the existing workforce—both with startling parallels to Hazleton's Illegal Immigration Relief Act Ordinance, which came 109 years later. One statute was an English literacy test. The other became known as the "alien tax" and required employers to pay "three cents for each day of such foreign-born un-naturalized male person as may be employed." In fact, the levy on employers became a worker tax, since bosses typically paid the money by garnishing the miners' wages.

To save money, mine operators cut wages and stopped paying their workers on time. The miners rebelled. By Labor Day, 1897, some ten thousand northeastern Pennsylvania coal miners—largely Polish, Slovak, Italian, and Lithuanian—were involved in protests.

On September 10, 1897, miners began a march with the intention of shutting down the mine in Lattimer, about two and a half miles northeast of Hazleton. When they got to West Hazleton, the local sheriff, James Martin, ordered them to disperse. Instead the miners agreed to take a different route and set off, led by Steve Jurich, a Slovak, carrying an American flag.

As three hundred to four hundred marchers approached Lattimer, they were met by the sheriff and his posse. Martin had deputized and armed more than eighty volunteers, a force consisting mainly of professional men with English, Irish, or German backgrounds, many with connections to the coal operators. The sheriff again ordered the marchers to disperse, but they refused. Shots rang out. The first man killed was Jurich, the flag bearer. In all, the sheriff's deputies shot and killed fourteen Poles, four Slovaks, and one Lithuanian. As the wounded cried out for help, one deputy reportedly responded, "We'll give you hell, not water, hunkies!"

The following year, Sheriff Martin and eighty-three deputies were tried for murder. They were all acquitted.

The location of the shooting is now an intersection in a quiet suburban neighborhood. A state marker on the site describes the Lattimer Massacre as "one of the most serious acts of violence in American labor history."

Re-Living Our immigrant Past

During the century that followed the killings, ethnic divisions among Europeans dissipated and were forgotten. Mayor Louis Barletta's wife is of Irish descent, an intermarriage that would have been unthinkable fewer than a hundred years ago.

But the twenty-first-century wave of migrants ushered in modern conflicts. Once again, old-timers resent the newcomers. Descendants of those Slavic, English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, Italian, and Lithuanian mineworkers, who once engaged one another in a maelstrom of ethnic tumult, united in common cause in speaking out against their new Latino neighbors. Like a long-abandoned coal mine, Hazleton's old vein of resentment and hostility found a new life.

Modern-day restrictionists take umbrage at any suggestion that race or national origin shapes their view. "People think we're after Hispanics," Hazleton City Council president Yannuzzi explained. "We're not. We're after illegals."

"People ask, 'Don't you have compassion for those who came here?' Of course," added Mayor Barletta. "I would sneak into this country, too, if my family depended on it. . . . We're seeing small-town America, the life being taken out of it, because we don't have the money to deal with the problem."

But legal avenues to attack the "problem" have themselves proved problematic. In 1898, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Pennsylvania's "alien tax," affirming a lower-court judge's ruling that declared it a "hostile" and "arbitrary" law that discriminated against noncitizens in violation of the

Constitution's equal protection guarantees.

As for Hazleton's 2006 Illegal Immigration Relief Act Ordinance, a year after its adoption, a district court judge found it unconstitutional. "Whatever frustrations officials of the City of Hazleton may feel about the current state of the federal immigration enforcement, the nature of the political system in the United States prohibits the City from enacting ordinances that disrupt a carefully drawn federal statutory scheme," wrote federal judge James Munley. The case, *Lozano v. City of Hazleton* (No. 07-3531), is currently on appeal before the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. The lead attorney representing Hazleton is Kris W. Kobach, who helped draft the Arizona and Pennsylvania ordinances.

In Hazleton, Latino leaders see patterns. "It's been happening throughout history and we haven't learned anything," said Ana Arias.

"You know what will be the funny part to this one?" Amilcar Arroyo, the Peruvian-born editor of *El Mensajero*, a monthly Spanish language newspaper asked me.

"I hope I'm wrong. I say, 'God tell me that I'm wrong.' You know what's going to happen? This Hispanic people of the second or third generation, they will forget, so the next wave of immigrants to this area probably, they will have the same problems as I have . . . and they will be doing the same as [they] did, the same generation of Irish, Italians, Polish people to this Hispanic people who came now. Because it's like that. It's a cycle. Believe me, it's a cycle, but I hope that doesn't happen. I hope so."

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