

## **The Anti-Immigrant Movement and the Politics of Exceptionalism**

By [Roxanne Lynn Doty](#) [1]

*Patrolling the Minuteman Project's "Huachuca Line" in southeastern Arizona in 2005, Sergeant Major likens the border watches to being in combat infantry. There are long periods of boredom, he says. "Then you spot an illegal and the adrenaline starts pumping." An elderly woman wearing sandals and delicate heart-shaped earrings listens intently as he tells the group "Enjoy yourself. You're protecting America."*

*In the winter of 2006 I travel all the way from Georgia to take up watch at "Bravo 6" on a ranch near Three Points, Arizona. He tells me he sometimes hires undocumented workers for his landscaping business and seems oblivious to any contradiction between doing so and targeting them with the Minuteman Civil Defense Corp.*

Over the period from 2005 to 2007, I researched the anti-immigrant movement. As I spoke with immigration restrictionists and observed their patrols and anti-immigrant rallies, I was often haunted by the question, "Are these people to be taken seriously?" At times it was hard to fathom that they amounted to anything more than a disgruntled fringe element of a society experiencing complex transformations in an increasingly interconnected world. I witnessed much hyperbole and many "colorful" characters, but at times questioned their potential broader impact. [2]

However, it is now clear that the capacity of these groups to stymie attempts to reform our broken immigration system should not be underestimated. They played a major role in undermining previous efforts to pass comprehensive immigration reform and are poised to do so again. While the recent past failures at reform cannot be totally attributed to such groups, their role was not insignificant. What can loosely be called an anti-immigrant "movement" in this country is not organized into one formal unified entity. However, there clearly exists a network of restrictionist groups and organizations that are connected to one another in various ways, which has enabled them to collectively undermine efforts to pass legislation that would result in any meaningful changes to our immigration laws and policies. They have been able to successfully spread their messages due to alliances with elements of the national media, other like-minded, issue-oriented organizations, and perhaps most importantly because they play upon powerful ideas and sentiments found amongst elements of the population at large.

Now that immigration reform has once again surfaced on the nation's agenda this year, immigration restrictionists have already begun to "circle the wagons." [3] In February, the anti-immigrant "think tank," Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) released a poll of questionable validity suggesting that minority groups prefer immigration enforcement—including the deportation of undocumented migrants—over comprehensive reform. [4] Membership in various restrictionist groups such as the Federal Immigration Reform and Enforcement (FIRE) Coalition has increased since 2008—the number of FIRE chapters had grown from 13 in 2008 to 135 by the end of 2009. [5] William Gheen, President and founder of ALIPAC (Americans for Legal Immigration Political Action Committee), joined forces with the conservative tea party movement to counter the March 21, 2010, march in Washington D.C. for immigration reform and plans other "anti-amnesty" actions.

Recent passage in the state of Arizona of what is arguably the most extreme anti-immigrant legislation in the country should put to rest any lingering doubts as to the ability of anti-immigrant factions to affect policy and the lives of immigrants as well as non-immigrants. Senator Russell Pearce (R-Mesa, Arizona), sponsor of the bill known as SB0170, was an enthusiastic supporter of the 2005 Minuteman Project border watch and is a well-known anti-immigrant activist. The new law makes it a misdemeanor to lack proper paperwork in Arizona and requires police officers to determine a person's immigration status if they have a "reasonable suspicion" that some one is an undocumented immigrant. [6]

### SECURITY AND THE ANTI-IMMIGRANT MOVEMENT

In a speech at the "Southwest Conference on Illegal Immigration, Border Security, and Crime" in Scottsdale, Arizona in November 2005, Frank Gaffney, president of the Center for Security Policy, referred to "the Arizona front in the war for the free world." The conference was hosted by then Maricopa County Attorney General, Andrew Thomas. While a few of the invited speakers represented moderate points of view on immigration, the roster for the most part read like a "who's who" list of the national anti-immigrant movement. Guests included Tom Tancredo, J.D. Hayworth, Jim Gilchrist, and Rick Oltman of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, FAIR. The language of war used by Gaffney and others highlights one of the underlying themes that have been key to the ability of the anti-immigrant network to grow and legitimate their movement and thus garner support from more mainstream segments of civil society, as well as from government decision-makers. Security is a powerfully evocative concept that elicits strong emotional responses. *National* security has, at various times throughout history, been linked to the immigration issue and used to promote and justify restrictionist immigration policies. Concerns about terrorism and fears of porous borders after the attacks of September 11, 2001, led to the immigration issue being linked to, and defined in large part in terms of, national security.

