

Sulzberger's Voice How Arthur Sulzberger Radicalized the New York Times Editorial Page on Immigration

By Jerry Kammer

In 2006, as marching protesters filled the streets of Los Angeles to demand rights for illegal immigrants, the *New York Times* published an editorial that glowed with approval.

“Something powerful pulled more than half a million people onto the streets of Los Angeles on Saturday, turning 26 downtown blocks into a pulsing sea of white T-shirts and American flags,” the editorial began. “A veteran police commander said that in 38 years he had never seen a march so huge.”¹

The editorial went on to declare that “[t]he marchers recognize — as much of the nation seems not to — the urgency of comprehensive immigration reform to the nation’s future. Their indignation is mixed with pride in their work and hunger for fair treatment.”

The editorial omitted an inconvenient fact, one that was important enough to be included by other newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Orange County Register*, and the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*.

As the *Los Angeles Times* reported, the marchers stood “amid a sea of American and Mexican flags.”² The Mexican flags didn’t make it into the *New York Times*. Neither did the flags of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, which were also abundant in the streets.

Syndicated columnist Ruben Navarrette explained why this is significant: “As a Mexican-American, on this issue I come down on the American side of the hyphen. I think student demonstrators made a huge mistake by hoisting Mexican flags, and that — as a rule — people who demand rights from one country shouldn’t wave the flag of another. It’s bad manners — and even worse civics.”³

The omission made the *New York Times* editorial a better fit for its civic vision. The editorial board at a newspaper whose front page declares its commitment to “all the news that’s fit to print” was blind to evidence that didn’t fit its bias.

That bias is founded in the *New York Times*’s determined advocacy for the tolerance and inclusiveness that are essential in a pluralistic, democratic society.

But the *Times* has carried its good intentions to a destructive extreme. Its editorials have poisoned the national discussion of a complex and emotional issue.

The *Times* has rejected the consensus-building moderation that used to characterize the policy prescriptions it presented on its editorial page. In the 1980s the liberal political philosophy that has long characterized that page was tempered by recognition of the risks of mass illegal immigration, particularly of unskilled persons who work in low-paying jobs.

Jerry Kammer, a senior research fellow at CIS, won many awards in his 30 years as a journalist. In 2006 he received a Pulitzer Prize and the George Polk Award for his work in helping uncover the bribery scandal whose central figure was Rep. Randy “Duke” Cunningham. His work in Mexico for the Arizona Republic was honored with the 1989 Robert F. Kennedy Award for humanitarian journalism.



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In 1981, for instance, as Congress began the long and often raucous debate that finally produced the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, a *Times* editorial observed that: “Uncounted millions cross our porous borders in search of a better life. Like prior immigrants, many enrich our land with industry. But their numbers are so great that they also strain community resources and threaten the jobs and well-being of those who preceded them.”⁴

Two years later an editorial stated: “For reasons of vitality, humanity and history, America wants and needs immigrants. What it does not need is such an uncontrollable flood of illegal migrants that it tries public patience and foments a backlash against all newcomers. That’s the genuine danger.” The editorial was headlined “Time to Turn the Illegal Tide.”⁵

The nuance, moderation, and long-term perspective of those editorials helped to build the national consensus for the 1986 legislation. But the feared backlash came anyway because IRCA failed in its promise to combine a one-time-only amnesty with worksite enforcement that would stop future illegal immigration.

While the amnesty went ahead, enforcement was reduced to farce. Workers with easily obtainable bogus documents pretended to be legal, and employers pretended to believe them. Instead of containing illegal immigration, IRCA became the engine of its roaring expansion as many who received amnesty moved across the country and established networks that attracted millions more who came illegally.

By 2007, the population of illegal immigrants nationwide was estimated at 10 to 12 million. By then the *Times* had stopped trying to balance humanitarian values with the negative effects of illegal immigration. Its editorial page has proclaimed a national “duty to welcome immigrants,”⁶ regardless of their legal status. It has stated flatly that “each and every one [of the more than 10 million illegal immigrants] deserves a chance to get right with the law.”⁷

Far from seeking to turn the illegal tide, the *Times* welcomes it, defends it, and encourages it. Rather than advocating compromise on immigration policy, the *Times* stokes confrontation. Adding insult to injury, it attacks the character of those who disagree.

