

Code Words in the Debate

Virtually every large-scale civil rights atrocity in U.S. history was preceded by a widespread campaign vilifying a specific ethnic or religious group. The most obvious was the justification for slavery, which characterized Africans as “subhuman.” Even following the emancipation of their descendants, ideologues posited the inherent inferiority of African Americans and paved the way for nearly a century of cruel Jim Crow laws. In the late 1800s, fear of a “yellow peril” resulted in the elimination of Asian immigration and prohibitions on Asian Americans’ rights to vote, hold office, or own property. In the 1930s, and again in the 1950s, concern about the “Wetback Menace” resulted in mass deportations of people suspected of being Mexicans, including many U.S. citizens. False concerns about a “Fifth Column” during World War II led to the internment of Japanese Americans.

In this historical context, it is clear that words have consequences. The standard propagandist’s technique for demonizing a target group is to define it as “the other.” As sociologists and social psychologists have documented, successfully defining a group as “the other” typically results in convincing a significant segment of the public that the target group (1) is an enemy that is dangerous and threatening; and/or (2) is inhuman, subhuman, or inherently inferior.¹ Accomplishing the former serves as justification for extreme action, even genocide, since the “larger public interest” is at risk. Once a group is widely accepted as “inhuman” or “inferior,” it allows the rest of society to

suspend its normal standards of right and wrong in judging actions taken against the target group.

As the U.S. immigration debate has become more polarized and virulent over the past few years, the rhetoric of anti-immigration advocates increasingly resembles an orchestrated, anti-Hispanic propaganda campaign. Recurring themes, code words, and buzzwords have emerged which take the immigration debate far from a world of reasoned, solution-oriented discourse on policy to an ugly underworld of extremist hate speech. Those who use the harshest rhetoric may insist that their targets are only “illegals,” those in the country without legal immigration status, but a close look at their language shows that the meaning and impact of their words and proposals go well beyond immigrants to the broader Hispanic American community.

NCLR has followed the use of certain words and phrases in the debate to demonize Hispanic immigrants, as well as those who might be perceived as immigrants. Some are clearly meant to appeal to base racial and cultural fears and prejudices. Others are designed to justify any action to combat illegal immigration, no matter how draconian or damaging they may be to individual rights, family values, the economy, or the country’s values. Some are subtle code words, others are more overtly hateful – all are harmful to people and anathema to reasoned debate. (Many public watchdog groups have been tracking this worrisome trend; see box.)

The following is an excerpt from the introduction of a 2007 report entitled *Immigrants Targeted: Extremist Rhetoric Moves into the Mainstream* by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL).²

The national conversation about immigration, both before and after the June 2007 defeat of the proposed immigration reform legislation in Congress, has become a deeply polarizing issue in American politics and public life.

While there are valid and sincere arguments on both sides of the issue, the debate has also been framed, at times, by vitriolic anti-immigrant – and particularly anti-Hispanic – rhetoric and propaganda. Purveyors of this extremist rhetoric use stereotypes and outright bigotry to target immigrants and hold them responsible for numerous societal ills.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which previously has documented how extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis have exploited the immigration issue to advance their own agenda, has become increasingly concerned about the virulent anti-immigrant and anti-Hispanic rhetoric employed by a handful of groups that have positioned themselves as legitimate, mainstream advocates against illegal immigration in America.

Unlike the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis, who make no attempt to hide their racism and bigotry, these anti-immigrant groups often use more subtle language to demonize immigrants and foreigners. They are frequently quoted in the media, have been called to testify before Congress, and often hold meetings with lawmakers and other public figures. However, under the guise of warning people about the impact of illegal immigration, these anti-immigrant groups often invoke the same dehumanizing, racist stereotypes as hate groups.

A closer look at the public record reveals that some of these supposedly mainstream organizations have disturbing links to, or relationships with, extremists in the anti-immigration movement. Often identified in the media or their mission statements as “anti-illegal immigration advocacy groups,” they attempt to distort the debate over immigration by fomenting fear and spreading unfounded propaganda through the use of several key tactics:

- Describing immigrants as “third world invaders,” who come to America to destroy our heritage, “colonize” the country and attack our “way of life.” This charge is used against Hispanics, Asians and other people of color.
- Using terminology that describes immigrants as part of “hordes” that “swarm” over the border. This dehumanizing language has become common.
- Portraying immigrants as carriers of diseases like leprosy, tuberculosis, Chagas disease (a potentially fatal parasitic disease), dengue fever, polio, malaria.
- Depicting immigrants as criminals, murderers, rapists, terrorists, and a danger to children and families.
- Propagating conspiracy theories about an alleged secret “reconquista” plot by Mexican immigrants to create a “greater Mexico” by seizing seven states in the American Southwest that once belonged to Mexico.

