

BOOKS

[*The New Case Against Immigration: Both Legal and Illegal*, Mark Krikorian, *Sentinel*, 304 pages]

Assimilating to the GOP

By Scott McConnell

NO CONTEMPORARY American political movement has had more difficulty finding an effective tone than the immigration-reform lobby. Its aim of slowing down the rate of immigration has long been supported by popular opinion, but it has never found majority elite support in either party. The eloquent arguments pushed by *National Review* in the early 1990s, particularly Peter Brimelow's powerful brief for the American nation as a product of shared culture and ethnicity, were for the most part rejected or shunned by the conservative establishment, which on this issue did not even pretend to follow the impulses of its populist base.

Yet for those convinced that the United States needed a better immigration policy, Republican establishment rejection did not end the matter. A dozen years ago, when I first saw Mark Krikorian—then the new director of the Center for Immigration Studies—I thought he was the best possible voice for making the immigration-restriction argument persuasive to Americans. Young, wonkish, sufficiently ethnic in background and sensibility to be empathetic to the immigrant experience, highly intelligent with a firm grasp of all the policy detail deployed by both sides in the debate, Krikorian had an uncanny ability to normalize the issue, to dampen its emotive aspects and defuse the smear words (nativist, racist, etc.) that proponents of high immigration habitually threw at their opponents. The

growth in influence of the Center for Immigration Studies under his leadership confirms this judgment. Especially striking is the headway Krikorian has made in courting influential Republicans: this book is blurbed by both David Frum and Bill Bennett. But history works in curious ways, and the embrace of immigration reform by the conservative establishment presents some difficulties of its own.

Krikorian's excellent *New Case Against Immigration* is a lucid elaboration of arguments made by CIS during the past decade. What will strike many as new is his insistence that the trouble is not that immigrants aren't as smart, industrious, or able to assimilate as the storied Ellis Islanders but that America has so changed as to put mass immigration in an entirely different context. Krikorian explicitly rejects the notion that the predominantly Mexican ethnicity of the new immigration is an issue, pointing out that America has always had an elastic definition of "white" (which used to exclude Germans and later Irish) and has steadily expanded it. But the volume of the current influx is a problem, and so are other factors that make the present immigration more problematic than the past.

Central to Krikorian's thesis is the fact that the United States was once itself a developing country—most people farmed, few were schooled. If it took in millions of poor and unskilled, the newcomers were coming to a country in which the natives were generally on the same socioeconomic level. There was a national commitment on the part of America's elites to assimilation at the highest level: American presidents ridiculed the notion of dual citizenship. The immigrants themselves, coming in great part from traditional rural societies, had thin pre-existing national allegiances. Moreover, there was scant opportunity for governments overseas to exert influence over the immigration streams entering our country. The contrasts with today are evident: Krikorian carefully documents the egregious efforts that Mexico, using its growing

network of consulates, is now making to keep its emigrants loyal to their mother country. For other immigrants, modern travel and communication render a binationalism of the heart altogether plausible. There are as yet not that many examples of "Americans" who have run for office in their native countries, but there are enough to serve as harbinger of the kind of postnational immigrant who has no wish to assimilate emotionally into the United States. The fact that most new immigrants speak Spanish means that many new arrivals can live entirely in Spanish-speaking environments, do business in Spanish, conduct legal affairs in Spanish, and come in no contact with American norms at all.

Or, perhaps, what used to be American norms. A great part of Krikorian's argument depends on his analysis of the American elite, which is "post-American," lacking, as he puts it, "visceral attachment to the American national community." Multiculturalism is one byproduct of this mindset: it means that, in Krikorian's phrase, America "almost sacralizes" group identities that would otherwise be fluid and optional. The civil-rights revolution has persuaded the country to adopt as its official story the seemingly irredeemable racism of whites and therefore create governmental institutions to keep a thumb on the scale for minorities for the indefinite future. All of these factors militate against Hispanic or Asian immigrants coming to consider themselves 100 percent American.

Diversity of this sort has other prices. Krikorian cites Robert Putnam, the *Bowling Alone* sociologist, who has found that highly diverse communities have great deficits in social trust and lack the "common good" sentiment that is one of the wellsprings of human happiness.

There are also more tangible consequences. When a developed country imports millions of mostly unskilled workers, the result is lower wages for less educated, native-born skilled workers and widening income inequality. When labor is cheap, business has less incentive to create or utilize technological innovations, to substitute machines

for human muscle. High immigration means less social and economic equality.

Since 9/11, there has been a significant security component to immigration as well. While America's Muslim immigrants have not carried out major terrorist acts, Europe's much larger Muslim enclaves have generated terrorists, and there's no logical reason why the alienation and militancy rife among Paris and London's second- and third-generation immigrants couldn't eventually take root here.