For instance, Lawrence Downes, the lead *Times* editorial writer on immigration, heaps scorn on those who express worry about the ability of unskilled and poorly educated immigrants to integrate into American life. He considers such concerns to be a mask for bigots, proof of nativist hostility. He calls them an “effective substitute” for the open racism that has been driven from the public square.⁸

In late 2012, a *Times* editorial touted its inclusive ideas for reform with this warning: “The hard-liners against reform — including the white-culture alarmists and the closet racists — have not gone away.”⁹

This claim to see evil motivations among those it criticizes is the flip side of the editorial page’s ability *not* to see non-American flags waved by those it supports. It is a familiar trope at the *Times*.

The 2012 editorial provoked former New York City Mayor Ed Koch to write an angry response. Said Koch, “I have never seen a more intolerant editorial in language and tone appear in the *New York Times*.”¹⁰

This stridency matters because the *Times* represents the pinnacle of American journalism. Its editorials are followed by engaged citizens across the political spectrum, as the paper’s first public editor, Daniel Okrent observed in 2004.

Okrent wrote that the editorial page is “so thoroughly saturated in liberal theology that when it occasionally strays from that point of view the shocked yelps from the left overwhelm even the ceaseless rumble of disapproval from the right.”¹¹

The Left-Right Divide

Following up on Okrent's point, it is important to note that viewpoints on immigration policy do not lend themselves to neat ideological distribution. Both principal sides — those who want expansive immigration policy and those who want to limit it — offer an eclectic mix of participants.

While the *Times's* support for expansive immigration draws on the classic liberal concern for the vulnerable, its policy preferences are close to those of the libertarian *Wall Street Journal*.

The *Journal* calls for open borders as it professes belief in “capitalism, free markets, and free people.”¹² Ethnic lobby groups, church organizations, and some labor organizations join its list of allies, along with employer groups like the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Meanwhile, those who favor more restrictive immigration policies include social conservatives concerned about national cohesion and the rule of law as well as liberals who warn about wage competition with American workers and environmentalists concerned about population growth.

The environmentalist group includes Philip Cafaro, a Colorado State University philosophy professor and board member of Progressives for Immigration Reform. Cafaro says the *Times* “slanders those they disagree with, which — given their immense influence — has emboldened all kinds of lesser lights to follow suit.”¹³

Restrictionists, meanwhile, are hounded by their association — whether direct or remote — with their own version of lesser lights, particularly those whose vehement views are truly nativist and bigoted and destructive of civil debate.

In 1982, Jack Rosenthal won a Pulitzer Prize for editorials in the *Times* that included this fundamental question about immigration policy: “Who should decide which foreigners are allowed into the United States, the foreigners or the United States? In a responsible society, the question would answer itself. But that's not the way things now work in the United States.”¹⁴

Rosenthal, who was the editorial page editor from 1986 to 1993, observed that editorials reflect the zeitgeist. “They are a function of their times,” he said in a 2012 interview. He added that IRCA was forged “at a time when the public understood, as it seems not to understand now, that you need compromise.”

That is certainly true. But the *Times* has compounded the problem, hardening battle lines on the left. Its positions have become so rigid that they undermine efforts to reach a compromise as destructively as those who denounce all proposals to legalize illegal immigrants as abject surrender to lawbreakers.

The driving force for this transformation of the most important American newspaper from moderate and reasoned to hard-line and intemperate is not hard to locate. It can be found at the top of the *Times* masthead.

On that lofty perch one name occupies a line all its own. It is the name of the man who became publisher in 1992 and declared his determination to shake up the editorial page because he thought it was too moderate and lacking in the passion and moral certitude he preferred.

That man is Arthur O. Sulzberger, Jr. As publisher he sets the *Times's* editorial course on important policy issues. The editorial page is his voice.

From Insecurity, through Privilege, to Defiance and Absolutism

The story of how Arthur Sulzberger became publisher of the *New York Times* is straightforward. He inherited the job from his father. He continued a line of succession begun by his great grandfather, Adolph Simon Ochs, who bought the paper in 1896.

The story of how he became the man who radicalized the paper's editorial page — especially on immigration — is far more complex and interesting.