Anti-immigrant propaganda and rhetoric, once almost the exclusive domain of hate groups, is now part of the day-to-day lexicon used by anti-immigration advocacy organizations, politicians, and media figures, including many considered “mainstream.”

What follows are some of these words and phrases organized by category. All are direct quotes from individuals speaking on the record about immigrants, taken from media interviews, TV and radio broadcasts, public speeches, and Internet posts:

Race and Ethnicity

A remarkable number of commentators on immigration make explicitly race-based appeals, often accompanied by ethnic slurs or stereotypes.* One of the bolder articulators of these views was the late Samuel Francis, a writer for the anti-immigrant journal, *The Social Contract*, who was fired by the *Washington Times* in part for suggesting:

[Whites] must reassert our identity and our solidarity, and we must do so in explicitly racial terms through the articulation of a racial consciousness as Whites.

The civilization that we as Whites created in Europe and America could not have developed apart from the genetic endowments of the creating people, nor is there any reason to believe that civilization can be successfully transmitted to a different people.³

Many others articulate similar views. Glenn Spencer of American Border Patrol has said, “The Mexican Culture is based on deceit. Chicanos and

Mexicanos lie as a means of survival.” Barbara Coe of the California Coalition for Immigration Reform routinely refers to Mexicans as “savages.” Joe Turner of Save Our State – California has said, “Just because one believes in white separatism, that does not make them racist.”⁴

The widespread use of explicit or implicit appeals to race or ethnicity offends our country’s commitment to equal opportunity, and has other nefarious effects. By dehumanizing Latino immigrants, or alleging that they are inherently inferior, the message is that their interests need not be considered, or may be given short shrift, by policy-makers and other Americans. Equally harmful is that these race- and ethnicity-based appeals deliberately blur the distinction between those who are in the U.S. illegally and the 75% to 80% of Hispanics in the U.S. who are U.S. citizens or lawful residents. It thus places all Latinos, as well as those perceived to be Latinos, at risk of being targeted by government policy and/or individual actions.

* NCLR’s search has uncovered the following terms, among others, which are used to describe Hispanic immigrants: “free flow of Mexicans,” “scratchbacks” (term for “wetbacks” who come across a desert instead of a river), “Mexican breeders,” browner invasion,” “brown disease,” “stumpy little brown beasts,” “brown squat monsters,” “Mexican mob,” “dumb and violent,” “browning of America,” “savages,” “barbarians,” “beaners,” and “scum.”

War and Invasion

It is increasingly common for mainstream commentators to refer to the current immigration phenomenon as a “war” in which the U.S. is being “invaded.”

For example, frequent television commentator Pat Buchanan said on Fox News recently:

*You've got a wholesale invasion, the greatest invasion in human history, coming across your southern border, changing the composition and character of your country.*⁵

The widespread use of rhetoric and language associated with war, invasion, or conquest has similarly adverse consequences. Ultimately, it serves to justify virtually any policy or individual action carried out in the name of fighting illegal immigration, since a country at war typically suspends many of its traditional rights and protections in the name of protecting its existence. This rationale is invoked to justify actions – such as racial profiling and other civil rights violations, separation of families, and punishment of innocent children for the actions of their parents – that in “peace time” would at least be considered subjects appropriate for careful, deliberate public debate. “Invasion” rhetoric provides an implicit societal imprimatur for racial or nativist appeals and is even cited by

many convicted of hate crimes to justify their actions. In the face of government inaction on the policy front, this rhetoric also encourages vigilantism.

One of Lou Dobbs’ correspondents, for example, referred to a U.S. visit by Mexico’s then-President Vicente Fox as a “Mexican military incursion.”⁶

Consider this from CNN’s Jack Cafferty in response to the peaceful 2006 pro-immigrant rallies, which included hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens and legal residents:⁷

*Taxpayers who have surrendered highways, parks, sidewalks and a lot of television news time on all these cable news networks to mobs of illegal aliens are not happy about it.... America’s illegal aliens are becoming ever bolder. March through our streets and demand your rights. Excuse me? You have no rights here, and that includes the right to tie up our towns and cities and block our streets. At some point this could all turn very violent as Americans become fed up with the failure of their government to address the most pressing domestic issue of our time.*⁸

