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A Conservative Argues for Immigration Reform

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Editor's Note: Conservative Republican Tamar Jacoby, who has become one of the nation's leading advocates of immigration reform, says everything ultimately comes down to the economy. Marcelo Ballvé is a New York-based writer with New America Media.

For a decade, Tamar Jacoby has been on the frontlines of this country's immigration wars.

At first she was more of an observer, editing a book and writing essays and newspaper op-eds on the topic at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative research group in New York. Jacoby, a Republican, was a senior fellow there from 1989 to 2007.

"The biggest concern in my intellectual life has been how we as a country can hold together given our differences," she says. "You can't do that without looking at immigration."

Last year, her interest grew into far more than an academic pursuit. When immigration reform legislation was making its way through Congress, Jacoby noticed a disconnect between American businesses' need for more workers and their relative inaction on the issue. She began to take a more engaged role, and reached out to business leaders in states including Texas, Colorado, Arizona and Georgia, helping jump-start employer coalitions that would advocate for immigration reform in Congress. For months, she participated in conference calls and meetings. She pressed individual business owners to state their case. In Senate offices, she argued that immigration reform would make the country "more prosperous, more vital, it's going to make us stronger."

In the end, the legislation was defeated by an anti immigrant groundswell in her own party's right wing.

Despite the bipartisan legislative push and business lobbying, the pro-reform side had trouble making its message resonate with the public.

For Jacoby, 53, and many others involved in the push for reform, the bill's death triggered a phase of retrenchment. "It was a painful and bitter defeat for all of us," she says in a telephone interview from Washington, D.C., "and it sent us into a period of soul searching."

Jacoby was quickly back in the thick of the immigration battle with a new organization, ImmigrationWorks USA. Structured as a federation for pro-immigration business coalitions, ImmigrationWorks USA aims to bring to bear the views of a broad network of employers into the debate.

Linking immigration to prosperity could be the only argument to muster enough momentum to counteract immigration restrictionists.

"The economic argument will be the one that turns the American people around on this issue, which right now is so emotional and lacking in rational discussion," says Sergio Bendixen, Democratic pollster and president of Miami-based firm Bendixen & Associates.

In the last century of American public life, he says, issues that affect families' pocketbooks and quality of life have a proven track record of turning the tide on major issues. However, Bendixen believes it will take a sustained multimedia and public relations effort – on the order of Al Gore's crusade to raise awareness about global warming – for this message to sink in.

Businesses rely on immigrant workers for their existence as viable enterprises, argues Jacoby. It is nearly impossible to hire U.S. workers for many jobs (as farmhands, meatpackers, dishwashers, etc.). Unlike in 1960, when about half of all American men dropped out of high school, today nine in 10 graduate. Without a critical mass of unskilled U.S.-born workers, there's a labor shortage in many sectors of the economy.

In the introduction to her 2004 book, "Reinventing the Melting Pot: the New Immigrants and What It Means to Be American," Jacoby refers to this problem with the same unsentimental pragmatism that characterizes her general approach to the debate.

"Of course, however hard they work, many poor, ill-educated immigrants who start at the bottom of the ladder remain there throughout their lives," she writes. "This is not particularly surprising, and it may seem to vindicate those who claim that the United States today is importing a new lower class.

"But that's part of the point of our immigration policy: America no longer has this kind of working class, and it turns out that we need one." That's why Jacoby says employers are passionate about this. "Who's going to be telling their representative how to vote on this? The people who have a real stake in it, and that's small and mid-sized business."

Yet, as the current system works, American employers seem to be facing a choice between growing their business and obeying the law. According to Jacoby, the government issues about one million work visas a year, when the market's real need is probably closer to 1.5 million.

Her organization calls for tougher enforcement at the workplace and along the border. Jacoby is against the border wall, calling it "ridiculous" but adds, "I think we need a virtual wall, we need to know who's crossing the border."

