

TantonWatch: Battling Hate in the Immigration Debate

By Mark Potok

The contemporary anti-immigration movement in the United States is largely the product of decades of organizing, fundraising, and ideological work by one man — John Tanton, a Michigan ophthalmologist who founded, funded or otherwise nurtured more than a dozen nativist groups. The network of groups Tanton built up still dominates the politics of immigration in America, with one of those groups testifying to Congress at least 90 times, another at least 130 times, and a third playing a critical role in killing bipartisan immigration reform in 2007 and 2014. The network was also a key supporter of former President Donald Trump’s harshest and cruelest immigration policies.

Tanton died in 2019, but the legacy of his work is very much alive. Immigration reform has proved incredibly difficult, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, thanks largely to the political influence, lobbying reach, and allegedly nonpartisan studies produced by Tanton’s network. Under Trump, who was arguably the U.S. president with the most extreme nativist views in at least a century, the administration regularly relied on studies and other support from parts of the network to back its most draconian policies, including the so-called “Muslim ban,” the slashing of refugee programs, and opposition to protection from deportation of “Dreamers,” who were brought to America by their parents while still young children. Even after Trump’s 2020 reelection defeat, his ideas and those of the Tanton network were still being actively championed by Stephen Miller, who was for four years Trump’s senior advisor for policy. Miller, who remains intensely focused on immigration issues, followed up his service to Trump by continuing to attack Democrats, President Joe Biden in particular, for being soft on immigration.

Tanton began his ideological odyssey on what is normally considered the political left, focused on the alleged threats of overpopulation and, in particular, its potentially negative effects on the environment. Over the decades, however, he began to adopt more and more far-right positions, including contempt for Latinos, Africans and other non-white immigrants, along with “low-IQ” individuals. He developed close relationships with white nationalists, Holocaust deniers, anti-Semites, and other extremists. He was a nearly lifelong enthusiast of eugenics, the idea of breeding a better human race by allowing only certain individuals to reproduce. But he also regularly attacked targets usually thought of as conservative, including many church hierarchies and faith traditions, big business, major philanthropists, and others. Particularly galling to a great many conservatives was Tanton’s enthusiastic support for worldwide abortion rights, which he saw as an important antidote to overpopulation.

In 2020, a group of about a dozen individuals, ranging politically from the center left to the center right, began meeting under the auspices of a grant from the Gilder Foundation administered by Rick Swartz, a longtime activist on immigration issues and founder of the National Immigration Forum. The central aim of the group, of which I am a part, was to try to fight back against the extremism embodied in the Tanton network, principally by exposing the true nature of Tanton’s beliefs and those who succeeded him. To this end, I was asked to prepare short and up-to-date profiles of key organizations and leaders in the Tanton network. These subjects include Tanton himself; the Federation for American Immigration Reform and its current president, Dan Stein; the Center for Immigration Studies and its leader, Mark Krikorian; NumbersUSA and its chief, Roy Beck; and Stephen Miller. In addition, I’ve prepared a profile of *The Camp of the Saints*, a French novel that has become a key text of the nativist movement in the United States and elsewhere; another on the role of eugenics in the Tanton network; and, finally, a short piece illuminating how Tanton and others have frequently targeted faith traditions deemed too friendly to immigrants.

We are releasing these 11 profiles, along with this introductory essay, on Aug. 3, 2021, which is the second anniversary of the massacre of 23 people in an El Paso, Texas, Walmart, the deadliest attack on Latinos in American history. The self-confessed killer told police that he had intentionally targeted “Mexicans,” and in a separate online manifesto complained of a “Hispanic invasion” and “cultural and ethnic replacement,” ideas that are central to

Tanton and many of the groups he spawned. Our purpose is to underline how noxious ideology, like that nurtured by the Tanton network, can and frequently does ultimately lead to racist violence and political terrorism.

The key idea animating our group is that the extremism displayed by the Tanton network and related organizations has no place in the immigration debate. We absolutely support the idea of a serious debate on immigration, and hope to encourage moderate policies that protect our country while avoiding cruelty and contempt for immigrants. But we also believe that that debate should be guided by facts, not by racial animus and baseless conspiracy theories.

A very large number of organizations have done serious research on the Tanton network, and I have relied in great measure on their foundational early work. These organizations include the American Civil Liberties Union; the Anti-Defamation League; the Bridge Initiative of Georgetown University; the Center for American Progress; the Center for New Community; DiversityInc.; Right Wing Watch (a project of People for the American Way); the Southern Poverty Law Center; and the Western States Center. I have also relied on reporting by organizations including the Cato Institute; CNN; the *Dallas Morning News*; the *Detroit Free Press*; Fox News; *The Hill*; *Los Angeles Magazine*; *National Review*; NBC News; *The New Yorker*; *The New York Times*; *Politico*; the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*; *Vanity Fair*; *The Wall Street Journal*; the *Washington Examiner*; and *The Washington Post*.

Another resource is a book by Bob Worsley, a businessman, former Arizona state senator, and moderate Republican who successfully ran against the then-Arizona Senate president, an immigration extremist, in 2012. *The Horseshoe Virus: How the Anti-Immigrant Movement Spread From Left-Wing to Right-Wing America* (RealClear Publishing, 2020) is unusual in that it critically analyzes the Tanton network and its legacy from a conservative perspective.

Special thanks are owed to the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, whose leaders have graciously agreed to host these profiles, which we invite individuals and groups to reproduce on their own websites or in other venues. Our hope is that these research documents will provide useful material for all those, wherever they may stand on the political spectrum, who work toward a humane and rational reform of American immigration laws.