Conquest

A variant of this militaristic theme are references to “*La Reconquista*,” an antiquated metaphor used by Chicano scholars in the 1960s to refer to a mythical “*Aztlán*,” in the Southwest. Although it is difficult to find anyone in the Latino community outside of a few student groups or fringe groups that have ever espoused this idea, it appears to be gaining far more attention and notoriety in the context of the current immigration debate than it ever did as a scholarly doctrine.*

CNN television host Glenn Beck has stated:

*But what about the American Southwest? You've got people coming here that have no intention of being Americans. They say, you know, 'Hey, this is our land. We deserve it back.'*⁹

And this from regular Fox commentator Michelle Malkin in reference to street rallies by immigrants which occurred in 2006:

*We saw in April and May ... that supposed fringe come out into the mainstream. And it wasn't just a dozen folks who are ensconced in the ivory tower who believe that the Southwest is Aztlán and it belongs to them... I take the Mexican government at its word when it says that is exactly its plan. If you look at the Mexican consulates that are active, political lobbyists who have entrenched themselves in the American mainstream....*¹⁰

This framing has several pernicious effects, not the least of which is reinforcement of the “war and “invasion” frames noted above. It appeals to those already inclined to believe in paranoid conspiracies. It places the Mexican government as a central player in the alleged conspiracy, appealing to those critical of that country. It permits its adherents to claim that any expression of ethnic pride by Mexican immigrants or Mexican Americans is tantamount to treason.

But perhaps most troubling, this framing places all persons in the U.S. of Mexican origin, even U.S. citizens who can trace their ancestry in this country back many generations, as coconspirators in the alleged *Reconquista* plot, since such a scenario is plausible only if one presumes that Mexican Americans have a greater allegiance to Mexico than to the U.S. Thus, these code words, and the imagery associated with them, could be interpreted as the justification of wholesale violations of the civil and constitutional rights of U.S. citizens and legal immigrants, simply based on their ethnicity.

Take this comment on Fox News from Jim Gilchrist, cofounder of the Minuteman Project and frequent television guest:

*You're talking about a group that has as its agenda 'for the Mexican race, everything, for those outside the race, nothing.'*¹¹

* NCLR's search revealed frequent use of the following terms in describing the immigration phenomenon: “*La Reconquista*” (reconquest) is mainstream among Mexicans,” “*Aztlán* (Mexican homeland in current U.S.),” “*Aztlán* plot,” “lost sovereignty,” “losing the American Southwest,” “path to national suicide,” “existential crisis,” “plan to destroy America,” “race war,” and “enemy within.”

The allegations that a *reconquista* plot exists have been used to mischaracterize the work of the major Hispanic American civil rights institutions. Organizations such as NCLR and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) – which is a leading litigation, advocacy, and educational outreach institution – are increasingly described as actors in a so-called *reconquista* movement by anti-immigrant groups and media commentators, who dismiss decades of important work on civil rights, education, and other policy issues by questioning their loyalty to the United States.

At one point, CNN’s Lou Dobbs displayed an image prepared by the Council of Concerned Citizens, which has been long considered a hate group with White supremacist leanings, of the so-called *Aztlán* territory at risk of being “reconquered” by Mexico, and Fox’s *The O’Reilly Factor* gave a platform to the late Rep. Charlie Norwood (R-GA) to air his claims that NCLR was part of such a movement. Norwood later issued a public call for NCLR to renounce the *reconquista* along with a number of other extremist views it has never held. These views were repeated so often in the media and in correspondence to NCLR that it took the unusual step of posting a point-by-point rebuttal to Norwood’s accusations on its website. (<http://www.nclr.org/content/viewpoints/detail/42500/>)

Other Societal Ills

According to some anti-immigrant activists, immigrants are responsible for almost every societal ill imaginable. Regardless of the merits of the policy argument, the rhetoric used is dangerous; for example:

Disease

As ADL notes, references to Latino immigrants riddled with dangerous diseases are frequent. For example, on November 23, 2007, Michelle Dallacrose posted a video on the “Mothers Against Illegal Aliens” website, noting:

...with diseases such as mono, chagas, hepatitis, staff infections, and flesh eating diseases, which are noted in this report, it is reasonable for a reasonable person to conclude that many of these diseases

are here and on the rise because of our OPEN AND INSECURE BORDER with Mexico and the fact that Illegal Aliens are not subject to medical inspection or certification, as are legal applicants. With our children being exposed to and infected by the SUPERBUG in our schools, it should not be inconceivable that we are now being exposed and subjected to attacks by diseases which put our lives at risk because of learned bad behavior and unexceptable [sic] and prohibited cleaning practices which could kill us and our children while staying in any hotel or eating at any restaurant anywhere in America!!!!