However, it is not only *national* security that has been the focus of immigration restrictionists, but also what scholars who study security have referred to as *societal* security, i.e. a group's concern about threats to their identity and survival as an entity, e.g. as a nation, an ethnic, racial, religious, or even socioeconomic group. Such "existential" threats are often very ambiguously defined, revolving around issues like language, culture, work ethic, family values, and other things purported to define "us" as a people vis-à-vis "others." Perceptions of a societal threat are key to the immigration debate. It is important to note that things like culture and values have often been codes for race. For example, in her study of the new white nationalism, Carol Swain finds that white nationalists see immigration from non-white nations as a threat to "their God-given right to their distinct cultural, political, and genetic identity as white Europeans." [7] This is not to say that all anti-immigrant activists are racists, but it does suggest that the anti-immigrant cause is inherently attractive to white nationalists who often couch their rhetoric in terms of cultural identity.

The anti-immigrant movement in the United States has clearly drawn upon both of these understandings of security, which have worked symbiotically to fuel restrictionist sentiments. Perceptions of a threat to either national security or societal security or both depend upon the notion of an enemy; not a personal enemy, but a public enemy, whose very existence is disruptive to the social order. The anti-immigrant movement as a whole has created such an enemy based ostensibly on legal status. The result has been a *politics of exceptionalism* aimed predominantly at unauthorized immigrants, but which often has ramifications beyond this population.

### THE POLITICS OF EXCEPTIONALISM

The belief that a certain group is an enemy of society permits that group to be singled out and excluded from the basic rights and protections guaranteed by the law or constitution. Individuals who are members of a group believed to be an enemy are thus turned into an *exception* when it comes to sharing in the benefits of membership in a society. In the worst instances, those deemed enemies may even be subjected to extreme abuses often carried out in the name of law and order. Nazi concentration camps are the most prominent historical example of exceptionalism. [8] Jews in Nazi Germany were constructed as enemies of the German people and not only lost their citizenship and legal identities, but were subjected to a policy of extermination. A politics of exceptionalism

can, however, take forms that are not as severe as concentration camps and attempts to exterminate an entire race of people.

Other manifestations of exceptionalism should not be dismissed as insignificant, because they can have devastating consequences for individuals and communities, and they can function as a barometer of a society's commitment to its stated principles and values and its beliefs regarding to whom those principles should be applied. Executive Order 9066, signed by President Roosevelt in 1941, which removed Japanese-Americans from their homes, schools, and workplaces and sent them to internments camps, is a good example of a politics of exceptionalism that was less extreme than Nazi death camps. Exceptionalism can be enacted at various levels of government, but citizens and civilian organizations can also engage in a politics of exceptionalism that feeds into official government policy. [9] The whole array of activities engaged in by the anti-immigrant movement, including civilian border patrol groups, constitutes examples of a politics of exceptionalism.

The anti-immigrant movement portrays unauthorized immigrants as enemies who represent a danger to the social order. This comes through forcefully in their rhetoric, the slogans on signs displayed at their rallies, on their websites, in their highly visible border watches, and in the sentiments and presumptions that underlay the policies they promote. A sign at one anti-immigrant rally in Phoenix, Arizona, with the words, "TAKE AN ILLEGAL ALIEN DOWN," in bold letters is a good example. To "take someone down" implies doing something negative to him or her, e.g. inflicting an injury either physical or emotional, even killing. Images posted on anti-Hispanic, anti-immigrant websites are also illustrative; a photo of a woman holding a toddler above a caption that says "Just Say No to Wetback Breeders," and a picture of an Hispanic man wearing a sombrero with the words "Subhuman Spic Scum" across the top and captioned with the words "If It's Brown Flush it Down." Both of these were posted on the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement's website. [10] New Jersey Radio talk show host Hal Turner has urged violence against undocumented migrants telling his listeners to "Kill illegal aliens as they cross into the U.S. When the stench of rotting corpses gets bad enough, the rest will stay away." [11] In a posting on the Aryan Nations website faction leader August Kreis declared "open season" on "these dirty wetbacks," suggesting that "this infestation of cockroaches need deportation or extermination." [12]