Former *Times* reporter Alex Jones and his wife Susan Tift described the formation of Sulzberger's character in *The Trust: The Private and Powerful Family Behind the New York Times*. The book was hailed in the *Los Angeles Times* as “important for an understanding of a great institution.”¹⁵

The authors write that Sulzberger was “small and slight for his age, afflicted by allergies,” a child of divorce who was “subdued and lacking in confidence.”¹⁶ But during his prep school years he learned self-assurance and assertiveness through Outward Bound, the organization that describes itself as “the premier provider of experience-based outdoor leadership programs for youth and adults.”¹⁷

When he was a senior at Tufts University in Boston, Sulzberger began dating Gail Gregg, the woman who would become his wife. As described in *The Trust*, “She was forceful and self-assured — the very strengths he had tried to cultivate in himself, though his way of expressing them tended to be cocky and confrontational.”¹⁸

Like many in his generation, Sulzberger protested against the Vietnam War. Years later he said he hadn't worked on the Tufts student newspaper because “we had a war to stop.”¹⁹ He was arrested twice for civil disobedience. His father was so concerned by the second episode that he came up from New York for a visit. Their meeting revealed the depth of the young man's dissent.

As they walked through Boston Common, *Times* publisher and Marine Corps veteran Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Sr. asked his son this question: “If a young American soldier comes upon a North Vietnamese soldier, which would you want to see get shot?”

Tift and Jones said young Arthur replied “defiantly,” telling his stunned father, “I would want to see the American get shot. It's the other guy's country; we shouldn't be there.”²⁰

The response was “calculatedly provocative,” wrote Tift and Jones. They saw the urge that produced it as a fixed part of Arthur's personality. “They said he was “inflexible and viewed the world in black and white.”²¹

A 2009 *Vanity Fair* article by journalist Mark Bowden provided another look at Sulzberger's inclination to absolutism.²² Bowden wrote that in Sulzberger's office was a framed World War II quotation from Winston Churchill: “Never never never give up.”

Bowden noted, however, that is not what Churchill said. What Churchill actually told the British people was: “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never — in nothing, great or small, large or petty — never give in.” But Bowden reported that Churchill added a qualifier to his call for heroic defiance. The British people should never give in, Churchill said, “except to convictions of honor and good sense.”

In the Sulzberger era, there would be no room for qualifiers of the paper's advocacy for expansive immigration policy. It would disavow the nuance of the 1980s editorials.

The *Times's* editorial calls for immigration reform reflected a conviction that Sulzberger expressed in his 2006 commencement address at the State University of New York at New Paltz.²³

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“You weren’t supposed to be graduating into a world where we are still fighting for fundamental human rights, whether it’s the rights of immigrants to start a new life; or the rights of gays to marry; or the rights of women to choose,” Sulzberger told the graduates.

He said fateful decisions lay before them. “You will choose at each point whether to be bold or hesitant, inclusive or elitist, generous or stingy.”

Sulzberger’s most sacred value is inclusiveness. For him it is synonymous with diversity, which more than two decades ago he called “the single most important issue” facing the *Times*.²⁴ He is committed to using his position to be the champion of those who have felt the sting of discrimination, whether because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or immigration status.

This is a fundamentally admirable value that he has taken to an extreme with *Times* editorials on U.S. immigration policy. That policy affects the ambitions of tens of millions of people who yearn for the world’s most coveted document: a green card conveying the right to permanent residence in the United States.

No Shades of Gray

In 1987, at the age of 35, Arthur Sulzberger Jr. was named to the newly created position of assistant publisher of the *New York Times*. As it announced the move, the *Times* reported that he would “work closely with Max Frankel, executive editor; Jack Rosenthal, editor of the editorial page, and Lance R. Primis, executive vice president and general manager.”²⁵

The Trust reports that Frankel tried to show the impetuous Sulzberger the value of self-restraint. According to the book, Frankel “took it as one of his duties to help him distinguish shades of gray. Whenever he saw Arthur Jr. make absolute declarations, he diplomatically worked behind the scenes to rein him in.”²⁶

Sulzberger’s politics tend to be uncompromising. But his lifestyle shows flexibility in reconciling his populist politics with his appreciation of the good life provided by the Sulzberger name.