The next time you eat in a restaurant or sleep in a hotel or motel...just remember to bring your own food, dishes, utensils [sic], glasses, towels, and maybe your own water. The person who cooked your meal or made your bed may very well be the one who picked your fruit and vegetables, yesterday....and we've heard the stories about what they do in the fields....haven't we?

But this view is also widely, and inaccurately, disseminated in the mainstream media. Lou Dobbs, for example, has inaccurately asserted that cases of leprosy in the U.S. have increased by 7,000 over the last three years; he has also alleged the existence of a direct link between the increase in leprosy to illegal immigration.

But according to the National Hansen's Disease Program, the 7,000 figure refers to cases over the last 30 years (not three), which represents a declining trend in the number of cases.

Regarding the potential link to immigration in general or illegal immigration in particular, the program's spokesperson speculated that it could "be a statistical fluctuation, or it could be the result of better data collection" but that, "in any event the 137 reported cases last year were fewer than in any year from 1975 to 1996."¹²

Remarkably, Dobbs has repeated this assertion even after being confronted with clear evidence to the contrary.¹³

Criminality

Many commentators inaccurately suggest that immigrants in general, and Latino immigrants in particular, have a higher proclivity to commit crime.* CNN's Glenn Beck suggests that Mexicans come from an inherently lawless culture:

*You want to leave Mexico for a reason, and that reason is that it is ...so riddled with drugs and corruption and the mob that you cannot raise a family. It is a country that has been overtaken by lawbreakers from the bottom to the top.*¹⁴

On one program, Lou Dobbs asserted that one-third of those in federal prisons are noncitizens,¹⁵ and then later said, "illegal aliens, those citizens – noncitizens taking up a third of our cells in our penitentiaries," a claim that subsequent analysis has proven to be both exaggerated and misleading.¹⁶

This view is commonly held and frequently repeated, despite the fact that not a single scholarly study has found that Hispanic immigrants commit crimes at a higher rate than other groups. In fact, a number of studies have come to the opposite conclusion.¹⁷

Economics and Welfare

There are numerous references in the debate to allegations that immigrants "steal jobs" from Americans and create other adverse economic

* NCLR's review found numerous references to immigrants as criminals, including terms such as "flotsam and jetsam that seeks to float into our territory," "lawlessness and chaos," "a beautiful nation turned into a jungle," "massive underground illegal element," "drug running," and "rampant criminality."

impacts. This is an area in which there is vigorous academic debate, though the preponderance of the evidence suggests that immigrants have an overall positive impact on the economy. Despite the substantial evidence to the contrary,¹⁸ Roy Beck of NumbersUSA had this to say about immigrant workers and the economy:

*Well, these are not jobs that we need foreign workers for. We don't need illegal workers. We've got 18 million Americans who cannot find a full-time job right now. The economy has adjusted to the fact that these 8 to 10 to 12 million illegal workers and their families are in the country, but it's been something that's been harmful for the economy as a whole.*¹⁹

Lou Dobbs also emphasizes this point; in discussing a report on rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, he said:

*...the Bush Administration has made it possible for tens of thousands of Gulf Coast reconstruction jobs that should be offered to residents who had to live through the disaster now looking to rebuild their lives, those jobs will instead be filled by illegal aliens. The fear is that New Orleans will turn into La Nueva Orleans, once proud city of working Americans displaced now by cheap, illegal, foreign labor.*²⁰

Increasingly, anti-immigration commentators assert that immigrants are accessing public benefits at a high rate or receiving benefits and breaks unavailable to other Americans. The accusation that undocumented immigrants are accessing social services is a perennial issue in

the immigration debate, despite the fact that they are categorically ineligible for all of the services provided at the federal level – except for emergency care – and most services provided by most states. The states that have adopted vigorous verification schemes to make extra sure that immigrants aren't accessing their programs improperly have spent millions of dollars to uncover almost zero fraudulent participation.

The benefits issue, especially with respect to health care, appears to be gaining traction as a political issue. Recently, the National Republican Campaign Committee ran a series of ads accusing one U.S. representative of supporting “free health care for illegals,”²¹ even though Congress has not considered any proposals to provide access to health care to undocumented immigrants, and immigrants are far less likely to seek health care than their native-born counterparts.²²

The attribution of numerous societal ills wholly unrelated to the presence of immigrants has numerous perverse effects. For one thing, almost none of the alleged problems can be linked through traditional academic research to immigration in general, or illegal immigration in particular, and proponents rarely bother to cite any evidence for their claims. As noted repeatedly above, when such purported evidence is analyzed, it is often found to be untrue, or at least wildly exaggerated.

