Chapter 3
The Early Politicization of the Illegal-Immigration Issue

The concern of this chapter is the genesis of the backlash against immigration, and illegal immigration in particular, which began in California in the early 1990s and later spread to the wider United States. Many intersecting factors contributed to the backlash, including a deteriorating economy, environmental worries, crime, the perceived welfare burden imposed by immigrants, and concerns about immigrants’ assimilability and threat to whites’ numerical and cultural dominance.

The United States’ and especially California’s demographic profile changed rapidly in the late twentieth century, mainly in response to the changes wrought by the 1965 immigration act discussed in the previous chapter. In the early part of the century immigrants from Europe constituted nearly 90 percent of new arrivals to the United States; by the century’s end it was less than 20 percent, with four out of every five coming from Latin America and Asia. By 1990 California was more than a quarter Latino, with around eight million persons of Latino origin living in the state. Latinos concentrated in the south of the state, with nearly 3.5 million in Los Angeles County alone. The Asian population also increased dramatically and by the early 1990s one in ten Californians was of Asian descent. Some of course were descended from old stock that came in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries before racist legislation closed the door on Asian immigration, but more were post-1965 arrivals from China, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, India, and Korea. Demographers predicted, and Californians discussed widely, that whites would become a minority in California in the early twenty-first century. Many whites that saw this as a threat blamed immigration as the cause. While the vast majority of Latino and Asian residents were citizens or legal immigrants, some, perhaps a million persons, were there illegally. Most of the undocumented were from Latin America, most of these were Mexican, and most arrived in the United States having slipped illegally across the 2,000 mile U.S.-Mexico border. America’s southern border became in the 1990s the site and symbol of the battle and failure to control illegal entry. It was, and remains, notoriously porous. The inability of the federal government to curtail illegal entry created considerable resentment among citizens, hundreds of...
whom took to parking their cars at night on a hill overlooking the border near San Diego, with headlights illuminated to pick out the desperate figures darting into El Norte. In the next decade such direct action became more organized in the form of Arizona’s Minuteman Project, an armed citizen militia which took border control into its own hands.

The numerical increase in the nonwhite population, which some commentators referred to dramatically as the Latinoization of California, helped engender a new cultural insecurity among the dominant Anglo group. On one everyday level, whites were confronted with different cultural practices: pets such as chickens, roosters, and goats, pastimes like cockfighting and sports such as soccer; street vendors selling Mexican food and trinkets; and a significant increase in Spanish-language books, newspapers, magazines, and television and radio stations.¹ The sounds, sights, and smells of southern California were changing, and many white residents found it strange, difficult, threatening even. On another level, the perceived Latinoization encouraged larger existential questions about California’s future. The fall of communism in Europe at the turn of the decade produced an upsurge in ethnic tensions and fighting, including genocide, as historic rivalries long suppressed by leftwing dictatorships burst bloodily forth. Commentators worried that California too could become Balkanized if its ethnic populations continued to expand while rejecting the dominant Anglo culture. In this debate, the apparent reluctance or inability of new immigrants to learn English figured large. Based more on supposition that fact—indeed, opinion polls show that a large majority of immigrants want to learn English—the perception was reinforced by California’s bilingual education program, in which non-English speaking schoolchildren were taught in their native language and only a small section of the day given over to formal English language instruction. Critics argued, and would later change the law in their favor by passing Proposition 227 in 1998, that bilingual programs risked ghettoizing students by stymieing their chances of learning English early and quickly.

In universities debate raged about what it meant to be American. The old descriptive and normative metaphor of the melting pot where immigrants assimilated to American culture while adding a little of their own to the mix was denounced by some academics as nothing less than racist. The intellectual driving force behind such ideas were the postmodern and post-structural turns in political thought, which argued that all cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and so on were of equal value and that membership in one or more of these groups defined individuals’ identity. But a multicultural society, where diversity is eulogized and different cultures sit side by side, challenges the process of Americanization. Affirmation action programs provided a further challenge to America’s philosophical foundations. Originally designed in the 1960s, affirmation action recognized that African Americans had been held back by institutional racism and that a helping hand was needed to give them a fair chance in life. Over time, however, the programs were widened to include women and other racial and ethnic minorities, but the motivations also changed. Were once it was about righting past wrongs, the rise of the multiculturalism encouraged proponents to justify affirmative action in terms of promoting diversity, but a diversity defined by individuals’ membership