The get-tough approach taken in recent years by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), in which thousands of undocumented workers were arrested in a wave of high-profile workplace raids, have become familiar images: cuffed immigrants filed out of their workplace and into police vans, families separated, mass deportations.

Jacoby says enforcement is indispensable, but believes the country's unrealistic immigration law is responsible for the current situation, in which agencies like ICE and the U.S. Border Patrol must grapple with some eight million undocumented workers who fill the vacuum in the labor market. "We're trying to enforce an unenforceable law," she says, "and that by definition leads to draconian and inhumane actions."

This year, her organization helped rally business groups to push back against governors and state legislatures that are cracking down on employers with undocumented workers on their payrolls. At least 12 states have passed employer sanctions—measures requiring employers to verify workers' immigration status or penalizing businesses hiring undocumented workers, according to the National Restaurant Association. A June 10 ImmigrationWorks USA report calls the debates over these state proposals "the new immigration battleground." In Mississippi this year, for example, state lawmakers, brushing aside businesses' complaints, passed a law requiring all employers to verify workers' status using the federal government's error-riddled E-Verify system.

They also made it a felony for an unauthorized worker to take a job in the state, which reportedly provoked an exodus of immigrant workers. Despite Mississippi's hardline legislation, the report concluded that the overall trend nationwide was away from the strictest forms of employer-targeted legislation, in part because of businesses' new activism on the issue. In several states, including Indiana and Kentucky, legislation was rejected. In Arizona, a tough existing law was scaled back in response to the business community's outcry. As state-based business coalitions grapple with local lawmakers' efforts to clamp down on immigration, ImmigrationWorks helps business groups connect to the broader movement. "I'll come in and say, 'Other states have done this before you. You're not alone, you don't have to reinvent the wheel,'" Jacoby says.

Immigration battles at the state level, though, are also preparation for the inevitable face-off when federal immigration reform resurfaces as a possibility. Both presidential candidates, Sens. John McCain and Barack Obama, have said they will prioritize it.

But supporters warn that, if one lesson is to be learned from last year's failed effort at reform, it's not to underestimate the intensity and outspokenness of those who vehemently oppose it. "Opposition—the over-my-dead-body opposition of the anti-immigrant right—was red hot," Jacoby wrote in The New York Daily News last year, shortly after immigration reform's death in the U.S. Senate. "Opponents were loud, angry, unrelenting—and terrifying to members of Congress, particularly those coming up soon for reelection."

The business-minded center-right has gushed over Jacoby, as when a column in The Economist called her "a beacon of light in a foggy debate." Moderates linked to both parties also laud her work.

Hispanic pollster Bendixen says, "I think Tamar Jacoby understands the immigration issue better than anyone else in the country."

Meanwhile, a blog post on Vdare.com, a Web site headed by immigration restrictionist Peter Brimelow, refers to her "an obnoxious robo-cheerleader for the big business open-borders side." What worries Jacoby about her opponents is not their rhetoric, but their proven ability to get their message into the media (where they tar every reform effort as "amnesty for illegals") as well as lawmakers' mailrooms, in-boxes, and phone banks. The immigration debate is transformed, Jacoby says, "when it becomes a two-sided debate in the center, which is where most Americans pay attention to politics."

Although very vocal, Jacoby estimates only 20 or 25 percent of the electorate is composed of those she describes as "Lou Dobbs voters"—a reference to the well-known CNN anchor who makes screeds on "broken borders" his hallmark and describes illegal immigration as an "invasion."

In her view, some 60 percent of voters—whom she calls the "silent middle"—are ambivalent about immigration, perhaps nervous about embarking on a solution, but aware the current system is untenable.

Jacoby thinks enough members of Congress realize the need for immigration reform and only require a friendly political climate to work out a new compromise and get it approved.

If local business owners speak out credibly, and with conviction, about a healthy economy's need for immigrants, this could have a ricochet on the ordinary voter, Jacoby says.

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