

Home of the Brave?

by James Moos

National Officer of the United Church of Christ

“Fear is the foundation of most governments,” John Adams wrote in his 1776 pamphlet *Thoughts on Government*. Fear is also the foundation of many political campaigns as we see in the current presidential election. Nowhere is this more evident than in the overheated rhetoric on immigration. Mass deportations, militarization of the southern border, higher walls and racial and religious discrimination are all seen as ways of “protecting” Americans against what has been characterized as hordes of drug dealing, job stealing, terrorizing criminals streaming into our country.

Individual stories of criminal acts committed by immigrants are presented as “proof” that immigrants (especially the undocumented) are dangerous. To the contrary, most studies comparing crime rates and immigration levels in American cities show that high rates of immigration do not translate into higher rates of crime. In fact, between 1990 and 2010 the foreign-born share of the U.S. population (including undocumented immigrants) rose significantly, even as the overall crime rate fell dramatically.

Ever since 9/11 the fear of terrorism has been a driving force in American politics, and that fear drives much of the immigration debate. The oft repeated slogan “not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims” is far from accurate. Only a small percentage of terrorist attacks in the U.S. have been committed by Muslims. An FBI study concluded that, between 1980 and 2005, 94% were carried out by non-Muslims. A 2014 study by the University of North Carolina concluded that, since 9/11, Muslim linked terrorists claimed the lives of 37 Americans, while 190,000 of our citizens were murdered over the same period. Even so, racial and religious criteria for entry into this country are suggested as ways to combat “the terrorist threat”—Arabs and Muslims are suspect, (white) Europeans and Christians are not.

Economic fear-mongering against immigrants is similarly fallacious. Claiming to take the side of American workers, anti-immigrant politicians accuse foreign-born workers of driving up unemployment and driving down wages. The facts speak differently. According to the labor-related *Economic Policy Institute*, there is a broad consensus by academic economists that the overall impact of immigrants on the wages of native-born workers has been small but positive; as the labor force expands, the overall economy also expands. In addition, according to the non-partisan *Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy*, undocumented residents paid an estimated \$11.84 billion in state and local taxes in 2013; legalizing their status would add another \$2.2 billion.

While not all politicians or candidates for political office lead with fear, fear has long been a political staple in matters of immigration and beyond. Apocalyptic language has been used to frighten the public in matters as diverse as communism, same-sex marriage and the IRS. John Adams said that fear rendered people in whom it predominates "...so stupid, and miserable, that Americans will not be likely to approve of any political institution which is founded on it." If only it were so.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Moos is a National Officer of the United Church of Christ.

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