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VOICE FROM SANTA BARBARA

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The Politics of Hate



We are fortunate to live in a country with a Constitution that guarantees freedom to all people.

The Constitution of the United States does not discriminate against people based on whether they hold a foreign or domestic passport. A foreign national has the same right to free speech, the free pursuit of religious ideals, to bear arms, freedom from illegal search and seizure, and the right to due process as every U.S. citizen. Every person who steps foot on our soil enjoys constitutional protection, and that is the way it has been for as long as the United States has been a country.

An additional fundamental constitutional right is that any person born on U.S. soil is a U.S. citizen. If that were not the case, this would be a country of non-citizens who have no country. Only the blessed few with the purest of bloodlines would be citizens.

Rep. Brian Bilbray, R-Cal., has introduced a bill to create just such a caste system. He intends to create this American apartheid by denying "citizenship at birth to children born in the United States of parents who are not citizens or permanent resident aliens."

It's doubtful that such a bill would survive a constitutional challenge, considering that the 14th Amendment clearly states that, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States ..."

Rep. Mark Foley, R-Fla., has proposed overcoming the protection of the Constitution by amending it. For more than 222 years, the Constitution has only given rights except for the 18th Amendment, which in 1919 proscribed the "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors," and was repealed by the 21st Amendment in 1933.

Should Foley have his way, our proud document and way of life would again be cheapened by advancing the doctrine of an extremist few by using the Constitution to take away that which has always existed.

A recent guest commentary in the News-Press theorized that because the right to citizenship by birth on U.S. soil is so plainly stated in the 14th Amendment, that must be the origin of the right. That is not the case. The popular trivia question asks: "Who was the first president born in the United States?" The answer is Martin Van Buren, born 1782. Were his parents naturalized U.S. citizens? Who knows, or cares for that matter, Van Buren was born in the U.S. and therefore was a citizen.

When European immigrants came to the United States between independence in 1776 and the ratification of the 14th Amendment in 1868, did they worry about their immigration status and how that might affect their children's immigration status? Of course they didn't, because being born in the U.S. has always meant an unquestioned right to citizenship. A more likely source of this right is Article 11, Section 1 of the original Constitution ratified in 1789, that mandated that, "No person except a natural born Citizen ... shall be eligible to the Office of President."

The 14th Amendment made clear that former slaves were citizens. Bilbray and Foley are proposing that children of undocumented workers have even fewer rights than the recently freed slaves of the 1860s. Our country has slowly progressed forward in the area of civil rights since the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863; now is not the time to start going backward. Now is the time to contact Lois Capps and tell her you will stand with her in opposition to the politics of hate.

What is particularly disturbing about the Bilbray and Foley proposals, as well as the recent commentary in support of those proposals, is the return to the politics of hate that usually seems to only rear its ugly head in times of economic difficulty. Malcolm X said he would rather deal with whites from

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the South than from the North because they were at least honest about their hatred.

Please, let's be honest about what Bilbray's Citizenship Reform Act of 1999 really is — the "We Hate Foreigners, So We're Going to Do Everything We Can to Keep Them Out of the U.S. Act of 1999." Anyone who supports this act who says this isn't the case is either lying to himself or to his listener. It's quite clear in the language that the supporter of the act uses in his commentary.

The first tactic of hateful speech is to dehumanize the people being vilified. In this case, the writer repeatedly refers to undocumented workers as "illegals." No, these aren't people who are working hard to provide for their families, people with dreams and ambitions and the will to work and live in unimaginably difficult conditions so they can make a better life for their children. These aren't people without whose labor at less than market value our economy couldn't flourish. These aren't people who do the most demeaning work that U.S. citizens wouldn't even dream of doing. No, they are nothing more than "illegals."

The author refers to the innocent children of these workers as "demographic time bomb(s)." He does put this offensive term in quotes attributing it to "one expert." Perhaps this "expert" was found on the Internet at the website of the White Aryan Resistance or the Ku Klux Klan. Is this "time bomb" a human being, or simply the non-person recipient of hate-mongering accusations? Is this "time bomb" more likely a child that grows up knowing only the United States as home? A child that perhaps only speaks English and has never even been to his parents' country of origin. Maybe this child will grow up to marry someone with his same person-

without-a-nation status. Their children too will be without a country, despite being third generation Americans.

What is particularly offensive about immigrant bashing here in California is that many of the "time bombs" born here have more of a right to be here than us U.S. citizens. Between 10,000 and 25,000 years ago, the indigenous people of the Americas crossed the Bering Strait from Asia. Until a little more than 506 years ago, they lived free from interference from people from the other continents of the world — assuming that Lief Ericson, who was actually the first European to step foot in the Americas, had no contact with the citizens of the Americas when he landed in what is now Northeastern Canada in the year 1000.

In 1848, after having attacked Mexico with no provocation whatsoever, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed by a defeated Mexico. All of what is now the Southwest United States was taken from Mexico after an unprovoked invasion. Whether us U.S. citizens like it or not, we are the occupying colonists of an illegitimate invasion. We are no different than the Romans that subjected their provinces to their rule. We are no different than the Moors that occupied the Iberian Peninsula from 711 to 1992, and, yes, we are no different than the Nazis who occupied Europe during World War II. All of those conquerors imposed their culture, their law and their caste system upon those that they conquered.

So here we are my fellow citizens, a mere blip in the long history of the indigenous people of the Americas. Occupying their land and saying to them, because of our xenophobia, our representatives are trying to take away one of the few rights you have retained.

Fortunately, 210 years ago, our ancestors — that is, the few of us who are direct descendants of the founders of our country — had the wisdom to recognize that being born on the soil of our new country bestowed the rights of citizenship. Now the xenophobes, the immigrant bashers, the racists, have set out to destroy this right.

Us U.S. citizens must take the first step to rectifying our sins as the occupiers of another people's land, and as descendants of ruthless conquerors. We must realize that the right of U.S. citizenship of those born on U.S. soil is but the first gesture to show that we are capable of sharing that which we have stolen with those from whom we have stolen it.

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