Unfortunately, these are just a few of the numerous examples of the portrayal of undocumented migrants as enemies that can be found in various mediums. Other examples are at least ostensibly less extremist. Pat Buchanan's 2006 book, *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America*, is only slightly more subtle, as are the writings of the late Harvard University professor, Samuel Huntington, on the "Hispanic threat." [13] Similar ideas work their way into the mainstream media, e.g. CNN's Jack Cafferty's remark regarding the April 2006 pro-immigration reform marches that "...our streets were taken over today by people who don't belong here..." [14]

Other more policy-oriented examples include the calls to end "birthright citizenship," which suggests that even the youngest and most innocent are considered potential enemies who must be denied full societal membership. Support for ending "birthright citizenship" is not limited to anti-immigrant extremists but is also echoed in the mainstream media. Prominent columnist George F. Will recently argued, based on what many consider a questionable interpretation of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, that ending this right would be a "simple" reform that would drain some steam from immigration arguments.

Opposition to the Dream Act, which would make undocumented youth eligible for citizenship after completing a college degree or two years of military service, is another example of an exclusionary logic that targets young people many of whom have lived in the United States for most of their lives. Anti-immigrant groups regard it as an attempt to enact "amnesty for illegal aliens." Once a group of human beings is portrayed as the enemy, as a threat to "our way of life," "our values," "our culture," "our identity as a nation," and "our territorial integrity," making them an exception by taking away their rights easily follows. Understood in this light, the increase in hate groups and hate crimes against migrants and presumed migrants is not completely unrelated to the increasingly harsh, official immigration policies which have been devastating for migrants and their families. These policies include the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, which has resulted in hundreds of border-crossing deaths year after year; the proliferation of local anti-immigrant legislation, which in numerous cases has led to the racial profiling of Latino members of the population; and the

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increased detention and deportation of undocumented migrants often resulting in the tearing apart of families. The most recent and arguably the most extreme example of exceptionalism in local anti-immigrant legislation is SB1070 which was signed into law by Arizona Governor Jan Brewer on April 23. The law effectively legalizes racial profiling and has sown fear in the state of Arizona and opposition across the country.

A social science survey found that unauthorized migrants are the most despised of all immigrant groups, ranking so low that they were not perceived as fully human. [15] This is clearly consistent with the notion of a politics of exceptionalism that works its way into the everyday lives of immigrants, both authorized and unauthorized, denying their human dignity, peace of mind, and often compromising their basic material necessities of life. People have been deprived of their economic livelihoods in places like Hazelton, Pennsylvania, where anti-immigrant ordinances have forced immigrant-run businesses to close. These ordinances, in the words of a former storeowner, “look at immigrants as enemies.” [16]

The politics of exceptionalism that undergirds the strength of the anti-immigrant movement raises important questions about the depth and breadth of our democratic ideals. The contemporary immigration situation illustrates what a society can begin to look like when it becomes structured along the lines of the exception. Our current immigration policies create “enemies” out of a significant segment of the population, leaving them vulnerable in numerous ways to being racially profiled by law enforcement, and to being intimidated, or worse, by extremist hate groups. This is certainly not the first time that immigration policies have reflected a politics of exceptionalism.

Exceptionalism in U.S. immigration policy has a long history in which the image of “the foreigner” has often been associated with various threats to the well being of the U.S. populace, resulting in scapegoating and discriminatory policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The fact that exceptionalism is not peculiar to the contemporary immigration situation does not lessen the severity of its consequences, nor should it lead to complacency regarding how it comes about and is legitimated to the extent that it is across a broad spectrum of society. History attests to the fact that government regulation of immigration often yields to public demand. The contemporary anti-immigrant movement has played a major role in rallying public demand for a politics of exceptionalism. It is important to clearly understand and counter the ideas and sentiments that undergird such a demand.

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[1]  
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[2]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn1](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn1)

[3]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn3](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn3)

[4]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn4](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn4)

[5]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn5](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn5)

[6]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn6](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn6)

[7]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn7](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn7)

[8]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn8](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn8)

[9]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn9](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn9)

[10]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn11](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn11)

[11]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn12](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn12)

[12]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn13](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn13)

[13]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn14](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn14)

[14]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn15](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn15)

[15]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn17](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn17)

[16]  
[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#\\_edn18](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/anti-immigrant-movement-and-politics-exceptionalism#_edn18)

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[20]

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[21]

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