Jones and Tifft say he scorned New York’s Upper East Side — where he had grown up — as “little more than a gleaming ghetto of limousines, fur coats, and small yapping dogs” and as “the place where all the people he doesn’t like live.” They say he “self-consciously chose to live on the Upper West Side, where residents valued their integrated neighborhoods and long history of social activism.”²⁷

Sulzberger cultivates an image that bursts straight from the Outward Bound promise to inculcate “real leadership skills and the courage to follow our own path.”²⁸

Ken Auletta reported in *The New Yorker* about a 2005 speech in which Sulzberger expressed his gratitude to the organization:

“Sulzberger recalled how, when he was 16, Outward Bound changed his life. He had felt lost and insecure, he said — a child of divorce, shuttling between two homes and, alone in the wilderness, with the help of Outward Bound mentors, he learned self-reliance.”²⁹

Auletta said Sulzberger became “a man of remarkable self-assurance,” a publisher who walked through the *Times* offices “in colorful striped shirts and bright suspenders.”³⁰ Jones and Tifft said Sulzberger became “cocky and confrontational” as he pursued his determination to bring cultural revolution to the *Times*. “From the moment he became publisher he was like a silversmith,” they write, “noisily banging the *New York Times* into a shape that reflected his own values, beliefs, and personality.”³¹

Shaking Up the Editorial Page

Nowhere was this transformative urge applied more quickly than at the editorial page, which according to Auletta, “had been criticized for being too predictable, too fastidious.”³²

The publisher who had transformed himself from a timid youth to an assertive adult focused on the editorial page right after becoming publisher in 1992. As Auletta put it, Sulzberger “wanted a livelier, more assertive, populist page.”³³ Later Sulzberger himself would say, “We needed passion.”³⁴

Sulzberger picked a blunt, tough-talking native Alabamian named Howell Raines to be the new editorial page editor. Jones and Tift wrote that Sulzberger regarded Raines as “a kindred spirit: a contrarian whose values had taken shape during the 1960s, who viewed the world as a moral battleground.”³⁵ Jones later told *Editor and Publisher*: “What (Sulzberger) knew about him was that he was aggressive and opinionated — just like Arthur.”³⁶

Sulzberger was delighted with the swaggering, moralistic certitude that Raines brought to the editorial page. An editorial “can’t merely be another analysis,” Sulzberger said. “It’s got to be more directive, in my judgment, than that.”³⁷

Speaking with Ken Auletta of *The New Yorker*, Sulzberger said, “There’s a relentlessness about Howell I admire.”³⁸ He praised Raines’s talent for “ratcheting up its level of staking out clearly defined ground — of stating its views without a lot of shading.”³⁹

Raines became known for the thunderous moralism of his editorials, particularly those attacking President Clinton from the left. “Howell eats gunpowder for breakfast,” said *Times* reporter Michael Wines.⁴⁰

The abrupt shift to an overtly aggressive tone caused grumbling within the editorial board. “When you spend a lot of paragraphs bashing people, you don’t spend a lot of paragraphs making sound arguments,” a board member told the *Washington Post*, declining to be identified.⁴¹

While the radical new spirit thrilled Sulzberger, it offended the pride of some editorial page alumni. Max Frankel, who had edited the editorial page from 1977 to 1986, struck back in a 1999 memoir. Frankel disputed the notion that he had been too even-handed, and that the editorials had taken on a tedious “on the one-hand, and on the other” quality.

Wrote Frankel: “The myth took root even inside the *Times* and led Howell Raines, one of my successors, to promise rashly that his page would print only ‘one-handed’ opinions. His fist did rattle the china for a while, but if he had read more of yesterday’s papers, he’d have recognized that mere invective is no substitute for vigor and verve. We had plenty of both.”⁴²

Tift and Jones wrote that Sulzberger’s revolution took another notorious turn as he introduced the Sunday Styles Section. The move was an attempt to win new readers and advertisers with edginess and barrier-busting features about “gay rodeos, a clothing store specializing in lace-up ‘bondage trousers’ for skinheads and dominatrices, and the joys of Billy Idol and cyberpunk.”⁴³

With a glee that was openly defiant and eagerly confrontational, Sulzberger reveled in the effort to tart up the old Gray Lady. “Young readers had better like it, because all the older ones will drop dead when they see it,” he said.⁴⁴

The section would fail from the weight of its outrageousness, but not before Sulzberger delighted in its revolutionary excess. Tift and Jones describe the time when an elderly gentleman approached Sulzberger at a social function, expressing the concern that the *Times* had become “unTimesean.” They wrote that Sulzberger “thanked him and later told a crowd of people that alienating older white male readers meant ‘we’re doing something right.’”⁴⁵

It's Not All about Nativism

Twenty-one years after *Times* editorials helped build support for the compromise that IRCA was supposed to represent, they played a far different role in the Senate's 2007 battle over comprehensive immigration reform.

