

Tom Tancredo: Leader of the Anti-Immigrant Populist Revolt

By Tom Barry | December 30, 2005

Rep. Tom Tancredo, who has represented Colorado's Sixth District since 1999, has in the last six years succeeded in rallying an anti-immigrant populist revolt that brings together the nativists, religious right, cultural supremacists, militia movement, and anti-immigration policy institutes with a new anti-immigration wing of the Republican Party.

Tom Tancredo is a firebrand politician, who doesn't mince words but who speaks about little except immigration, multiculturalism, and the clash of civilizations. He made his mark in Colorado's House of Representatives in the late 1970s, where he teamed up with other social conservatives and new right advocates—a group that Gov. Dick Lamm called “House crazies.” As a state legislator, Tancredo earned a reputation for slashing social services, backing social conservative positions, and cutting taxes.

After serving two terms, Tancredo, who had taught history at a Denver junior high school, was appointed in 1981 to head the regional office of the Department of Education in the Reagan administration. But it wasn't his credentials as an educator that interested Education Secretary William Bennett, but rather Tancredo's social conservatism and his belief that the federal government's involvement in education should be downsized. In his four years with the Department of Education, Tancredo shrunk the office staff in Denver from 225 to 60 employees.

In 1985 Tancredo used his position in the Department of Education to distribute to teachers a speech by a former colleague that called for a “truly Christian educational system” and bemoaned the “godlessness” in a country founded as a “Christian nation.” Despite the ensuing controversy, Tancredo kept his position and was reappointed by President Bush Senior in 1989.

From 1993 to 1998, Tancredo served as president of right-wing think tank Independence Institute, located in Golden, Colorado. The institute weighs

in on an array of state issues, including government spending, education policy, and social issues. Its board of trustees includes Jeff Coors of Coors Brewing, a right-wing philanthropist involved in right-wing foundations established by the Coors family, such as Castle Rock Foundation. Emblematic of the positions held by the Independence Institute, Tancredo said, “I do want to do away with the education department.”

A three-term limit promise by the Republican incumbent in the 6th congressional district left an opening that Tancredo filled in 1999, promising like his predecessor that he would limit his tenure in the House of Representatives to three terms. Soon Tancredo found himself in the national spotlight. When he arrived in Washington, Tancredo refused to attend a White House session welcoming new representatives, saying that Clinton wasn't a “real president.” Several months later, the Columbine school shooting, which occurred in Tancredo's district and not far from his home, had the effect of highlighting Tancredo's acceptance of campaign funding from the gun lobby.

Although Tancredo's own district, including the well-to-do suburbs of Denver, is not one where many immigrants live, Tancredo adopted immigration reform as his personal issue. In May 1999 he founded the Immigration Reform Caucus. Serving as the chair of this congressional caucus, Tancredo has succeeded in establishing a widening base of Republican lawmakers who believe that immigration restrictionism should be the position of the party, which has traditionally adopted the posture of its business wing favoring a ready supply of cheap labor. The caucus, which in 1999 had

sixteen members, had 91 members, including one Democrat, at the end of 2005.

Although he originally promised to leave Congress after three terms, Tancredo is now running for his fourth term in the 2006 elections. When he ran for the congressional seat in 1998, he said: “We want to reinvigorate the electoral process by introducing people into the system who think of government service as a temporary endeavor, not as a career.” Four years later, Tancredo said that he had been absolved of his pledge in conversations he had with the Lord. Referring to his decision to renege on his pledge, Tancredo said, “I do put it in God’s hands and I say, ‘Lord, I hope I’m doing what you want.’”

Before 9-11, immigration restrictionists operated in the political wilderness, ignored by the leadership of both political parties. However, by mixing issues of national security, border control, national identity, and large immigration flows, Tancredo helped make immigration one of the issues of public debate that cut across the usual red-blue political divides. In 2003 Tancredo began to demonstrate the muscle of the Immigration Reform Caucus with the proposed Mass Immigration Reduction Act, which received support from such national restrictionist groups as NumbersUSA, Population-Environment Balance, Carrying Capacity Network, Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), Negative Population Growth, American Renaissance, and American Patrol. While that bill foundered, the House of Representatives shocked the political establishment in December 2005 by passing a harsh restrictionist bill that included measures to double the Border Patrol, dramatically expand the border wall, and incarcerate those crossing the border illegally. The bill represented a sharp rebuff to President Bush’s own proposal for a guest worker program.

Tancredo founded Team America, “A political action committee dedicated to securing our nation’s borders.” Angela “Bay” Buchanan, sister of Pat Buchanan, serves as Team America’s executive director. According to Team America, “Illegal immigration is the most critical issue facing our nation today. The mission of Team America is to make this issue a significant part of the national political debate and to identify, recruit, and help

elect to public office individuals who are committed to enforcing our laws and securing our borders.”

His founding of Team America notwithstanding, Tancredo is not a team player, at least when it comes to partisan politics. Like many other social conservatives who came into politics with the rise of the New Right in the 1970s, Tancredo regards politics as a fight between the grassroots and the liberal establishment, generally found on the East Coast. For Tancredo, immigration is a life-or-death issue in the culture war to save America, and he doesn’t intend to let party loyalties stand in the way of battling back in the clash of civilizations. One sign of this independence as a populist has been Team America’s backing of restrictionist challengers to prominent Republican incumbents, including Utah’s Chris Cannon and Arizona’s Jim Kolbe.