It is significant that Krikorian's argument addresses the sheer size of America's immigration intake and does not especially target illegal immigration. Politicians haven't adopted this line, finding it easier to rail against illegals—while the open-borders lobby counters by proposing to legalize the illegals. But Krikorian recognizes that a decent society is not going to refuse schooling or medical care to people without papers and that the immigration problem is rooted in numbers, not illegality. The negative consequences of high rates of immigration remain whether the new entrants sneak across the border or are relatives by marriage of someone who arrived a dozen years ago. Effective reform, as recommended by the Barbara Jordan-chaired U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform in 1995, requires ending the automatic visa rights granted to "family member" immigrants that effectively cede control of who can enter the United States to the new immigrants themselves. The illegal alien problem can be substantially mitigated by simply making it difficult for people to work illegally.

Krikorian's arguments are a blend of the new (those stressing the incompatibility of high immigration with modern postindustrial society) with those heard in the immigration-reform movement for a generation, presented with measured rhetoric and unimpeachable logic. But the logic itself won't turn the tables on immigration reform in the United States—where, once again, both major parties have chosen candidates with no interest in reducing the immigrant flow. Still, the movement is now in a different political environment than it was in the

1990s: both more rooted in the Republican Party and more of a mass movement. I believe Krikorian welcomes these developments.

The main line of demarcation is 9/11 and the subsequent Iraq War, now at the centerpiece of American political divisions. Have these watersheds changed the way Americans think about immigration? Should they?

At one level, their effect is obvious. In the week after 9/11, George W. Bush was forced to cancel plans to forge a grand agreement with Mexico's president Vicente Fox to legalize illegal aliens, a deal that may still be politically impossible. The hostility of the major neoconservative voices toward immigration, intense during the 1990s, has become muddled.

As the immigration-reduction movement has sunk deeper roots into the conservative movement and begun to acquire a mass-electoral base, it has also picked up some of the political style and impulses of the prowar Right. Talk-radio hosts who are anti-immigrant are especially anti-Muslim and noisy enthusiasts for bombing other countries. (Michael Savage is the most prominent but not sole example.) At least impressionistically, the immigration-reform movement is attracting people from the same social strata as those volunteering for military service: working-class whites. And while the rush of wartime patriotism has helped galvanize immigration reform, it raises issues the movement didn't face in the 1990s.

More than 30 years ago, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan wrote that the immigration process, because it regulates the ethnic composition of the American electorate, was "the single most important determinant of American foreign policy." While that foreign policy was responsive to many elements, it responded "probably first of all to the primal factor of ethnicity."

It was a bold assertion, debatable then as now at many levels. But one fact seems indisputable: those from the new immigrant groups have played a very secondary role in the Bush/McCain for-

eign policy—torture apologist John Yoo being a notable exception. Asian-Americans, educationally and professionally on track to become a growing part of America's elite, have evinced very little enthusiasm for the War Party agenda. While Hispanics have volunteered in great numbers for military service, the nascent Latino political class, largely Democratic, shows almost no inclination to tub thump about democracy in the Middle East, striking Iran, or rolling back Russian influence in the Caucasus. To the extent that the existing American political class is now given to grandiose and probably self-destructive visions of America's role in the world, modifying its composition through immigration seems much less of a bad idea than it might have ten years ago.

And if Mexico has indeed begun an extraterritorial campaign to retain the political allegiance of Mexicans in El Norte, where does this rank on the outrage scale relative to igniting a "preventive war," or to some of the ideas circulating the Beltway about promoting America's "global hegemony"?

In the 1990s, immigration reform seemed (at its most attractive) linked to concepts like prudence and self-restraint. It had such backers as Eugene McCarthy, George Kennan, and Samuel Huntington—men with a pronounced and realistic sense of America's limits. It seemed to say, without expressions of hostility to other nations or peoples, that it was a risky and unnecessary thing to shake up America's social and ethnic structure by importing millions of poor.

By becoming part and parcel of the Republican Right, the immigration-reform movement risks becoming absorbed by the Right's jingoism, turning into another means of expressing American superiority over foreigners, people to be kept out at home and bombed abroad. This may not be Krikorian's sentiment, but it is the mindset of many of the companions with whom the immigration-reform movement now travels. While such allies may fuel the movement's success, they render it a mixed blessing. ■

[*Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*, Rick Perlstein, Scribner, 896 pages]

Tricky Rick

By Walter M. Hudson

WHEN RICHARD NIXON won the White House in 1968, he was what America did not need but may have deserved. His presidency resulted in massive distrust and cynicism toward government and authority in general, though this was by no means all bad. America had placed too much power and faith in the Cold War presidents. The job was overwhelming for one man—perhaps the only time in history where the fate of humanity was vested in one office—and the era’s “crisis psychology,” as David Halberstam termed it, created an atmosphere in which anything was permitted to defeat a political opponent. Your adversary had no rulebook, the thinking went, so you couldn’t afford one either.