David Brooks wrote about the antagonisms in the national debate.

“What’s made the clashes so poisonous is that many members of the educated class don’t even recognize that they are facing a rival philosophy,” Brooks wrote. “Many of them assume that anybody who disagrees with them on immigration and such must be driven by racism, insecurity, or some primitive atavism. This smug attitude sends members of the communal, nationalistic side into fits of alienation and prickly defensiveness. It’s what makes many of them, in turn, so unpleasant.”⁴⁶

As an op-ed columnist at the *Times*, Brooks is an independent voice not bound to support the biases of the editorial page. Perhaps out of deference to colleagues, he didn’t mention the page as one of the most aggressive participants in the ideological battle.

Brooks’s column echoed a concern expressed years earlier by John Higham, the dean of American immigration scholars and the author of the classic 1955 study of nativism, *Strangers in the Land*.

Higham criticized the liberal tendency to find nativist hysteria at the root of restrictionist concerns. The study of nativism, he said, had been framed by the inclinations of the modern mind, which “dwells on the unconscious savagery lurking in its own dark corners.” For many a liberal scholar, he wrote, “Nativism displays all the terrors that beset his own sensibility.”⁴⁷

Such cautionary notes are no longer played on the editorial page of Arthur Sulzberger’s *Times*.

The Editorial Page and the 2007 Senate Debate

The comprehensive immigration reform package that came to the Senate floor in 2007 was a 761-page legislative behemoth. Like the 1986 act, it was balanced on a compromise. This time it paired a sweeping amnesty with a provision to redesign legal immigration so that it was based more on skill and less on family connections.

The *Times* loved the legalization part as ardently as it hated the other end of the deal.

Endorsing the legalization proposal, the *Times* declared: “It is the nation’s duty to welcome immigrants, to treat them decently and give them the opportunity to assimilate.”⁴⁸ Once again, the *Times* did not qualify the imperative to welcome immigrants by distinguishing between those who come legally and those who come illegally.

Then the *Times* denounced the other half of the deal. “The Senate bill is repellant in many ways,” the editorial declared, invoking the image of a toxic flower garden: “Its fragrant blossoms are grafted to poisonous roots.”⁴⁹

One feature that was repellant to the *Times* was the plan to redesign legal immigration. As *The Economist* observed, the idea was to “adopt a point system that will give priority to the sort of young, employable immigrants who are most likely to contribute to the economy.”⁵⁰

It was not a revolutionary concept. It already was the policy in Canada, Australia, and Britain.

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David Brooks also liked the idea. He noted that if it were adopted, “Potential immigrants would understand that the United States is looking for people who can be self-sufficient from the start, and they’d mold themselves to demonstrate that ability.”⁵¹

He also saw it as a way to bring order out of the prevailing immigration chaos. “Under our current immigration system,” Brooks wrote, “most people get into the United States through criminality, nepotism, or luck. The current system does almost nothing to encourage good behavior or maximize the nation’s supply of human capital.”⁵²

But at the editorial page, the plan was repugnant because it failed to serve the highest value: inclusiveness for the world’s poor and unskilled.

The *Times* demanded that the current system of legal immigration *not* be reformed, that it continue to offer green cards not just to individual immigrants and their immediate families, but also to their extended families in ever-lengthening links of in-laws and cousins known as “chain migration.”

A *Times* editorial expressed disgust with the legislative proposal. It denounced “the repellent truth ... that countless families will be split apart while we cherry pick the immigrants we consider brighter and better than the poor, tempest-tost ones we used to welcome without question.”⁵³

It drew a hard line: “The deal should be improved. If it is not, it should be rejected as worse than a bad status quo.”