This phenomenon reached what appears to be a new low during the recent wildfire outbreak in California, when unknown individuals constructed a fake CNN website which included a story falsely accusing a Latino student group of deliberately setting and taking responsibility for the fires.²³ The false story was posted on dozens of anti-immigrant websites and disseminated further through list servers, few of which have carried the subsequent CNN disclaimer.

Such distortions and falsehoods have multiple impacts – they provide convenient rationales for policy-makers and individuals to do “whatever it takes,” no matter how harmful, to combat illegal immigration. In some cases, they appear to be designed as a recruiting tactic, seeking to bring into the anti-immigrants ranks those individuals and groups whose principal interests may lie in

economics, crime, or health care. In other cases, this leads to the adoption of wholly unjustified and counterproductive public policies. But both individually and collectively, these false charges have the effect of further demonizing undocumented immigrants as well as legal immigrants and citizens.

Endnotes

1. There is a rich body of literature on the subject. See, for example, G. Koch, “Fear of the Other,” paper prepared for presentation at the Ministry of Reconciliation, Kings College, June 2002. For specific applications in the immigration context, see M.N. Marger, *Race and Ethnic Relations: American and Global Perspectives*, Wordsworth, 1994; K. Johnson, *The History of Racial Exclusion in Immigration Laws*, University of Dayton, <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/02rights/immigra09.htm>; and C. Bankston and D. Hidalgo, *Immigration in U.S. History*, Tulane University Press, February 2006;.
2. Anti-Defamation League, *Immigrants Targeted: Extremist Rhetoric Moves into the Mainstream* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, October 2007).
3. D. D’Souza, “Racism: It’s a White (and Black) Thing,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 1995. See also, H. Kurtz, “Washington Times Clips its Right Wing,” October 19, 1995.
4. *Immigrants Targeted: Extremist Rhetoric*.
5. Pat Buchanan, interview by Sean Hannity, *Hannity and Colmes*, Fox News Channel, November 26, 2007.
6. D. Leonhardt, “Truth, Fiction and Lou Dobbs,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2007.
7. NCLR has documented significant participation in the 2006 pro-immigrant rallies by Latino U.S. citizens. In a poll of Latino voters conducted in November of 2006, about one-third of Latino voters said that they or someone close to them had participated, and nearly half of young Latino voters reported that they or someone close to them had participated. <http://www.nclr.org/content/publications/detail/42997/>
8. Jack Cafferty, commentary, *The Situation Room*, CNN, November 10, 2006.
9. Glenn Beck, commentary, *The Glenn Beck Program*, CNN Headline News, November 28, 2007.
10. Michelle Malkin, interview by Bill O’Reilly, *The O’Reilly Factor*, Fox News Channel, August 23, 2006.
11. Jim Gilchrist, interview by Martha MacCallum, *The Live Desk*, Fox News Channel, October 8, 2006.
12. “Truth, Fiction and Lou Dobbs.”
13. Ibid.
14. Glenn Beck, commentary, *The Glenn Beck Program*, Premiere Radio Networks, March 27, 2006.
15. Lou Dobbs, commentary, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, November 3, 2003.

16. Exaggerated because the *federal* noncitizen incarceration rate had fallen to 24% in 2005 from 27% in 2001, meaning the federal rate was closer to a quarter than a third; misleading because immigration is itself a federal offense. The combined state-local noncitizen incarceration rate in 2005 was 6.4%, which is lower than the overall proportion of noncitizens in the population. See D. Leonhardt, "Immigrants and Prison," *New York Times*, May 30, 2007.
17. R. Rumbaut et al., *Debunking the Myth of Immigrant Criminality* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, June 1, 2006).
18. See, for example, *Immigration's Economic Impact* (Washington, DC: Council of Economic Advisers, June 20, 2007), which had three key findings: 1) On average, U.S. natives tend to benefit from immigration; 2) careful studies of the long-run fiscal effects conclude it is likely to have a modest, positive influence; and 3) skilled immigrants are likely to be especially beneficial to natives.
19. Roy Beck, interview by Lou Dobbs, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, CNN, December 17, 2003.
20. Lou Dobbs, commentary, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, CNN, April 15, 2006.
21. The ad can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWmvY-2y6QU>.
22. "Study finds immigrants' use of healthcare system lower than expected," *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 2007. See also, A. Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the Immigrant Menace* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, May 1995), which documents the repeated examples in U.S. history when immigrants have been falsely blamed for epidemics.
23. "CNN Orders Removal of Hoax Web Page," CNN.com, October 29, 2007. See also, "Fake CNN Story Blames 'Radical Hispanic Separatists' for California Fires," *urbanlegends.com*, October 30, 2007.