

Conservatives launch Families First on Immigration

by *Bill Berkowitz*

So-called 'compromise' calls for end of 14th Amendment citizenship birthright

Unlike last year's Evangelical Climate Initiative, an attempt to build bridges to combat global warming that drew headlines and stunned some longtime "traditional values" conservative evangelicals, the newly formed "Families First on Immigration" appears to have elicited little support for its grand entrance into the immigration debate.

And, unlike the numerous religious organizations that have consistently supported undocumented workers and their families, Families First on Immigration is focused more on securing the U.S. borders and eliminating citizenship birthright than with the human rights of immigrants.

Under the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, anyone born in the United States is a citizen -- a right Families First is waging an extremely uphill battle to overturn.

After months of missing the debate on the issue, Christian conservatives are now staking out a position on immigration. The new group is a coalition that involves such conservative notables as former Republican Party presidential hopeful Gary Bauer, who heads up a group called American Values, former Bush advisor to Catholic voters, Deal Hudson of the Morley Institute for Church & Culture, and David Keene of the American Conservative Union, are advancing what they call religiously grounded positions on immigration.

For quite some time, the religious sector has had contrasting views on immigration. Nowhere was this more in evidence than during an address Joan Maruskin, the liberal director of the Church World Service Immigration Program, gave at an immigration conference held last April organized by the Family Research Council, a Washington-based Christian conservative lobbying group.

Against the backdrop of an FRC-sponsored member poll that found that 90 percent of respondents chose forced deportation as the appropriate fate for the estimated 11 to 12 million undocumented immigrants here, Maruskin called the Bible "an immigration handbook" and argued in favour of amnesty -- to what observers said was a decidedly tepid response.

Nearer the other side of the debate is Families First on Immigration, which in January sent letters to President George W. Bush and to leaders of the new Democratic controlled Congress urging them "to adopt a grand compromise on the divisive issue that includes strong border security, an amnesty for illegals already here who are relatives of citizens and an end to birthright citizenship," the Washington Times reported.

"Our position really is consistent with Christian teachings and with the rule of law," said Manuel Miranda, chairman of the Third Branch Conference, a coalition of over 150 grassroots leaders, who has brought together more than 30 top shelf conservatives on this issue.

"Out of concern for keeping families together, the religious leaders propose granting citizenship to any illegal aliens in the country who are related to U.S. citizens. This would include anyone who has had a child born here, often referred to as an 'anchor baby,'" the Washington Times pointed out.

"In return, the federal government would end birthright citizenship, which automatically grants U.S. citizenship to anyone born here, regardless of his parents' legal status. The 14th Amendment says 'all persons born or naturalized in the United States ... are citizens of the United States.'"

"This is a real compromise," Miranda claimed. "On the one hand, there is legalization of a large number of people, but conservatives get the settlement of the thorniest issue for them in the immigration debate."

"We weren't surprised that leaders of the religious right finally got into the game," Devin Burghart, the program director of the Building Democracy Initiative at the Chicago, Illinois-based Center for New Community, told me in a telephone interview. "The organization is trying to stake out a more moderate position than the Minutemen and other extremist anti-immigration organizations, and it is using a religious

frame to try and woo supporters."

"While the language the group is using is more moderate sounding -- touting a compromise solution to the problem -- its anti-immigrant positions are quite radical," Burghart added. "And although they claim to be in line with traditional religious teachings, they seem to be ignoring much of the Bible, particularly passages about welcoming strangers."

"It's a disingenuous attempt to appear to be not anti-Latino while at the same time pandering to their right-wing base," Mark Potok, the director of the Southern Poverty Law Centre's Intelligence Project, said in a recent telephone interview. "These leaders are desperately trying to hold their coalition together that very likely cannot stay together."

Earlier Manuel Miranda, the former judicial nominations counsel to then Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) and to the Senate Judiciary Committee, and a man who has known his fair share of controversy, told CBN: "Until now, religious leaders have been criticized for staying uninvolved in the immigration debate ... This coalition gets them involved, they offer to come to the table and offer ideas they can eventually support. Previously, the White House did not invite their participation, and they did not offer their help. With certain results, a wider participation may get the President wider support to allow Republicans and Democrats to obtain a coherent reform. This new coalition is bigger and broader than the Secure Border Coalition that dominated the debate on the right in the last go round."

