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Father of Anti-Immigration Movement Awaits History's Judgment

BY Jonathan Tilove
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John Tanton signs thank you letters to donors to U.S. Inc., the umbrella organization for a variety of projects working on immigration and related issues. (Photo by Lance Wynn)

PETOSKEY, Mich. -- John Tanton naps with his boots on.

It's not that he's about to be called into battle, though the image is an apt one. What with a kind of national war over immigration being waged of late, Tanton, white-thatched and straight-backed, is the veritable George Washington of the armies of restriction, the father of the modern immigration reform movement.

It's just more efficient leaving the boots on, and Tanton, an eye surgeon, now retired, didn't create a bare-bones, soup-to-nuts movement by wasting anything.

"I think I made a difference; I helped to set in motion a lot of the organizations on one side of the debate," says Tanton, 72, rested and ready in his low-rent office smack in the middle of downtown Petoskey.

"I don't want to sound self-congratulatory," he says. "I mean the old

saying is: He leads best who when the job is done finds people saying, 'We did this ourselves.'"

You needn't take his word for it.

There on the wall he's hung a framed copy of the 2002 Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report that identified him, big cover cartoon and all, as "the puppeteer," pulling all the strings of the "organized anti-immigration 'movement' in America" -- a sort of Jim Henson of hate -- "in bed" with the racist right.

He might quibble over every other word, but you get the point: "There are not many people who do what I do, quite frankly -- that's why you're sitting here."

From this pristine little city in the wilds of northwestern Michigan ("It's not the end of the world, but you can see it from here," he says), John Tanton created a social movement from scratch. He welcomed a reporter for a three-day visit this month to talk about it.

Perched on the shore of Lake Michigan, Petoskey is quaint and shiny with the prosperity of its well-heeled summer residents and thriving Methodist Chatauqua community. Its two main streets offer no hint that all is not well with Michigan and America's heartland. There are restaurants and cafes, two thriving independent bookstores, a health food store and a magnificent new public library. It is compact, pretty and entirely walkable. According to the 2000 census it is home to 6,080 people, 93 percent white. There are 216 foreign-born residents -- 160 from Europe, 50 from Canada and six from Latin America.

If it is a kind of throwback to an earlier De Tocqueville America, so too are the Tantons, John and his wife, Mary Lou, each a relentless figure of perpetual self-improvement and civic engagement. It is a life of great books, foreign policy discussions, Saturday salons, college classes in everything from the chemistry of chocolate to macroeconomics, nature study, German lessons, beekeeping, gardening, hiking and the pursuit of precious solitude. Nights, weekends and Mondays he has always set aside for community work -- and the creation of a movement.

Without great personal wealth or inherited advantage, Tanton, a conservationist to his core, built the intellectual and organizational infrastructure of that movement on his fundamental belief that America has too many people.

"When people say, 'What about those jobs Americans won't do?', my favorite answer is the city of Petoskey," says Tanton. "We have virtually no immigrant population around here and the garbage gets picked up, the streets are swept, we have all the functions of any city or urban area and they get taken care of just fine."

Bigger is not better. Growth is by no means good. Comfort is not all. Do your own chores.

"A man who chops his own wood is twice warmed," says Tanton. "Three times, if you count hauling the ashes."

"It gets back to an ethic that I like to say is not so anthropocentric (regarding humanity as the center of the universe)," says Tanton. "There are other forms of life that have some claim on things, for God's sake. It's just not what's good for us in the short term."

Before we proceed, Tanton insists that this story will be a waste of ink and paper if readers -- especially those already hostile to his point of view -- are not challenged to put a number on how many immigrants they would admit to the United States each year, and then specify whom. Consider it the price of admission for joining in the immigration debate.

His answer: about 200,000, made up of the immediate family of earlier immigrants and "our fair share of refugees." He likes 200,000 because that is about how many people emigrate each year. Equilibrium. In the long run he would like to see a gradual decline in the U.S. population until it settles into a "stationary state" of balance with the environment and available resources.

"That's my basic thing still, since I was a kid on the farm" -- born in Detroit, he spent his formative years in Sebawaing in the Thumb of Michigan -- "thinking about how we could walk more lightly on the land."

In 1964 he and Mary Lou settled in Petoskey and he started his ophthalmology practice.

In the '60s and '70s Tanton became active in the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club and Planned Parenthood, eventually serving as national president of Zero Population Growth.

Concern about the "population explosion" was trendy. Americans started having fewer babies. But the victory against population growth was short-lived. The immigration reforms of 1965 would bring many more immigrants to America, and the population climbed accordingly, both because of the immigrants themselves and their higher birthrates. For many environmentalists, support for immigration and multiculturalism trumped population concerns.

