

The New York Times

Dark Heritage

By: Bill Keller – May 12, 2013

Last week the Heritage Foundation delivered a report claiming that legalizing undocumented immigrants will create a more-or-less permanent underclass of benefit-sucking, wage-lowering, economy-crippling parasites, with a cost to American taxpayers of — megaphone, please — SIX POINT THREE TRILLION DOLLARS! The report was promptly denounced, not least by reputable conservative economists, for example here and here and here. Then one of the report's co-authors resigned from Heritage after The Washington Post discovered that he had once proposed blocking immigrants with low I.Q. scores. (More on that later.)

You might think that after such a reception the report would be quickly retired to the Bogus Science Hall of Fame. But not so fast. This one deserves a closer look.

The Heritage Foundation has never made a secret of its conservative political orientation, but it has generally tried to remain within plausible boundaries of analysis. Heritage gives you data with lots of spin, but tends to avoid being downright outlandish. On issues like health care and welfare reform, Heritage scholarship has made serious contributions to the public debate, whatever you think of the policies prescribed.

But on immigration, something else is going on. As the economist Douglas Holtz-Eakin, a former economic adviser to John McCain, pointed out at National Review Online, until 2006 the Heritage line on immigrants was comfortably within the mainstream: that immigrants are not welfare sponges but rather — as consumers, workers and creators of new businesses — they, and especially their children and grandchildren, are contributors to the national wealth. Then in 2007, with an immigration bill pending in Congress, Heritage analyst Robert Rector issued the first version of the hair-raising analysis that was repurposed last week.

Heritage's abrupt turn was a puzzle to many conservatives, including some within the Heritage family. Holtz-Eakin, who had been a Heritage fellow, told me he was mystified. Tim Kane, the Heritage analyst who had prepared the earlier, immigration-is-good report and is now chief economist at the Hudson Institute, said former colleagues at Heritage now worry that the new report will cast doubt on their other scholarship.

I'm not an economist (and neither is Robert Rector, the principal author of the new report), but I've discussed the analysis with six economists, some of them specialists in immigration policy, four of them staunch conservatives. Their consensus is that the report issued last week is not an objective quest for enlightenment, but 100 pages in service of a boldface headline. (SIX POINT THREE TRILLION DOLLARS!) It systematically overestimates the percentage of undocumented immigrants who will get citizenship, and exaggerates the likelihood that they will end up as wards of the welfare state. It underestimates the contribution these immigrants and their children will make to the country's wealth if they are allowed out of the shadows to work and study and open businesses without fear. It plays down the reality that these

immigrants *already* cost taxpayers many millions. And it assumes that for the duration of this supposed pig-out at the federal trough — 50 years is Rector's time frame — nothing much changes in government policy.

Rector points out that if you look closely, right there on page 33, he acknowledges a few factors that could bring down the cost of amnesty. This comes right after his longer list of factors that could make the costs even higher — which he told me is what he really believes. But none of these caveats changes the headline. SIX POINT THREE TRILLION etc.

I believe Rector is sincere in his conviction that amnesty will put a crushing burden on taxpayers. But I suspect that like many profoundly convinced people he sees what he wants to see. This is the same researcher who, according to my colleague Jason DeParle, once published a report claiming tens of thousands of poor people had Jacuzzis and swimming pools — extrapolating from a government survey that had found four. Before you laugh, you should know that Rector's views on the deadbeat poor had considerable influence on the shape of Bill Clinton's welfare reform, and that his earlier version of the costs-of-amnesty study helped kill immigration reform last time around. He is an ideological force in Washington.

But Rector's inflated numbers are not the worst thing about the Heritage report. His basic point, that integrating a large population of mostly poor people into the aboveground American economy will be expensive for at least a generation or two, is right, even if the costs will not be as shocking as he claims. The fundamental flaw is framing the immigration debate as essentially about the federal deficit. In fact, the case for immigration reform — and in particular the case for amnesty — is about rationalizing an inhumane and counterproductive system; about putting families that are now stunted by their illegal status on a path, not just to citizenship but to taxpaying productivity; about assimilation and mobility, innovation and entrepreneurship and, ultimately, about economic growth. Heritage is not just offering the wrong answer; it's obsessing on the wrong question.

There are other lessons you can take away from this episode. Here are three.

First, this is an unusually stark sign of the transformation of Washington's think tank culture into a more partisan archipelago of propaganda factories. In recent years, according to James McGann, director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, think tanks on both the right and the left have set up explicit lobbying arms, anointed leaders known not for academic credibility but for partisan ferocity, and picked their fights at least in part to help drive their fund-raising. Last year the right-wing billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch exercised their megadonors' droit du seigneur over the libertarian Cato Institute, ousting the longtime president. The announcement in December that Senator Jim DeMint, a Tea Party darling, would become Heritage's new president was not the beginning of a transformation, but its logical culmination. DeMint was enthusiastically front and center last week in the unveiling of the Heritage immigration report, even as scholars in his employ were telling friends they found the study embarrassing. I'm told the 2007 attack on immigration reform was gangbusters as a fund-raising message. Some speculate that this time around the issue might also make a nice platform for DeMint's possible presidential ambitions.

Second, what we are seeing here is not just an attack on immigration reform, but a declaration of war on Republicans who would like to make their party less strident and

meanspirited. To the hard right, which has been so ascendant in the G.O.P., the Republicans hoping to win Hispanic votes and soften their hardhearted image by liberating 11 million unlawful immigrants are apostates. “Marco Rubio does not understand any of this,” Rector said scornfully when we discussed the Heritage report. What is revealing is not that Rector thinks he is smarter than the Republican senator who is pushing immigration reform, but that he feels perfectly free to say so on the record.

And third, be wary of scholarship that can be twisted into the service of bigotry. The dark streak of nativist prejudice that lurks in this generally welcoming country has often been inflamed by questionable or selective research that played to popular fears and resentments: fear of competition for jobs and opportunity and resources, fear that immigration brings criminals and terrorists, and just plain fear of the other, the different, the foreign.

Which brings us to Rector’s co-author, Jason Richwine, whose 2009 doctoral dissertation was entitled “IQ and Immigration Policy.” Richwine argues that based on I.Q. tests today’s immigrants, especially Hispanic immigrants “lack the raw cognitive ability” of earlier European immigrants, and that these defects persist from generation to generation. “No one knows whether Hispanics will ever reach I.Q. parity with whites, but the prediction that new Hispanic immigrants will have low-I.Q. children and grandchildren is difficult to argue against.” This, he writes, leads to “underclass behavior” and “less social trust.” Whether differences in I.Q. are the result of culture, environment, genetics or biases in the testing is one of the great unresolved debates in social science, but Richwine is convinced that these differences justify a new program of social engineering. He concludes that new immigrants should be screened for intelligence. Because I.Q. testing is “a political nonstarter” owing to its past association with racism and eugenics, he suggests that lawmakers should use the euphemism “skill tests.” By the end of the week, even some of his dissertation advisers were backing away from the document, as David Weigel reported in a thoughtful exploration of the subject on Slate.

The idea that our immigration system should make more room for well-educated and highly skilled applicants is a fixture in most reform proposals and is the practice in many other countries. Heritage supports it, and so do the various bipartisan proposals in Congress, as a way to compete for and retain the world’s best talent. But Richwine’s proposal for an I.Q. admissions test, like Rector’s portrayal of immigrants as merely a costly encumbrance, gives comfort to those who would treat immigrants as an inferior species — not just freeloaders, but mentally deficient to boot. At least Heritage can console itself that it was not to blame for Richwine’s exercise in social Darwinism. That particular piece of work earned him a Ph.D. from Harvard.