In the summer of 2007, the compromise unraveled. There was a furious uproar against legalization. Much of the opposition was based on a reasonable concern that the bill would repeat the failure of the 1986 act. Some of the concern, especially what emanated from talk radio, was an ugly expression of xenophobic hostility.

But once again, the *Times* showed no sense of the inclination to compromise that made it a constructive force in the 1980s. It saw the opposition as tub-thumping bigots. It decried “the ferocity of the opposition from the restrictionist right, with talk radio lighting up over ‘amnesty’, callers spitting out the words with all the hate they can pour into it.”⁵⁴ The verdict for those who wanted to restrict immigration was clear — guilty by association.

There were other reasons for the failure of the 2007 “comprehensive immigration reform” effort. The *Times*’s extremism showed itself during the uproar over a provision for hundreds of thousands of low-wage guest workers every year.

The dissenters included several dozen Democrats who voted for a proposal to kill the entire program. That effort was sponsored by North Dakota’s Byron Dorgan, who declared, “The main reason that big corporations want a guest worker program is that it will drive down U.S. wages.”⁵⁵

The *Times* was all for the guest worker program, but only if the annual influx of hundreds of thousands of low-skilled workers would be able to get green cards. So unconstrained was its commitment to inclusiveness that it was blind to a concern voiced by op-ed columnist Paul Krugman, who observed in 2006 that “modern America is a welfare state, even if our social safety net has more holes in it than it should — and low-skill immigrants threaten to unravel that safety net.”⁵⁶

The *Times* also ignored the fact that the “comprehensive” reform would have led to an extraordinary increase in the nation’s population. In that failure it had plenty of company, as *Washington Post* columnist Robert Samuelson first noted in 2006, after the Senate passed a bill for comprehensive reform:

You might think that the first question anyone would ask is how much it would actually increase or decrease legal immigration. But no. After the Senate approved the bill by 62 to 36, you could not find the answer in the news columns of the Post, the New York Times, or the Wall Street Journal. Yet the estimates do exist and are fairly

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*startling. By rough projections, the Senate bill would double the legal immigration that would occur during the next two decades from about 20 million (under present law) to about 40 million.*⁵⁷

The *Times* has shown no interest in such quantitative measures. A 2009 editorial capsulized its indifference with the enthusiastic proclamation that legalization would produce “bumper crops of new citizens.”⁵⁸

Lawrence Downes, Lead Editorial Writer on Immigration

Arthur Sulzberger’s convictions on immigration policy have found their passionate voice in Lawrence Downes.

Combining commitment to the cause with a talent for graceful prose, Downes has written or helped write dozens of unsigned immigration editorials since he joined the *Times* editorial board in 2004. He has also penned many personalized “editorial observer” columns, which combine opinion with on-the-ground reporting.

While Downes brought no immigration expertise to the board, he came with great empathy for those who face rejection because of their illegal status. He also identified with those whose feel marginalized by mainstream society for reasons of ethnicity.

Himself of mixed heritage — his maternal grandparents were Okinawan and his father a Caucasian from New York — Downes has written movingly about the about the complexity of being mixed race — “hapa” — in Hawaii, where he grew up.

“Dwelling on it can tie a person in knots,” he wrote. “It can be disorienting to feel forced to choose between identities when you are both and neither. It can be infuriating to be stared at by people trying to puzzle out what you are.”⁵⁹

A former copy editor and projects editor at the *Times*, Downes joined the editorial board in 2004. Gail Collins was then the editorial page editor. She had succeeded Howell Raines in 2001 when Raines became the paper’s executive editor. Collins, in turn, was succeeded in 2007 by the current editorial page editor, Andrew Rosenthal, son of legendary *Times* executive editor Abe Rosenthal.

Rosenthal presides over the regular meetings — usually three times a week — of the editorial board. The board, which consists of more than a dozen journalists who specialize in various areas of public policy, chooses the editorial topics. Then the task of writing the editorial is assigned, generally to one member of the board, but occasionally to more.

On immigration Downes is the go-to guy. His most passionate cause is the defense of illegal immigrants. He is their defender and advocate. He is the voice of Arthur Sulzberger.

