

Refuting the Rooster

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When someone uses public air waves emanating from a community radio station, that person wields the power to address the general public. When such access is granted free of charge, all in the name of the right to free speech, free speech also demands that opposite voices be heard.

I recently heard on the radio a bigoted tirade against Mexicans and Latinos in general. The DJ claimed that when he was growing up in Sacramento, California, there were only white and Asian people there, that the overwhelming majority of people were of European descent, Asians being the largest minority, and that his high school had no segregation problem because there weren't any students who were not Europeans. How you can segregate a homogeneous group is beyond me, though it's hard to believe that in the 1950s there was not a large population of Latino farm workers living in Sacramento.

What happened to history? Weren't Latinos here before the Anglos? Whence all those Spanish names that grace our cities, mountains, rivers, indeed, the entire state? The whole southwest?

The DJ went on: "When a new wave of immigration arrived thanks to the do-gooders, that created a segregation problem; prejudices, affirmative action... befell the USA because of those who insisted that immigration be worldwide and not just from the European area."

This is a deeply racist mindset. My rebuttal does not attempt to make those who think this way see how ugly, destructive, and evil such racist sentiments are. No, I'm not about to waste my time and energy trying to educate people like that. But it is necessary to refute such notions with facts. I've tried to access the web site the DJ mentioned (immigrationcounter.com.) and couldn't find it. But I did do some research of my own and have come up with a number of facts that ought to be aired in order to help dispel the many myths that surround immigration, both the documented kind and the undocumented kind. (I refuse to use the term "illegal." No human being is illegal. The simple fact that one is on this planet should by all natural law give you some automatic rights, but people- and government-made borders tend to obscure this basic fact by imposing layer upon layer of rules, laws, lines on maps, and fences and walls on the ground. Latinos have lived on both sides of the US-Mexico divide for 400 years, so we speak the truth when we say that "we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us.")

In another segment of his show, our racist DJ has stated that the solution to the healthcare crisis in the US is to deport "all the illegals." (Such drivel would be funny if it weren't so dangerous.) This kind of speech, which is primarily designed to incite racism and hate, has no basis in reality. The healthcare crisis is what naturally occurs when you apply capitalism to the healthcare of the people: it creates a greedy, heartless system in which doctors make money when you're sick but not when you're healthy, where every incentive exists to keep you unhealthy, where drug companies constantly promote chemicals of questionable therapeutic value, some of them downright killers, and insurance companies play with the money and the lives of working people. The healthcare crisis has nothing to do with immigration, and to conflate the two is a cynical misrepresentation, in other words, a big fat lie.

Many myths abound about immigrants, particularly about Latino immigrants, since we constitute the majority of the current immigrant population, but also about other nonwhite immigrants. During times of national stress such as today, the Powers That Be find it useful to have a convenient scapegoat, somebody who's defenseless and can be hammered without fear of retaliation. Such a scapegoat galvanizes and unifies the population. The Nazis demonized the Jews, the Roma, and many others, which brought us the Holocaust during WWII.

Racism has a long history in the US, a country founded by white European settlers imbued with ideas of white supremacy who used African slaves to work for them while killing off the native

population in order to steal the land. Here, many people from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds have been demonized by societal powers such as the press and the pulpit to provide the “majority” of white people with a convenient scapegoat to confuse and distract attention from the root of their problems: the capitalist imperialist system that rules this country and, indeed, the entire world.

Today a similar dynamic is at work. The demonization of Arabs and Muslims in general, the to-do about immigration legislation last year, the increase in the frequency and brutality of immigration raids, the increased publicity surrounding the issue, the Minutemen vigilantes, etc., all attest to this. Because we live in such a climate today, incendiary speech has to be addressed; we are not going to be silent anymore. On May Day, 2006, 30,000 of us took to the street in Santa Barbara to make that point, and millions more did so elsewhere in the US.

Let’s shed light on some common myths about immigration. What follows is from the Center for American Progress (www.americanprogress.org/heck_immigration.html):

I. Reality Check: Immigrants in the U.S. Health Care System.

Myth: U.S. public health insurance programs are overburdened with documented and undocumented immigrants.

