

Of Borders and Ballots

2006 may be immigration reform's year.

By W. James Antle III

WILL IMMIGRATION be a major factor in this year's campaigns? Many poll watchers think so, calling it the gay marriage of 2006—the definitive social issue on many voters' minds despite the political class's manifest disinterest. Political analyst Jennifer Duffy, an editor of the *Cook Political Report*, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "Whether immigration dominates a race or shapes it, I expect every competitive race to engage on it on some level."

The midterm elections offer immigration reformers an unprecedented opportunity, but their success is hardly guaranteed. Already opponents of serious reform are working overtime to co-opt the issue by cloaking guest-workers programs in border-security rhetoric. Immigration restrictionists will need to go beyond running protest candidates and start winning more elections. Sending Washington a message matters less at this point than sending sympathetic legislators.

The December special election to fill the House seat vacated by California Republican Chris Cox illustrates both the potential and the problem. Former state Sen. John Campbell, a conventional Orange County Republican, would have cruised to an easy victory in the GOP-dominated district if immigration politics hadn't intruded.

Instead Jim Gilchrist, a founder of the Minuteman Project, entered the race on a third-party ticket. He raised \$600,000 and ended up getting 25 percent of the vote. Campbell won only after his campaign spent liberally to get likely supporters to fill out absentee ballots; Gilchrist actually

beat him among voters who turned out on election day. Ten days later, the House of Representatives voted 239 to 182 in favor of a tough immigration-enforcement bill with no amnesty provisions. At least some of those votes were motivated by fear of Gilchrist imitators. Perhaps Campbell himself was scared straight—he eventually modified his position on guest workers and repudiated past votes giving illegal aliens in-state tuition and recognizing Mexican consulate cards.

But there is more than one way to spin an election outcome. Just as the conventional wisdom transformed the success of California's anti-illegal-alien Proposition 187 into a morality tale about angry white Republicans, Gilchrist's loss will be portrayed as proof that immigration reform isn't really a winning issue. The Orange County GOP chairman scoffed to reporters, "It looks like it didn't work out for Jimmy-One-Note."

"I wasn't a one-issue candidate," Gilchrist retorts, rattling off his platform planks on Iraq and tax reform. "My opponents were no-issue candidates." He plans to run again in 2006; the only question that remains is who his next target will be. Under California law, Gilchrist is ineligible to re-register to run as a major-party candidate in this election cycle ("I'm a Reagan Republican disillusioned with my party," he says). That means he could seek a rematch against Campbell or run in another GOP-held district. Some supporters, however, would prefer to see him campaign statewide, challenging either Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) or Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Only when discussing Schwarzenegger does Gilchrist sound reluctant. "Personally, I like the governor," he says. "He's been very supportive of the Minuteman Project." But if Schwarzenegger were to break his pledge to veto drivers' licenses for illegal aliens, "I could see myself getting into that race." Gilchrist plans to make a decision at the end of January.

He won't be the only immigration-reform stalwart on the ballot this year. Canyon County Commissioner Robert Vasquez is running for Congress in Idaho. Vasquez has gained national notoriety for his creative efforts to combat illegal immigration. He sent the Mexican consulate a bill for over \$2 million to pay the costs the county incurred providing social services to illegals. He sought to use federal racketeering statutes against major employers of unlawful migrants. (A judge dismissed the lawsuit on Dec. 14.) And the Republican is critical of the Bush administration on this issue. "There can be no border security with any kind of a guest worker program," Vasquez told the Associated Press. "All that's going to do is increase the numbers coming across to get here in time for amnesty."

Vasquez's primary opponent disagrees. Sheila Sorensen favors a guest-workers program and calls the RICO lawsuits against the illegals' employers "ridiculous." Her campaign website touts businesses as "part of the immigration solution" and warns, "It's impossible to seal the borders." But Sorensen is careful to make her immigration-policy differences with Vasquez sound like a

matter of prudence rather than a dispute over the need to secure the borders. Despite her guest-workers stance, she claims to oppose amnesty and support tough enforcement measures.

