

John Tanton has died. He made America less open to immigrants — and more open to Trump.

The nativist helped make anti-immigrant politics mainstream.

By Carly Goodman

As the crowd at President Trump's Wednesday rally chanted "Send her back!" after his torrent of accusations against Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.), it was clear that Trump had unleashed something malignant and dangerous across America.

The ugly rhetoric and calls for violence against immigrants and people of color on display Wednesday aren't new. Yet they have become particularly potent in recent years because the president has not just encouraged them but also worked to transform white nationalism into actual policy.

So, perhaps it is appropriate to note that on the day Trump's rally erupted into disturbing anti-immigrant chants, it was reported that John Tanton, the guiding force of the contemporary anti-immigration movement, had died. His legacy was clearly on display at Trump's most recent rally, but it didn't start there. Tanton helped Americans embrace nativist policies over the past 40 years by framing immigration as a threat to white America.

Tanton launched the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) in 1979. At the time, immigration, both legal and unauthorized, was on the rise. The 1965 Immigration Act had eliminated the national origins quotas that had limited immigration to European (and overwhelmingly white) countries since the 1920s. This policy change, alongside geopolitical and global economic shifts, brought new immigrants to the United States from Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Some groups, like David Duke's Klan Border Watch and other white power organizers, responded to newcomers violently. But on Capitol Hill, there was a desire to encourage immigration rather than restrict it. Some supported humanitarian refugee resettlement, while others wanted to recruit workers or help unite families. There was no appetite for a mass deportation force, which would threaten civil rights and make America less free. And so, Tanton wrote, "a countervailing force must be built."

Tanton was an unlikely leader for a radical movement. An ophthalmologist who lived and worked in Petoskey, Mich., Tanton was drawn to the immigration issue via an unusual path. An avid birdwatcher and beekeeper, Tanton joined the burgeoning environmental movement in the 1970s. He soon turned his attention to issues of population growth, seeing too many people overusing too few fragile resources. His solution? "Passive eugenics" and limits to the size of the human community. Since white native-born birthrates were dropping and the source of the country's population growth was immigration, Tanton believed that cutting immigration was critical.

But calling to restrict immigration was a sensitive subject. The public embraced the label "nation of immigrants" and, historically, immigration exclusion was shot through with racism and bigotry. Since the civil rights movement, excluding immigrants based on race or national origin was understood to be chauvinistic and backward. Tanton wanted to make sure FAIR was seen as "middle of the road" — not racist — and worked continuously to set it apart from the more emotional, hate-driven white nationalists who shared his goals.

FAIR — and a growing network of organizations founded or funded by Tanton, including the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), NumbersUSA and the Immigration Reform Law Institute (IRLI) — avoided explicit discussions of race. For example, when anti-immigration supporters were angry about the growing presence of Spanish language translations in official documents, FAIR didn't take on the issue of bilingualism. Rather, Tanton launched U.S. English, an organization that advocated for "official English" policies in states across the country. These initiatives sent a clear message to Spanish-speaking residents, immigrant and citizen alike, that they were unwelcome.

Although Tanton and his supporters wanted to dramatically curtail all immigration, particularly legal immigration, they tended to gain traction when they framed the issue around unauthorized immigration. It was

easier for the public to understand — illegal vs. legal — but this framing overlooked the more complicated reality, notably the ways that U.S. policies encouraged immigration, while limiting legal paths.

To gain even more authority, Tanton founded CIS to act as an independent-seeming “think tank” that could produce research with a “greater appearance of objectivity,” in the words of FAIR President Dan Stein. This approach helped the media and policymakers embrace its work.

By establishing FAIR, CIS and other groups, Tanton created an anti-immigration ecosystem that was otherwise absent in Washington and in the media. Newspapers published editorials that reflected FAIR’s thinking about immigration as a “flood” or “onslaught,” and then FAIR quickly sent copies to all members of Congress, creating the sense that there was consensus supporting restriction.

What was true for Congress was also true for journalism. While mainstream outlets such as “The Today Show” didn’t want to give fringe views a platform, they were happy to book staff from Tanton’s groups to come on the air and explain why the United States should turn immigrants away. These men wore suits and spoke authoritatively about complex legal issues. While the actual policy options were far more complicated than “restriction” vs. “open borders,” the public came to understand the issue in narrow, skewed terms.

As the end of the Cold War produced new migrations, rising ethnic conflict and resurgent nationalism globally, FAIR’s influence increased. After the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, FAIR helped make the event an immigration issue, going on “60 Minutes” to introduce the public to perils it saw as embedded within the U.S. asylum system.

It worked. Tanton’s groups helped advance a variety of anti-immigration legislation, including proposals to sharply curtail legal immigration and end birthright citizenship — and a trio of harsh laws that passed in 1996. But the consequences have been stark. The measures included in these laws have left millions of people who otherwise might have gained lawful status undocumented, and kept families apart and living under the threat of deportation. Since then, the United States has doubled down on border militarization, detention and deportation, making immigration primarily a security issue. Providing a pathway to citizenship for millions of people living without lawful status is consistently popular in public polls, but Tanton’s organizations have blocked all legislative efforts to create it.

While Tanton’s groups presented themselves as race-neutral, his work was anything but. In 1993, he wrote, “I’ve come to the point of view that for European-American society and culture to persist requires a European-American majority, and a clear one at that.” And through his Social Contract Press, Tanton helped to foster an intellectual environment for white nationalists and nativists to express themselves. Quarterly issues featured contributions from FAIR and CIS members along with thinkers of the far right. The press published an English language edition of “The Camp of the Saints,” the racist French novel that has inspired the alt-right. It was never just about numbers.

But his greatest legacy was creating a way of debating immigration without using overtly racist language. As Tanton wrote in 1978, “We plan to make the restriction of immigration a legitimate position for thinking people, and to have FAIR identified in the minds of leaders in the media, academia and government as speaking for a consensus of American thought and opinion.” He did just that.

Tanton made restriction palatable — to the media that echoed his framing, to policymakers who put forth legislation and proposals, and to the part of the public that wanted to pin society’s problems on a vulnerable population of immigrants.

Today Tanton’s ideas operate through our immigration policy and in how much of the public thinks about the issue. The concept of immigrant “removal” sounds legal, official and far-removed from the violence and rabidity of Trump’s campaign rallies, with angry cries of “send her back!” aimed at a sitting congresswoman. But they share the belief that the United States is, at its core, a white country.

One person can make an enormous difference. Tanton's life's work made severe immigration restriction thinkable, then mainstream. His organizations persist, and alumni from Tanton's groups now staff the Trump administration, advancing their radical vision in the halls of power. Tanton's legacy will be with us for some time. But perhaps a new vision — one that recognizes the humanity of everyone and treats immigrants with dignity and respect — can displace it now that he is gone.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/07/18/john-tanton-has-died-how-he-made-america-less-open-immigrants-more-open-trump/?utm_term=.3cbc932c0657