Reality: Twenty-one percent of total medical costs were paid through public sources for native-born citizens, compared to 16 percent for documented and undocumented immigrants. In terms of taxes paid per household, this equates to \$56 for healthcare for documented immigrants and \$11 for health care (emergency Medicaid services) for the undocumented.

Myth: Immigrants come to the United States to gain access to health services.

Reality: Immigrants are most likely to be employed in industries that do not offer health insurance coverage, such as agriculture, construction, food processing, restaurants, and hotel services. Uninsured rates in these industries are more than 30 percent for all workers compared to 19 percent for workers across all industries.

Myth: Undocumented immigrants are “free-riders” in the U.S. health care system.

Reality: The National Research Council concluded that immigrants will pay on average \$80,000 per capita more in taxes than they will use in government services during their lifetimes. The Social Security Administration, for example, estimates that workers without valid social security numbers contribute \$7 billion in Social Security tax revenues and roughly \$1.5 billion in Medicare taxes annually, yet elderly immigrants rarely qualify for Medicare or long-term care services provided through Medicaid.

II. Reality Check: Immigrants and the U.S. Work Force.

Myth: Out-of-work natives could replace undocumented immigrants in our workforce.

Reality: Removing all undocumented immigrants from the U.S. workforce would leave 2.5 million low-skill jobs unfilled. In a paper commissioned by the Center for American Progress, William & Mary economist David A. Jaeger found a telling disparity between myth and reality in the effects of immigration on the workforce: out-of-work natives could not effectively replace undocumented workers. The jobs that undocumented immigrants currently hold require a substantially lower skill set than most jobless natives possess. As a result of the skills gap, only 105,000

natives could appropriately replace the 2.5 million immigrants in very low-skill jobs, leaving 2.4 million positions unfilled. Such a loss would put states with large immigrant populations, such as Arizona and California, in dire straits.

Myth: Undocumented immigrants are a drain on the U.S. economy.

Reality: Even conservative estimates show that undocumented immigrants play a substantial role in supporting the U.S. economy and boosting its potential. In Arizona, they earn 2.9 percent of total wages; that is 2.5 times more than physicians and 3.1 times more than lawyers and police officers or firefighters. Immigrants' presence in the labor force not only buttresses that force's lower tiers, it also fosters overall economic growth. A 2006 study found that state revenues collected from undocumented immigrants in Texas exceeded by \$424.7 million what the state spent on these immigrants in public services such as education and health care in 2005.

Myth: Undocumented immigrants do not pay taxes.

Reality: Undocumented immigrants pay income, sales, and other taxes. The majority of undocumented immigrants pay income taxes using Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs) or false Social Security numbers. All immigrants, regardless of status, will pay on average \$80,000 per capita more in taxes than they use in government services over their lifetime. The Social Security system reaps the biggest windfall from taxes paid by immigrants; the Social Security Administration reports that it holds approximately \$420 billion from the earnings of immigrants who are not in a position to claim benefits. This last item is from Testimony on the "ITIN" and Social Security Number Misuse, presented by Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr., Social Security Administration, Office of the Inspector General, to the House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Oversight, Subcommittee on Social Security, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC, March 24, 2004, www.ssa.gov/oig/communications/testimony_speeches/03102004testimony.htm .

III. Reality Check: The Feasibility of a Mass Deportation Policy.

Myth: Deportation is a realistic and economically feasible way of taking care of the backlog of undocumented workers currently in the United States.

Reality: Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) has stated "[T]he dirty secret is that we couldn't deport 10 million illegal immigrants if we wanted to." Deporting 10 million undocumented immigrants would cost \$41 billion annually over five years, or \$206 billion total, using conservative estimates of key variables. Compared to other current budget figures, the cost of a mass deportation policy would:

- Exceed the entire budget of the Department of Homeland Security for the 2006 fiscal year ending in October 2007 (\$34.2 billion)
- Approach the total amount of money requested by the 33 federal agencies responsible for homeland security activities for FY 2006 (\$49.9 billion)
- More than double the annual spending on border and transportation security (\$19.3 billion)
- Comprise half the annual cost of the Iraq war (\$74 billion)
- More than double the annual cost of military operations in Afghanistan (\$16.8 billion)

IV. Reality Check: The Majority of the Public Supports Comprehensive Immigration Reform.

Myth: There is weak support among the public for immigration reform.