Another immigration reformer to watch is Arizona Republican Randy Graf, who is running to succeed retiring Congressman Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.). Graf was a senior adviser to the committee that introduced Proposition 200, a successful ballot initiative aimed at curbing social services for illegal aliens. Every Republican in the state's congressional delegation opposed the measure, but it won 56 percent of the vote. In 2004, Graf left his position as majority whip in the Arizona House of Representatives to mount a primary challenge to Kolbe, winning 43 percent of the vote and carrying Cochise County despite being outspent more than 6 to 1. A major point of contention was Kolbe's sponsorship of guest-workers legislation.

"I consider guest-worker status for illegal aliens amnesty," says Graf. While announcing his retirement, Kolbe took a swing at his former primary challenger: "I'll be honest, I think we can do better than Randy Graf. ... A lot of his campaign is based on anti-Kolbe and anti-immigration." Several of the congressman's moderate allies are considering bids for the GOP nomination and some Democrats see the district, which only narrowly voted for President Bush in the last election, as a pickup opportunity.

Graf believes opponents are underestimating his general-election viability, pointing out that his immigration realism is augmented by conservative stands on other issues. "No one has been able to explain to me why I'm too conservative for this district," he says.

Candidates who are outspoken opponents of the immigration status quo have slowly been gaining political momentum. The Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus, chaired by Congressman Tom

Tancredo (R-Colo.), contains more than a third of the House Republican Conference. In recent immigration votes, the caucus's positions have been supported by the full House, including dozens of Democrats. They were able to defeat attempts to attach guest-workers programs to legislation that would enhance border and interior enforcement.

Some commentators claim that Tancredo is leading his followers over a cliff. Their evidence includes the fact that Gilchrist isn't headed to Congress and Jerry Kilgore's recent loss in Virginia. As Andrew Ferguson put it in his column for Bloomberg News, "Republican gubernatorial candidate Jerry Kilgore lost his bid against a liberal Democrat in the heavily Republican Commonwealth of Virginia after anchoring his campaign in a get-tough attitude toward illegal immigrants."

"Republicans embrace anti-immigrant fervor at their peril," wrote Leslie Sanchez, an expert on Hispanic market trends, in the *Washington Post*. "The party is perilously close to adopting as its immigration policy the hanging of a 'closed' sign on the border." The *Wall Street Journal* predictably editorialized, "But immigration is an issue, like trade, that always looks better in the polls than it does on election day; very few people vote because of it."

Except that even proponents of mass immigration want to be seen as immigration enforcers. Every major guest-workers proposal on Capitol Hill promises toughness at the border, and supporters abjure the amnesty label. Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean accuses Republicans of "scapegoating immigrants" but concedes "we all agree we need to strengthen our borders and enforce our immigration laws."

Politicians who are squeamish about border control can read the polls as well as anyone else. According to Gallup, 56 percent of Americans wanted the federal government to focus on enforce-

ment rather than amnesty, and 52 percent said even legal immigration was a net economic detriment to the country. If anything, these survey results probably understate the issue's salience. Republican strategist Frank Luntz told *Time*, "This is the kind of issue that the Silent Majority talks about in private but doesn't mention to pollsters."

Yet it is true that restrictionist candidates don't always do as well as public opinion suggests they should. Given the impact each electoral defeat has on their cause, immigration reformers would do well to ponder this disconnect.

"Some of my own friends in the immigration-reform movement didn't vote for me," recalls Joe Guzzardi, a VDARE columnist who ran for governor in California's 2003 recall election. Part of the problem is that many voters who support immigration control actually vote on the basis of other concerns. Tying immigration to related issues—wages, education, health care, and taxes—could reduce those numbers.

Another obstacle is that single-issue immigration candidates are often inexperienced campaigners. "An immigration reformer should show they are a person capable of being a senator or congressman in other respects," Guzzardi says.

Seasoned politicians, on the other hand, can get by with tough-sounding gestures while boasting lackluster voting records. Sen. Ben Nelson (D-Neb.), for example, received a fair amount of press coverage for his co-sponsorship of a border-control bill, but his Americans for Better Immigration career rating is a "D" while his recent votes scored a "D-". Reformers need to insist that immigration not simply be a wedge issue, but also an action item.