Does Nixon’s impressive yet nefarious rise to power make him kind of a perverse epic hero of the late 1960s? As a man who drove himself to the top despite his opponents and—most of all—himself? As a man who helped create a nation of red and blue states, attack-dog politics, and cultural warfare? This is what Rick Perlstein, previously the author of a good biography of Barry Goldwater, asserts but fails to prove in *Nixonland*.

Of course, to begin to understand how Nixon could win the presidency, one needs to understand the era in which he reached the summit of power: the climactic high 1960s, from 1968 to 1972, the time of maximum social unrest. Though it is hard to believe now, America seemed to be falling apart. In 1969, the usually staid *Wall Street Journal* asserted that the U.S. was in the midst of a guerrilla war within its own borders.

Remember the comforting, black-and-white footage of the March on

Washington in 1963. In retrospect, it’s a startling picture of old, dignified America—decorum and respectability abound: men in coats and ties, women in modest dresses, noble speeches appealing to better angels and dreams of a brighter future. It’s painful to flash forward half a decade and see in Technicolor what appears to be insanity: fools such as Jerry Rubin and Bernadine Dohrn prancing around, praising Charles Manson and telling kids to kill their parents.

What happened in the interim? Why did America suffer, as one wag called it, a “psychedelic breakdown?” As Perlstein points out, in 1964 the Democrats had crushed Goldwater. In an awesome display of the ambition and hubris of the modern West, LBJ and a Democratic Congress promised a Great Society, “abundance and liberty for all.” And what instead did the people get? “America plunged into chaos,” as Perlstein puts it. The crisis was mild compared to, say, France in 1789 or Russia in 1917, but to complacent Middle America, it was terrifying: riots in the cities, skyrocketing crime rates, open promiscuity and obscenity, widespread drug abuse, campus disruption, stalemate if not defeat in Vietnam, breakdown of family life. “All this moral anarchy,” writes Perlstein, “all of it felt linked.”

In Perlstein’s account, Nixon provides the skeleton key to understanding the period. Indeed, the ascendancy of the Silent Majority—Red State America, in its more recent guise—is coded in terms of Nixon’s life story. The horrified Middle Americans that elected and supported him were “Orthogonians”—the term Nixon himself gave to the fraternity he co-founded at Whittier College for kids who weren’t the elite. Orthogonians were hardly downtrodden, though. According to Perlstein, they were “Martyrs who were really not martyrs, oppressors who were not really oppressors: a class politics for the white middle class.” The entitled ones were Whittier’s elite fraternity of “Franklins.” And Nixon fought a personal battle against Franklins all his life—the Kennedys,

most prominently. He rose to power because he perfectly reflected “Orthogonian” rage and anxiety. He was, after all, one to them to his core.

This all seems too clever by half, and Perlstein carries his thesis for more than 700 pages. Throughout the book, he refers to Franklins and Orthogonians in various political guises, his style combining a kind of New Journalist hip argot with metafictional irony—at times, one might say, Tom Wolfe, at others, Thomas Pynchon. So we read cool and clever chapter titles (“In Which a Cruise Ship Full of Governors Inspires Considerations on the Nature of Old and New Politics”); you-are-there descriptions of the Watts riots and the ’68 Democratic convention; and smart-Alec, tongue-just-enough-in-cheek commentary. (“Now that farmers were afraid that Martin Luther King would send Negro biker gangs to rape their children, the Republican restoration was inevitable.”) At the center of the maelstrom, the trickster himself is always there—always prevailing, jiu-jitsuing his opponents by any means necessary.

Amusing, and even exciting at first, the book’s sprawling narrative becomes wearying, condescending, and ultimately puerile. Its slapdash tone betrays a willingness to play fast and loose with the facts and to provide overly simple explanations. Perlstein writes, “In the State of the Union address the president said his first economic priority was ‘controlling inflation.’ He lied.” That is a highly dubious assertion, at best. In fact, Nixon was more concerned about inflation than unemployment in his first year in office, even willing to see unemployment rise if it would help curb inflation. Perlstein calls Nixon’s creation of the EPA “less noble the closer you looked: its 3560 employees all came from existing agencies; its 1.4 billion budget taken from existing programs, the only difference being that these previously scattered centers of authority were now directly controlled from the White House.” But wait a minute—could it be that these “scattered centers of authority” were