Reality: Voters consistently express support for comprehensive immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship. Data from a recent CNN poll, for example, show that 80 percent of the public favors a program that would allow illegal immigrants who have been living in the United States for several years, have jobs, and are willing to pay back taxes, to apply for citizenship. A Quinnipiac University poll from November 2009 similarly showed that a very strong 69-to-27 percent majority of registered voters favor a similar program.

Another popular myth is that Latino immigrants use and abuse the welfare system. This is false. Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for any form of welfare benefits, including food stamps, and documented immigrants have a 5 year moratorium on the use of federal benefits. The only public services undocumented immigrants now enjoy are Medicaid, but only for medical emergencies, and public school education for the children of undocumented immigrants, per the US Supreme Court, *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982).

Business needs immigration, legal or illegal, but preferably the illegal kind, since workers with few rights can be more easily manipulated: their wages can be set below minimum wage; they won't complain when they are denied their breaks; they don't file a workers compensation claim when they are injured on the job; they don't file complaints when they are sexually harassed by foremen and bosses; they don't join unions (although this has changed a lot), but in general they are a much more vulnerable and therefore malleable work force than documented workers, who have, at least on paper, the right to seek legal redress of their grievances.

Here's what the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, TX (hardly a leftist organization) had to say about this:

“Immigration and Monetary and Fiscal Policy. The fact that immigration tends to fluctuate with the business cycle is one way it facilitates the work of monetary policymakers. By providing workers when and where they are needed, immigration raises the speed limit of the economy by keeping wage and price pressures at bay. In 2000, at the height of the economic boom, Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan attributed the U.S. economy's remarkable growth record to two main factors: growth in productivity and growth of the labor force. Both factors held down unit labor costs and allowed the economy to grow faster with less inflation, thereby reducing the need for the Fed to intervene by tightening interest rates to slow growth.

“In the long run, immigrants also have a beneficial effect on the fiscal health of pay-as-you-go government programs, such as Social Security and Medicare. Because immigrants are, on average, younger than natives and have higher fertility rates, immigration decelerates the aging of the population. This slows the ongoing decline in the ratio of workers to retirees and helps maintain the solvency of these programs.”

This last point is very interesting. As the Bard would say, “There lies the rub.” This is the racist's fear: that in the future the majority of the population of the United States will be brown, not white, “non-European.” Fear of “the other” is a basic characteristic of racism.

One of the many reasons for the large increase in immigration from Mexico during the last 10 years or so is NAFTA, the free trade agreement Bill Clinton negotiated with Mexico that came into effect on January 1st 1994, also commemorated by the Zapatista uprising. The number of Mexicans living in severe poverty grew by 4 million since then. Fifty thousand Mexican farmers lose their land annually, victims of free trade produce grown on US corporate mega-farms generously subsidized by the government being sold in Mexico at prices Mexican farmers cannot compete with. As a result, they lose their farms and migrate to the North or to Mexican cities, where they try to eke out a living, and when they can't find work in Mexico's largest cities, many of them eventually make their way here to work in the lowest paying sectors of our economy. Thus blame for the increased levels of illegal immigration can rightfully be placed on the US government and the corporations it is beholden to who worked so tirelessly to get NAFTA passed.

Here are some more pertinent facts from the US Census Bureau:

The Hispanic population of the US was estimated to be 42.7 million in July 2005, about 14% of the total population. This does not include 3.9 million residents of Puerto Rico (who are US citizens, not immigrants).

In 2004 approximately 40% of Latinos were foreign born. In 2005 88% of Latinos under age 18 were native born.