Can reformers make progress despite these factors? Gilchrist, for his part, is optimistic. "I was a guy with no political experience when I first ran," he says. "And I'm just the beginning." ■

The Irrepressible Mencken

The bad boy of Baltimore has lost none of his punch—or relevance.

By Daniel McCarthy

FOR A MAN dead 50 years this month, H.L. Mencken remains remarkably prolific. No fewer than three volumes of wholly original Mencken material have seen print since 1989—first *The Diary of H.L. Mencken*, published against his explicit instructions, and more recently the memoirs *Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work* and *My Life as Author and Editor*. With this trove of fresh Menckiana have come, inevitably, new biographies, beginning in 1994 with Fred Hobson's *Mencken: A Life*. Terry Teachout followed eight years later with *The Skeptic*. And last November brought a third, touted as the most comprehensive yet, Marion Elizabeth Rodgers's *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*. Between these books and their contrails, Mencken has not been this much a public figure since the stroke that ended his career in 1948.

And what a career it was. Starting in 1899 at the tender age of 19, Mencken was a newspaperman for nearly five decades, working—usually for one or another of the *Baltimore Sunpapers*—as reporter, drama critic, city editor, columnist, Sunday editor, and editor in chief. At the same time, he led a parallel life in magazines, first as book editor of *The Smart Set* and soon, with George Jean Nathan, as its co-editor from 1914 to 1923. For a decade thereafter he helmed *The American Mercury*, a political and cultural monthly he founded with Nathan and publisher Alfred Knopf. Along the way, he and Nathan had launched three lucrative pulp magazines simply as cash cows.

All that, and Mencken still found time to write a half-dozen original books, including the first American works on Shaw and Nietzsche, and to revise and edit collections of his own journalism and essays amounting to about a score more. His tremendous output, as much as his vituperative talent and fortitude in assailing any eminento he thought a fraud or poltroon, led Walter Lippmann to acknowledge him in 1926 as “the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people.” The *New York Times* went one better, calling him “the most powerful man in America.”

But his reputation flagged in the 1930s, as the old broadsides against Rotarians and Baptists failed to amuse in the depths of the Depression. The *Mercury's* circulation slumped, owing to Mencken's diminished appeal and the magazine's suddenly steep cover price of 50 cents. Sniping critics took to calling its editor “the late Mr. Mencken,” while former friends like Nathan and Theodore Dreiser, launching their own magazine, took cheap shots at him.

Worse was to come. With the approach of World War II, Mencken recalled the Hun-bashing of the last great war. He felt no love for the English and no hatred of the Germans—quite the opposite—and above all he valued his freedom to speak his mind. Rather than submit to censorship, he resigned from the *Sunpapers*, retiring from journalism to write his memoirs, including the two that would be published posthumously and three volumes of youthful reminiscences—

Happy Days, *Newspaper Days*, and *Heathen Days*—that would prove his most popular works yet.

Their success came at price. In the '20s, Mencken had seemed radical; in the '30s, hidebound. In the decades that followed, he was something else again—quaint. By 1955, the year before his death, friend and fellow journalist Alistair Cooke could suggest that Mencken was no serious writer at all but rather “a humorist. He helped along this misconception by constantly reminding people that he was a critic of ideas, which was true only as the ideas were made flesh. He was, in fact, a humorist by instinct and a superb craftsman by temperament.” That verdict stood for a quarter of a century, even after Charles Fecher's seminal re-evaluation of his political and literary ideas in *Mencken: A Study of His Thought*.

But beginning in 1981, when Mencken's diary was released from the time-lock he had placed it under for 25 years after his death, all of that changed. By then, the sort of language he used in describing Jews and racial minorities was no laughing matter. Moreover, the diary and the memoirs released from 35-year time-locks in 1991 could not be dismissed as japes; here were Mencken's considered reflections for posterity on his life and times. Humorist gave way to controversialist once more, and the critics who bristled at his racial and political heterodoxies soon exhumed Mencken's other works to pronounce them duds, too. If friends like Cooke had unwittingly damned him with faint praise, his enemies now paid the compli-