“In truth, our biggest domestic menace never was waiting outside Home Depot, hoping to clean your basement,” Downes wrote in 2009. “Unauthorized immigrants are not about to destroy anything, not even when they get angry and loud and march in large groups. On the contrary, they are inspiring. Their ethic of self-reliance and hard work is one that Americans should recognize and celebrate.”⁶⁰

He added that a group protesting arrests of illegal immigrants in California “looked like poor people marching for a better life, the kind we root for in movies like ‘The Grapes of Wrath.’”

Of all the subgroups of illegal immigrants, Downes is most moved by the day laborers. He is eloquent in their defense. He calls them “the quiet ones at the bottom: ... the street-corner guys.” He describes them as “the most visible, most vulnerable, and most hated.”⁶¹

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Advocacy for the underdog is an honorable tradition of American journalism, and Downes deserves respect for his assertion of the human dignity of those he prefers to call “unauthorized.” Those who cheat them, exploiting their fear of deportation, deserve not just public condemnation but prosecution in a court of law.

But when the *Times* takes the position that “the country cannot live without immigrant labor — no matter what the nativists may claim,”⁶² it is necessary to ask: how many, and by what criteria, and at what cost to American workers?

And it is necessary to address the concerns that liberal economist Jared Bernstein raised in a letter to the *Times*. Wrote Bernstein: “I can hardly remember meeting an employer who didn’t complain of a labor shortage. But businesses claiming that ‘we can’t find the workers we need’ tend to leave out the other part of the sentence: ‘at the wages we’re willing to pay.’”⁶³

When advocacy for illegal immigrants is as unconstrained as it has become at the *New York Times* editorial page, when it gives scant attention to the strains and costs that so many poorly educated and unskilled people inevitably impose on a society, when it shows great respect for the predicament of illegal immigrants while insulting restrictionists as nativists and racists, it undermines the prospects of reaching a workable compromise on immigration reform.

Downes’s refusal to acknowledge that there are legitimate, non-nativist reasons for opposing illegal immigration would be astonishing at a great newspaper if it were not so consistent with the views of a publisher devoted to unconstrained inclusiveness.

A 2011 editorial said Arizona has become the “ground zero for a new nativism” with its strict laws against illegal immigration.⁶⁴ But the editorial page has never noted the remarkable intensity of the illegal influx. Between 1990⁶⁵ and 2008⁶⁶ the state’s illegal immigrant population exploded from an estimated 88,000 to an estimated 560,000.

“Those numbers are telling,” said Kelefa Sanneh a writer for *The New Yorker*, who noted the increase in a 2012 piece in which he wrote, “Arizona has sometimes been portrayed as a state besieged by unauthorized immigrants, and for good reason.”⁶⁷

But not on the editorial page of the *New York Times*. There illegal immigration is portrayed as an unappreciated blessing and Arizona as a state of racists reminiscent of the deep South at the height of the struggle for civil rights.

And while there is certainly reason to criticize the mean-spiritedness of some of the state’s leaders and the severity of its immigration laws, the *Times* has fixated on those issues while ignoring serious problems — e.g., overcrowded housing and schools, overstressed hospitals, and a general sense of disorder — that have riled the state and caused a large majority of its citizens to demand government action to stop illegal immigration.

Invoking Racism as the Ultimate Explanation

Downes’s compassion for illegal immigrants is matched by his contempt for those who believe that green cards should be awarded not just on family connections to persons already here but also on an evaluation of human capital.

He sees such concerns as a mask for racism. He disdains them as the direct ideological, illegitimate descendant of the spirit of the early 1900s when a federal commission used eugenics — then a fashion even among progressives — to stereotype entire populations according to their places of origin.

Such pseudo-science, Downes wrote, produced “poison seeds (that) bore fruit by the early 1920s” with legislation that drastically restricted the immigration of southern and eastern Europeans.

“It’s no longer acceptable to mention race,” he wrote, “but fretting about newcomers’ education, poverty, and assimilability is an effective substitute.”⁶⁸

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Such thinking is rooted in the righteous conviction that racism is the ultimate explanation. It allows Downes and the *Times* to close their eyes not only to the concerns of John Higham — the most respected chronicler of the nativism of a century ago — but of two esteemed Americans who headed commissions that examined immigration at times far more relevant to today's discussions.