Filling the void, Tanton in 1979 founded the Federation for American Immigration Reform. Since then Tanton's fingerprints have been on dozens of groups and projects that attack "mass immigration" from every direction. Piece by piece he has created advocacy groups, a think tank, a journal and a press, gradually expanding the scope of his assault to include questions of language, culture and national unity. He is mostly a talent scout and idea man, who assiduously follows up on every lead. Some seeds sprout and others don't. Many other immigration reform organizations that he did not himself found, he helped fund, guide and inspire.

Truth to tell, the immigration restrictionists are still a pretty ragtag ensemble when compared with the big money of the foundation left and mercantile right that is arrayed against them on this issue.

More formidable still, according to Tanton, are the words of Emma Lazarus etched into the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty and also into the American psyche -- "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled

masses yearning to breathe free ... "

Tanton's own late father was Canadian, a self-described "nickel immigrant" for the five cents it cost to cross the river to Detroit.

But why, he wonders, should a descendant of immigrants feel any guiltier about limiting immigration than any human born should feel guilty about supporting contraception?

And what is the answer to Lazarus? The dismal science of Thomas Robert Malthus, the English economist who at the end of the 18th century predicted population would outstrip food production, with misery and vice the great leveler. Malthus' forecast was undone, at least in the industrial world, by technology and the opening of America to large-scale migration.

But, says Tanton, the world has no more continents to settle. Circumstances do change.

Come October, according to the Census Bureau, the U.S. population will hit 300 million. "That's twice what it was in 1950 when I was in high school and we were self-sufficient in petroleum," says Tanton. "Now we're importing 12 million barrels a day (and consuming 20 million)."

He places a metronome on his desk to beat out the relentless pace of population growth.

"The successful prophet," Tanton has written, "is the one whose prophecy fails because it is taken to heart."

Do people listen to the morbid knights of Malthus? Or recoil?

Consider Richard Lamm, a long and close associate who chairs the Federation for American Immigration Reform's advisory board and is best remembered for his 1984 statement as Colorado governor that "terminally ill people have a duty to die and get out of the way."

Or the ecologist Garrett Hardin, a great influence on Tanton, who in his classic 1968 essay "The Tragedy of the Commons," warned, "Freedom to breed will bring ruin to all."

In 2003, Hardin and his wife, both old and ill, committed suicide.

The next year, Mark Krikorian of the Center for Immigration Studies (a FAIR spinoff) and Roy Beck of NumbersUSA (incubated out of Tanton's Petoskey operation and now independent) were grilled about their connections to Tanton at a congressional hearing. Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, afterward offered for the Salt Lake Tribune his insight into the Tanton-esque mindset: "They are anti-immigrant because they don't like Mexicans coming here and having big families with babies that don't die, that grow up and participate in our society."

Devin Burghart of the Center for New Community, a faith-based non-profit in Chicago, is co-writing a book on the modern anti-immigration movement and crowns Tanton "the mastermind of contemporary nativism."

The smoking gun for Burghart, and for the Southern Poverty Law Center, is Wayne Lutton, a trustee with the white nationalist New Century Foundation who has been working for Tanton in Petoskey since 1993, co-authoring their 1994 book "The Immigration Invasion" and working on Tanton's journal The Social Contract, serving as its editor since 1998.

"(Tanton) casts a very wide net," says Lutton, an affable presence who describes himself as a "right-wing green."

John Rohe, the son of Jewish immigrants, is another senior partner in the operation, the unabashed house liberal and author of a book lionizing both John and Mary Lou Tanton.

The late Sen. Eugene McCarthy wrote the foreword to "The Immigration Invasion."

The stranger the bedfellows the better the coalition, Tanton figures.

But there is something else at work. There is, in fact, one realm in which Tanton abhors limits, and that is in the realm of ideas. Garrett Hardin called it stalking the wild taboo. Or, as Hardin wrote in The Social Contract two years before his death, "Heresy is no guarantee of truth, but let us not forget (as T. H. Huxley said) that every new truth begins as heresy."

The accusation of racism against him has lost its sting. "It's a motion for cloture," Tanton says, "to choke off debate."

In an oral history interview recorded in 1989, Tanton attributed his rather extraordinary resilience in the face of criticism to "my ability to rely on my own good opinion of myself, rather than seek the good opinions of others."

Suffering some effects of Parkinson's, Tanton now uses a voice-command computer to write his words. He is getting his papers in order, grooming his successors, and keeping his hand in the great immigration debate still unfolding. But mostly, he is awaiting the judgment of history.

A prophet, perhaps. A heretic, to be sure. A "good ancestor," he hopes.

"This," he says, "is my last interview."

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(Jonathan Tilove can be contacted at jonathan.tilove@newhouse.com.)