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## Conservatives for Immigration Reform

*While the media focuses on the 'war' within the GOP over immigration, the real story is how committed the party is to reform.*

By: Kimberley A. Strassel – May 10, 2013

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The Heritage Foundation on Monday released a report designed to kill immigration reform. A few days later, nearly 30 leaders, hailing from the core of the conservative movement—think tanks, faith groups, political and advocacy organizations—signed a public letter backing the congressional process. Which got more notice?

The media glory in conflict, and so they devoted this week to the angry feud/war/battle in the GOP over immigration reform. The evidence? One research document from one think tank. The real news is the growing unity among conservative leaders and groups over the need to at least embrace the challenge of reform. This is no 2007.

At the height of that past fray over immigration—as restrictionists whipped up seething grass-roots anger against reform, drowning out proponents—Heritage released a similar report. It fueled a raging fire, and played a singular role in derailing reform.

This time the Heritage report—which purports to show how much a founding principle of America will "cost" taxpayers—was coolly dismissed by peers. Members of influential conservative groups—from Americans for Tax Reform to the Cato Institute to the American Action Forum—immediately held a press call demolishing the report's numbers, methodology and analysis.

These leaders then joined dozens of others—from the tea party, the American Conservative Union, the Manhattan Institute, the Southern Baptist Convention and more—to meet with Florida Sen. Marco Rubio to talk reform. Even those few attendees who remain opposed were there—engaged in honest dialogue. No napalm. No bazookas.

On Thursday came the public letter—with more names, from the Faith & Freedom Coalition, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, Latino groups, Catholic groups. TV and radio hosts that last time drove the frenzy have largely held their fire. Allies of reform, unlike in 2007, are holding regular calls and meetings, divvying up jobs, running ads. What makes this cooperation notable is that it is happening despite the Senate bill's flaws, and despite substantive policy disagreements among conservatives on everything from visas to border security to employer verification.

"This has been a unified approach, rather than a divisive approach," says Douglas Holtz-Eakin, the president of the American Action Forum. "And it reflects six or seven years of accumulated wisdom, that it will fall to conservatives to fix this problem."

That wisdom has mostly been about acknowledging there is a problem. The 2007 conservative cry of "deportation!" rested in an odd belief that U.S. jackboots could make the illegal problem disappear with a few energetic raids. The absurdity of that has sunk

in, helped along by Mitt Romney's more absurd call for "self-deportation." Mr. Rubio's point that today's illegal immigrants already have "de facto amnesty" has clarified for many conservatives the need to act.

That wisdom also reflects a keener grasp of how Barack Obama operates. The president wants citizenship for illegal immigrants, but he cares little for Republican concerns about the border, or fairness, or guest workers. His executive order stunt granting temporary status to young immigrants shows that he would happily "reshape the system by executive fiat, which is the last thing any conservative should want," notes Steven Law, president and CEO of American Crossroads.

The 2007 effort was driven by George W. Bush and John McCain—both of whom at that time inspired deep grass-roots ire. This time around, Mr. Rubio has the conservative street cred to draw in allies, while his outreach and his vow to steadily improve the Senate bill has given the process the room to proceed.

Nevertheless, immigration reform will be hard, maybe even impossible. It might still devolve into a conservative argy-bargy. Because there is a split in the GOP, one that is highlighting an important philosophical divide that transcends stale categories like "conservative" or "moderate" or "anti-amnesty" or "pro-business."

On the reform side, occupied by Mr. Rubio and growing numbers of conservatives, is a party that wants to rekindle its pro-growth roots, that has remembered it succeeds when it exudes optimism and solves problems. That is why the media judgment that the GOP is simply in search of "Hispanic votes" is trite. The right's budding embrace of reform reflects something bigger, an effort to reclaim principles that appeal to broad swaths of the public.

The other side—the Heritages, the National Reviews, the Jeff Sessions—are still channeling the party's more angry, reactive element. That bitterness—the obsession with income redistribution and equality, the fear-and-envy approach—are traditionally the remit of the far left of U.S. politics.

It isn't a winning philosophy, but it is an easy means to channel the rage of Americans frustrated by this presidency, by his welfare state, by the hard economic times. Which is why—despite the fewer voices today shouting this chorus—it remains a potent threat.

The test for the GOP now is which side wins out. That is why so many conservative leaders came out this week for efforts to fix our broken immigration system. They know that if they are to avoid a repeat of 2007, now comes the hard part.