Miranda, who is a spokesperson for the coalition, "had one foot in the political graveyard" in 2004, according to a November 2005 report in The Hill.

"In the wake of a Washington scandal, he had resigned his congressional post as lawmakers questioned his ethics and federal authorities investigated him. Most political observers believed that Miranda's days as a player in the Republican Party were over," The Hill noted.

By 2005, Miranda was once again "a widely respected leader among conservative activists" due to the

"leading role" he played "in thwarting the Harriet Miers Supreme Court nomination." In early January of this year, Miers resigned as White House Counsel, effective January 31.

According to The Hill, "Miranda's successful behind-the-scenes and public opposition to Miers is the culmination of a remarkable journey since he resigned his job with Frist because of involvement in a controversy over the publication of sensitive Democratic documents known as 'Memogate.'"

In 2004, Democrats "accused Miranda of stealing internal Democratic memos off a Judiciary Committee computer server," an act that several Republican senators called "improper after [Miranda] admitted to reading the memos, which a junior Republican Judiciary aide downloaded from the unsecured server."

He claimed "that he had neither broken the law nor Senate rules by reading the memos, but key Republican Senators did not back him," The Hill reported.

Although it was reported that Miranda felt he had been "betrayed by Republicans," there were conservatives who stood by him, and "the American Conservative Union dubbed him 'an American hero' for bringing the memos to light."

Miranda formed the National Coalition to End Judicial Filibusters, a group that actively worked to have the Republican Senate leadership invoke the so-called "nuclear option," a parliamentary tactic aimed at stripping Senate Democrats of the right to filibuster judicial nominees. Miranda's coalition eventually grew to encompass some 200 conservative groups; later changing its name to the Third Branch Conference.

His work derailing the Miers nomination and advocating the "nuclear option" in the Senate won him near universal approval from conservative lobbying groups. It is curious that such a controversial ideologue would be the spokesperson for a group that claims to represent conciliation and compromise.

Miranda told me in a telephone interview that, "We are asking the president to reopen the debate. We have been circulating a policy paper for comment and review called 'Good Stewards Good Neighbors.'"

The policy paper will definitely "add something to the debate," he said, but lamented that the "Democratic-controlled congress doesn't seem eager to address immigration."

Miranda said that the Minutemen, a vigilante group that patrols the U.S.-Mexico border, was not currently a "part of the coalition," but "if they agreed to our fundamental principles, they could join on."

At the heart of the Families First on Immigration proposal is the elimination of birthright citizenship which conservative columnist and radio talk show host Jane Chastain has termed the United States' "dirty little secret."

"Illegal immigration is a human tragedy that disrupts lives and separates families," Families First on Immigration wrote in the letter to Bush, a letter that also places blame for the problem on officials in Mexico. "It is a failure of two governments: the one that fails its people and the one that invites their departure for cheap labor's sake."

In its letter to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi of California, the group said that it "believe [s] that there is a need for such oversight [on immigration] as soon as possible. Our hope is that such oversight will lead to a better considered reform and a cohesive immigration policy that goes well beyond Band-Aid politics."

Others conservatives that have joined the coalition include longtime conservative direct-mail guru Richard A. Viguerie, the Rev. Donald Wildmon of American Family Association, the Rev. Louis Sheldon of Traditional Values Coalition and Rabbi Aryeh Spero of Caucus for America, and Paul Weyrich, widely considered one of the founding fathers of the modern conservative movement and the head of the Free Congress Foundation.

The most abhorrent aspect of Families First on Immigration's agenda is the removal of birthright citizenship, said Devin Burghart. "It is an attack on civil rights in general and on the 14th amendment specifically, which is a cornerstone of our democracy."

According to Burghart, an activist/researcher who has been tracking developments around immigration for several years, Families First on Immigration "is hungry for new members and hopes to tap into a new funding stream. They saw how successful the Minuteman Political Action Committee was in raising money and they hope to strike while the iron is hot."

The organization appears to be a "bridge group" said Burghart, "aimed at bridging the gap between the hard core anti-immigration movement and the religious right."

In terms of the issues that it is raising, the Southern Poverty Law Center's Mark Potek believes that it is unlikely that the group will have any "chance in a Democratic controlled congress."

However, while the group may not have an immediate impact via legislation, it will no doubt try to "inject immigration issues into the heart of 2008 presidential campaign," said Burghart. If it is able to accomplish that, it will be seen as a success."

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