

EL PUEBLO UNIDO

by Michael Ventura

Letters at 3AM – May 28, 2006

Two facts tower above all others regarding U.S. immigration. The first foretells how this issue will eventually be resolved. The second measures the injustice that immigrants suffer. Yet in all that I've read and seen since the May 1st demonstrations, each of these facts was mentioned but once.

The first fact is: "The latest census reports... [that] nationwide nearly half the children under 5... are Latino or other minorities." [CNN, Wolf Blitzer's Situation Room, May 10]. This "half" is mostly Latino. Already California, New Mexico, and Texas have non-Anglo (mostly Latino) majorities; New York and Arizona are 40% non-Anglo (mostly Latino), as are Maryland, Mississippi, and Georgia. [*The Week*, August 26, 2005, p. 16]. Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois (among other weighty states) will likely sooner or later have non-Anglo majorities. The trend will continue. The outcome is obvious. No matter what happens now, eventually Hispanic-Americans will be this country's decisive voting block and immigration law will be whatever they want it to be. The political party that helps them now will be the political party of the future. The party that obstructs them will be doomed to insignificance for decades as this young generation grows up, remembers, and votes.

The second fact was noted by Anna Quindlen in *Newsweek* [May 15, p.78]: "Although the conventional wisdom is that immigrants are civic freeloaders, the woman with a sign that said I PAY TAXES was reflecting the truth. Millions of undocumented immigrants pay income taxes using a special identification number the IRS provides. They pay into the Social Security system, too, even though they're not eligible to collect benefits. In fact, they may be helping to keep the system afloat, with \$7 billion currently in a designated suspense file, much of which is believed to have come from undocumented workers."

Read that twice. In *practice*, the IRS -- that is, the federal government -- recognizes the legality of undocumented workers. Our government knows where millions of them work. Our government, and everyone who cashes a Social Security check, spends their money. It's well-known that many U.S. corporations pay no taxes, and the Bush GOP has once again cut taxes for the rich, but these "illegals" pay. Their labor and the fruit of their labor is *in practice* legal, with legal arrangements for tax collection -- but the workers themselves are illegal. That is outrageous. House Republicans voted to make felons of people who contribute to their salaries! The hypocrisy of ranting about "illegals" while pocketing their coin -- *that* should be illegal.

Since the federal government benefits from undocumented workers, something is owed those workers in return: Justice. The just resolution is simple. All immigrants who pay taxes should, immediately, be issued green cards. *Then* they can get at "the back of the line" for citizenship, with the not so unreasonable stipulation of learning English (immigrants do that anyway, eventually). As for the penalty-fine Bush proposes? Tax-paying immigrants have already paid it.

It is extraordinary that these two facts -- the first demographic, the second financial and governmental -- are virtually absent from both print and broadcast journalism. You don't expect immigrant-baiters like CNN's Lou Dobbs and Fox News' Brit Hume (and the right-wing radio ranters) to quote a fact that undercuts their arguments; intellectually, they are not honest people. But mainstream journalists and liberal columnists seem equally ignorant of these facts -- which baffled me until I looked at by-lines and "mastheads" (lists of a newspaper's personnel). May 15's *New York Times* news section: by my count, out of 24 by-line names, one might be Hispanic; May 16, of 41 by-lines, two were Hispanic and two might be. The paper has no regular Hispanic news columnists and seems to have no Hispanic national news editors. May 15's *Newsweek* had no Hispanic by-lines and *Time* had one (or it may have been the other way round); *US News and World Report*, none in the news section. As for the *Austin Chronicle* -- flip through these pages and see for yourself. Anglo broadcast news has Hispanic readers, but readers usually don't write

and edit. Of course, one can't always tell by the names. Bill Richardson, governor of New Mexico, is Hispanic; Michael Ventura, writer of this column, is not. By and large, though, names are a fairly decent indication. In news journalism, Hispanic-Americans have yet to be recruited -- or should the word be *included*? On this enormous issue of immigration, the journalistic community is pretty much out of the loop. Or, like me, peddling hard to catch up.

I was shocked out of my ignorance and complacency by the May 1st demonstration in Lubbock.

Lifelong residents of Lubbock tell me that this city, "the Hub of the Texas Panhandle," never before witnessed a demonstration 3000-strong. That was the figure quoted next day in the *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal* (May 2, p.1). The number seemed, to me, low. Extrapolating from a count of those within about a hundred feet of where I walked, and standing on a height to view the entire march, I estimated 4000-ish, maybe more. *At least* 3000, then. In Lubbock, probably for the first time in Panhandle history.

We gathered at St. Joseph's Catholic church, in the northeast area of the city. We walked behind a marvelous hand-painted banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe -- bright colors on a white background, brilliant in the sun. On either side of the Virgin, folks carried signs: VOTE - IT COUNTS. As was typical of the May 1st marches everywhere, there were lots of kids, tiny ones and mid-sized ones, running about or in strollers or on the shoulders of fathers or big brothers -- kids who will never forget this day, and who are being taught by example to stand up. Also typical, most Lubbock marchers were adults under, say, 32 -- which means this phenomenon isn't going away. Everyone was excited. Many were smiling. There was no sense of discomfort, no scent of fear. The atmosphere, happy! (I've walked many demonstrations, and only at Woodstock -- a concert, but also a kind of demonstration -- have I seen a mass of people *happy*.) There were many U.S. flags, some Latin American flags, many hand-made signs. An Anglo's read WE ALL COME FROM SOMEPLACE ELSE. A Latino's, JUSTICA PARA TODOS. Justice for all. And there were chants, and when one chant died down you never knew who'd start the next -- it might be an old woman, it might be a young man, it might be three high-school girls walking hand in hand. SI, SE PUEDE! Yes, it can be done! EL PUEBLO! UNIDO! JAMAS SERA VENCIDO! A people united will never be vanquished!

My father was 6 before he spoke his first English word. My mother was 11 or 12. She would become the first woman of her lineage to graduate college. They didn't often speak Italian or Sicilian around their kids because they didn't want us to face the crap they'd faced before they overcame their accents. If they were alive, they would have marched May 1st. In New York City when I was young, Sicilians weren't quite white and weren't quite not. It depended on the neighborhood. I guess I thought I was white -- because in 1973, to the shock of my naiveté, I discovered that in Lubbock, presto, I wasn't white anymore (if, indeed, I ever had been). An aged Anglo barber left a line of blood across the back of my neck to insure that his establishment would not again be sullied by this particular spic. In memory of him and those like him -- and for my parents, myself, and, yes, the honor of humanity -- I'd've marched here May 1st, if need be, in a wheelchair. And, in fact, in Lubbock some people did march in motorized chairs and in wheelchairs pushed by relatives and friends. (Someone should tell Republicans that such folk don't scare easy.)

When we gathered at the federal building, most speeches were pretty fine. A priest began with a prayer that God "keep in our hearts [Jesus' words], 'As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.'" Lubbock County Sheriff David Gutierrez sang the daylights out of "God Bless America" (with marchers joining in). And a graying Anglo judge named Rusty Ladd said this:

"Every founding father of this country broke the law; every escaped slave and anyone who helped that slave broke the law; every Texian (of any color) who fought for the independence of our state broke the law; all those civil rights marchers and protestors of the 1950s and 1960s broke the law and our nation is the better for their having done so... If our legislatures... pass any law... that tells me I cannot offer food or drink or medical attention or shelter to any neighbor of mine, or passes a law that restricts my ability to treat my fellow man with dignity and respect,

then save me a cell in the local jail -- for on that day I shall become a lawbreaker as well.”

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