Latin-Americans constitute 53% of all foreign born people in the USA, or 18.3 million people. The breakdown by country is: Mexico 10 million, El Salvador 937,000, Cuba 925,000, the Dominican Republic 688,000, Guatemala 590,000, Colombia 500,000.

Latino immigrants make enormous cultural contributions to American life. Many fields, such as music and sports, have been greatly enriched by the presence of Latinos in these endeavors. Ours is a very rich and ancient culture emanating from three main roots: Spain, Africa, and the Native peoples of Central and South America. Our Spanish language has produced world-class works of literature in every sense comparable to the literary gems of English or any other language. We have excelled through the centuries in art, painting, sculpture, both in Spain and in America; we have excelled in the cinema. To try to diminish us by implying that we are culturally inferior bespeaks of either abysmal ignorance or malicious intent.

Another contribution we Latinos make is our service in the armed forces. Although I do not agree with war and would like to see each and every army, each and every missile, each and every bomb in the world eliminated, I have to say to those who hate us that, yes, we even shed blood by the buckets in defense of this nation. In Vietnam, a very sizable segment of the forces in the jungle were Latinos, who along with our Black brothers bore the brunt of the fight. Today in the Iraq war, there are many of us doing the dirty bloody work for Uncle Sam enabling him to get even richer.

Quoting from "Illegal Immigrants: Uncle Sam Wants You" By Deborah Davis, from *In These Times*:

"In the Iraq war, citizenship is being used as a recruiting tool aimed specifically at young immigrants, who are told that by enlisting, they will be able to quickly get citizenship for themselves (sometimes true, depending on what the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) branch of the Department of Homeland Security finds) and their entire families (not true; each family member has to go through a separate application process). Nevertheless, with the political pressures on Latino families

growing daily under this administration, many young Latinos are unable to resist the offer, which immigrants' rights activists see as blatant exploitation of a vulnerable population ...

"The large majority of new military recruits are signed up through the Delayed Entry Program (DEP), which operates in high schools, GED programs and home-schooling networks across the nation."

Later in the same article we read:

"The Department of Defense's casualty database doesn't publicly break down the dead and injured by ethnic group, but a tally of Latino surnames found that between January 10 when the surge began and July 1, 20 percent of the 174 young people (aged 18-21) who died were likely to have been Latino (the military does not keep public data on the race or ethnicity of casualties). With the intensification of DEP recruiting efforts in largely Latino high schools since the invasion began, this is no surprise."

Documented or undocumented?

Again, quoting Deborah Davis,

"How many of these young Latino recruits are illegal immigrants? Nobody knows, says Flavia Jimenez, an immigration policy analyst at the National Council of La Raza. 'But what we do know is that recruiters may not be up to speed on everybody's legal status... We also know that a significant number of [illegals] have died in Iraq.' The recruitment of illegal immigrants is particularly intense in Los Angeles, where 75 percent of the high school students are Latino. 'A lot of our students are undocumented,' says Arlene Inouye, a teacher at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, 'and it's common knowledge that recruiters offer green cards.' Inouye is the coordinator and founder of the Coalition Against Militarism in Our Schools (CAMS), a counter-recruitment organization that educates teenagers about deceptive recruiting practices. 'The practice is pretty widespread all over the nation,' she says, 'especially in California and Texas... The recruiters tell them, "you'll be helping your family."' "What recruiters do not tell their targets, however, is that the military itself has no authority to grant citizenship. It forwards their citizenship applications to ICE, which will then scrutinize them and their entire families for up to a year."

So, what I have to say today to America is, that as a community, we constitute the largest minority group in the USA; we have ancient roots in these lands, older than those of most European immigrants; our contributions to the economy far exceed what we take out of it. We take care of your gardens; we harvest your crops; we build your houses; we make your beds in hotels, residences, and palaces, and cook your food and serve it to you. We take care of your children, your old and your sick; we toil in slaughterhouses and pack the beef and poultry that stocks your supermarket shelves. We grace you with our music, with our dances; we delight your palate with our food that you love to eat and constantly imitate. And we fight, bleed and die for you, America. Don't you ever forget it.

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