Writing in the *National Review*, neoconservative author David Frum warned, “No issue, not one, threatens to do more damage to the Republican Party or the president than immigration.” That doesn’t seem to bother Tancredo, who instead believes that he has the masses of both parties on his side. When called to heel on separate occasions by House Majority Leader Tom DeLay and White House Chief of Staff Karl Rove, Tancredo didn’t recoil. Instead, he publicized these failed attempts as party discipline, and in doing so increased his widening base of loyalists, including such prominent media figures as Lou Dobbs, who fashions himself as a populist.

Tancredo is not alone in his assessment of the political divides in the United States. Steve Camarota, director of the restrictionist Center for Immigration Studies, said, “On immigration, there’s a fundamental divide in America. It’s not a left-right divide. It’s a divide between public opinion and elite opinion.”

One of the main criticisms of the anti-immigration advocates like Tancredo, aside from his nationalist and nativist rhetoric, has been that the refusal to accept the need for the legalization of the country’s 11-13 million undocumented residents implies the need for massive deportations. While Tancredo does not deny that deportations will need to be dramatically increased, he argues

that if employers are required to hire only documented workers, they will be forced to raise wages and thus attract native workers. As a result, he writes, “most illegal workers will go home voluntarily” when there are no more jobs to be had. “That strategy is ‘enforcement first,’” according to Tancredo, “and it is better than amnesty.”

Tom Tancredo is a frequent guest on radio and television news and talk shows, in part because of his often shocking comments. In mid-2005, Tancredo told a radio show host that if Muslim fundamentalist terrorists attacked the United States with nuclear weapons, one possible response would be to “take out their holy sites.”

Describing himself as a “devotee” of Samuel Huntington and the thesis of his *Clash of Civilizations* treatise, Tancredo like many on the right—from social conservatives to neoconservatives—base their restrictionism less on economic reasons than on cultural and racial ones. “I believe that what we are fighting here is not just a small group of people who have hijacked a religion, but it is a civilization bent on destroying us.”

“The threat to the United States comes from two things: the act of immigration combined with the cult of multiculturalism,” argues Tancredo. “We will never be able to win in the clash of civilizations if we don’t know who we are. If Western civilization succumbs to the siren song of multiculturalism, I believe we are finished.”

In an interview with the *New Republic*, Tancredo rhetorically asked: “What does it mean to be part of Western civilization? Are there inherent values that are worth anyone’s allegiance?”

Like many other Republicans in the West, Tancredo takes a hard line toward China, and is a strong supporter of Taiwan. Linking China and immigration, Tancredo told a crowd of immigration restrictionists that the Chinese government is “trying to export people” as a “way of extending their hegemony.”

Concerning Iran, Tancredo advocates U.S. support for the Mujahedin-e Kalq (MEK), the armed wing of the National Council of Resistance. Although identified as a terrorist organization by the State Department, Tancredo says “we should be aiding

them, instead of restricting their activities. We can use the MEK, they are in fact warriors. Where we need to use that kind of force, we can use them.”

Tancredo’s political leanings and philosophy are evident in his voting record and positions on policy issues, as evaluated by political advocacy groups. In recent years, Tancredo has received the following ratings: American Conservative Union, 100%; National Right to Live, 100%; Planned Parenthood, 0%; Americas for Tax Reform, 95%; U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 95%; Public Citizen, 9%; Council of La Raza, 0%; Arab American Institute, 0%; John Birch Society, 75%; Eagle Forum, 97%; Family Research Council, 92%; Concerned Women for America, 100%; American Wilderness Coalition, 0%; League of Conservation Voters, 3%; Peace Action, 0%; American Security Council, 100%; Center for Security Policy, 83%; National Rifle Association, 92%; Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, 0%; Federation for American Immigration Reform, 100%; Network-National Catholic Social Justice Lobby, 0%; and Bread for the World 0%.

Tancredo associates with a wide range of restrictionist, nativist, and white supremacist groups as part of his anti-immigration efforts. As sources of information, he recommends NumbersUSA and the Federation for American Immigration Reform. He is a frequent speaker at regional and national anti-immigration gatherings that include speakers from various vigilante and nativist groups, including such national figures as Chris Simox, Glenn Spencer, and Barbara Coe. On Memorial Day weekend 2005, Tancredo was the keynote speaker at a Las Vegas meeting that aimed to coordinate anti-immigrant and militia operations over the summer. Barbara Coe, leader of the California Coalition for Immigration Reform, told the assembly that illegal immigrants were “illegal barbarians who are cutting off heads and appendages of blind, white, disabled gringos.” A fellow traveler with the anti-immigration organizations is the National Alliance, a white supremacist group, which had a billboard outside the meeting hall that read, “Stop Immigration.”

If other Republican candidates for the 2008 nomination don’t make immigration a centerpiece issue, Tancredo has let it be known that he himself

will run for the nomination on the issues of immigration and “the cult of multiculturalism” that he believes are ruining (and threatening) America. Already, Tancredo has toured New Hampshire and Iowa in meetings hosted by the Christian Coalition to check out his prospects.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Reframing the Immigration Debate: The Actors and the Issues

We at the IRC strongly believe that this is a critical moment for immigration reform in the United States. For several years, we have watched with consternation as restrictionist forces have gained ground in communities, public policy, and political discourse. While there have always been brave voices to protest the violation of immigrant rights, we have seen a relative weakness in mounting a unified and coherent defense of immigrants and building a compelling call for reform. Here is a series of articles on immigration to engender dialogue and provide food for thought on the issues. Several of the articles are written by IRC Policy Director Tom Barry, while others come from collaborators on both sides of the border.

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