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PERSPECTIVES ON IMMIGRATION

Missing the Target: Anti-Immigrant Ordinances Backfire

by Walter A. Ewing, Ph.D.*

If you believe Bill Chase, a member of the Culpeper County Board of Supervisors from Stevensburg, Virginia, the Latino immigrants who have moved to the county in recent years aren't as willing to learn English as his own immigrant forefathers. "I think we all came from foreign countries and turned into English-speaking Americans," Chase told *The Washington Post* on August 9. Then, apparently without appreciating the irony, he added, "But I don't feel a willingness of this particular group to do that. I don't see the willingness to blend into society."¹

And so Chase and his fellow board members passed a resolution declaring that English is the official language of the county—even though only about 7 percent of the county's population was Latino as of 2006, amounting to just over 3,000 people.² Culpeper now joins two other Virginia counties, Prince William and Loudon, and more than a hundred other cities and counties across the country, where local governments have considered ordinances and resolutions that target (or claim to target) undocumented immigrants. These ordinances range from declaring English to be the official language of government, as in Culpeper, to imposing penalties on landlords who rent to undocumented tenants and employers who hire undocumented workers.

For the most part, this movement to attack immigrants through local ordinances is being fueled by two factors. The first is the repeated failure of the federal government to revamp U.S. immigration laws, which are decades out of step with the realities of a global economy and encourage much of the undocumented immigration that is provoking so much anxiety among many local policymakers. While Congress

and the White House remain politically gridlocked over immigration reform, pursuing border-enforcement policies that have consistently failed to stop undocumented immigration for a decade and a half, local communities are left on their own in dealing with the impact of new immigrants on schools, hospitals, transportation, and other public services.

Second, more immigrants are moving to parts of the country that previously experienced little immigration, which is fostering a sense of insecurity among some native-born residents. For instance, a study by San Diego State University sociologist Jill Esbenshade, released by the Immigration Policy Center, finds that most localities where anti-immigrant ordinances have been introduced have *fewer* immigrant or Latino residents than the nation as a whole. However, the immigrant and Latino populations of these locales have grown at *faster rates* than the national average.³

Regardless of why anti-immigrant ordinances are metastasizing across the country, the ordinances themselves, and the arguments of their supporters, are based on false assumptions. Take Culpeper County, where champions of the resolution complain that new immigrants aren't "assimilating." Missing from this complaint is an understanding of the fact that "assimilation" (or integration) occurs over the course of generations, not within a few years of a person's life. While most of our immigrant forefathers probably achieved at least a basic mastery of English after several years in the United States, like Latino immigrants now, they certainly did not become linguistically or culturally "American" in any meaningful sense within their lifetimes. And

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neither will today's immigrants. But their children and grandchildren will, just as we did.

There is no shortage of evidence to demonstrate this. A 2002 survey of Latinos in the United States by the Pew Hispanic Center and the Kaiser Family Foundation found that while Spanish is the primary language among 72 percent of first-generation Latinos (immigrants), this figure falls to 7 percent among second-generation Latinos (children of immigrants) and zero among Latinos who are third generation (grandchildren of immigrants) or higher. The share of Latinos who are bilingual grows from 24 percent in the first generation to 47 percent in the second generation, then falls to 22 percent in the third generation and higher.⁴ In other words, for better or for worse, English largely replaces Spanish among more than three-quarters of the grandchildren of Latino immigrants.

Today's immigrants are also no different than the immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in terms of improving their educational attainment and income levels from generation to generation. A study by RAND Corporation economist James P. Smith found that the sons and grandsons of immigrant Latino men not only achieved higher levels of education and higher incomes than their forefathers, but came closer and closer to achieving the same level of education and income as the white men of their generation. Smith concludes from this that "fears are unwarranted" that Latinos are "not sharing in the successful European experience, perhaps due to a reluctance to assimilate into American culture."⁵

Unfortunately, it seems that in each new generation of "Americans" there are many observers who fear that each new generation of immigrants will fail to integrate into U.S. society in the same way as their own families. Benjamin Franklin famously warned, for instance, that German immigrants to the United States "are usually the most stupid of their nation" and that, unless they were turned away, "they will soon outnumber us so that we will not be able to save our language or our government."⁶ Obviously, the fear that immigrants won't fit in or succeed has more to do with the difference in perspective that comes from experiencing a wave of immigration

while it is occurring as opposed to studying it a century or more after the fact.

An especially poignant example of the hypocrisy which so often permeates the arguments of anti-immigrant activists who themselves come from immigrant families is found in the statements of self-styled congressional anti-immigrant crusader Representative Tom Tancredo (R-6th/CO). Tancredo has declared that, by allowing "mass immigration" to this country, "we are creating linguistic ghettos where millions of immigrants speak no English while replicating living standards such as those found in Haiti, Calcutta and poor nations."⁷ He claims that the children of Mexican immigrants "are dropping out of high school, never getting to college, and Hispanic Americans...are not moving ahead and achieving the same sorts of goals as immigrants of the past."⁸ He even warns that "massive immigration in this country will determine not just what kind of Nation we will be, but whether we will be a Nation at all."⁹

Coincidentally, at the same time as the wave of immigration that brought Tancredo's grandparents to the United States from Italy, another congressman was voicing similar fears about immigration. In 1891, Representative Henry Cabot Lodge (R-MA) warned "that immigration to this country is increasing and...is making its greatest relative increase from races most alien to the body of the American people and from the lowest and most illiterate classes among those races." He was speaking principally of the Italians, but also the Russians, Poles and Hungarians. He observed that these immigrants, "half of whom have no occupation and most of whom represent the rudest form of labor," are "people whom it is very difficult to assimilate and do not promise well for the standard of civilization in the United States."¹⁰ He warned that "they have no interest or stake in the country, and they never become American citizens."¹¹

The passage of time has obviously proven Representative Lodge wrong concerning the ability of Italian Americans to achieve upward mobility, as Representative Tancredo can attest. But Tancredo is also a testament to the fact that even the grandchildren of immigrants sometimes react with fear rather than reason when faced with

large numbers of new immigrants who have only just begun to master English and move up the socioeconomic ladder. If policymakers like Tom Tancredo and Bill Chase are actually concerned that immigrants aren't integrating quickly enough into U.S. society, perhaps they should support state-sponsored English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and other programs that make the process of integration easier for immigrants, their employers, and the communities in which they

live. Instead, Tancredo, Chase, and other anti-immigrant activists pretend that integration isn't already taking place, then blame immigrants for allegedly not integrating, and then use that as an excuse to advocate harsh immigration policies that make integration more difficult. It is a perspective that is as cynical as it is nonsensical.

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Endnotes

¹ Nick Miroff, "Culpeper Affirms Status of English: County Targets Illegal Immigrants," *The Washington Post*, August 9, 2007, p. B01.

² N.C. Aizenman, "The Face of Local Counties Shifts With Surge in Minorities," *The Washington Post*, August 9, 2007, p. A01.

³ Jill Esbenshade, *Division and Dislocation: Regulating Immigration through Local Housing Ordinances*. Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, Summer 2007.

⁴ Pew Hispanic Center & Kaiser Family Foundation, *2002 National Survey of Latinos*, December 2002, p. 16.

⁵ James P. Smith, "Assimilation across the Latino Generations," *American Economic Review* 93(2), May 2003: 315-319.

⁶ Benjamin Franklin, "The Support of the Poor," Letter to Peter Collinson, May 9, 1753.

⁷ Paula R. Kaufman, "Tancredo Scores Immigration Crisis," *Insight*, August 19, 2003.

⁸ *Congressional Record*, vol. 149, p. H7002-H7003, July 16, 2003.

⁹ *Congressional Record*, vol. 149, p. H3444-3447, April 29, 2003.

¹⁰ Henry Cabot Lodge, "The Restriction of Immigration," *North American Review* 152(410), January 1891: 27-36.

¹¹ Henry Cabot Lodge, "Lynch Law and Unrestricted Immigration," *North American Review* 152(414), May 1891: 602-612.