In 1980, as the commission he directed was finishing its report to Congress, the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh wrote:

*In recent months, we have received a large number of letters from people who complain that immigration policy is out of control. They are right. Now undocumented aliens come to the United States in large numbers By permitting our laws to be flouted, we bring immigration policy as a whole into disrespect and, more important in the long run, we undermine respect of law, the foundation of a free society. . . . We will continue to be a nation that welcomes immigrants, but we must enforce our laws consistently and fairly, even when that means not letting some people in and deporting others.*⁶⁹

In 1994, Barbara Jordan, the iconic civil rights leader named by President Clinton to head a commission on immigration policy, talked about the need to enforce immigration law in order to protect the system of legal immigration. Said Jordan: “If we are to preserve our immigration tradition and our ability to say yes to so many of those who seek entry, we must also have the strength to say no where we must.”⁷⁰

In its report to Congress, the Jordan Commission asserted that “it is both a right and a responsibility of a democratic society to manage immigration so that it serves the national interest.”⁷¹ This view is anathema at the *New York Times* editorial page, where complaints about illegal immigration are proof of racism, enforcement is unjust, and saying no is a betrayal of inclusiveness.

Ross Douthat, who must be a very lonely man as the one consistently conservative voice on the *Times* op-ed page, put it this way:

*From the border to the workplace, immigration enforcement is invariably depicted as terribly harsh, hopelessly expensive, and probably racist into the bargain.*⁷²

Douthat didn't say who was doing the depicting. But any credible list would put the *Times* near the top, if not way over the top. While the editorial board has supported in principle a “compromise that combines tougher border and workplace controls with a legalization path,” it condemns actual enforcement measures at every turn.⁷³

The *Times* even condemns E-Verify, the federal system that allows employers to determine whether a new employee has a legitimate Social Security number. E-Verify is e-vilified on the editorial page even though one of the paper's blogs reported that the system “has proven to be a reasonably effective and efficient way for employers to avoid hiring illegal immigrants.”⁷⁴

The *Times* wants immigration law to be reformed in such a way as to enact the vision of inclusiveness that Sulzberger expressed in his 2006 commencement address. That is the path to justice, it believes. So firm is that belief that the *Times* ignores other concerns, including this one from *Harvard Magazine*:

*Will the current tide of poor, low-skilled Hispanic labor migrants (legal or not) gradually blend into the American mainstream like their European predecessors? Or will they remain a growing but segregated population, marginalized by race, class, language, and culture? Has this country's capacity to absorb the most vulnerable foreigners diminished during the past 50 years, or are we simply witnessing the pains of transition to a new stage of American diversity?*⁷⁵

Looking for Lawrence Downes

Lawrence Downes declined a request for a meeting to talk about immigration policy. He insisted that a phone interview be off the record, except for comments about why he would not talk openly: “Because I don’t think you’re being fair,” he said. “And I don’t think you’re doing it in good faith.”

Research into Downes’s work at the *Times* makes it clear that he is a good and decent man, at least when he is not smearing the character and motives of those on the other side of the debate.

Downes writes eloquently from a deep well of feeling. But his bias is so strong that he is incapable of acknowledging legitimate arguments on the other side. He is so enthralled with the benefits of contemporary immigration that its costs escape his notice.

Downes’s orientation fits a category of moral reasoning described by Jonathan Haidt, the psychology professor and author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*.⁷⁶ Haidt writes that human beings are inclined to form moral communities around belief in certain values that are so strong that they not only bind the group, but blind it to evidence from others.

Haidt offers an explanation for the liberal moral vision that prevails at the *Times* editorial page. He notes that, beginning in the 1960s, the left became galvanized in a series of “incredibly important battles” they would fight on behalf of Blacks, women, and gays.⁷⁷

“If you sacralize these groups, it binds you together to fight for them,” he writes.⁷⁸ He adds this: “Follow the sacredness. Once you sacralize something, you become blind to evidence.” And not far behind the blindness, he says, is demonization of those who disagree.

Black and White at a Parking Lot in Phoenix

Downes’s tendency to demonize those who resist illegal immigration is even more problematic when it leads him to blatant distortion.

Consider the “editorial observer” piece Downes wrote in 2007 under the headline “Showdown in Phoenix, Where Mariachis and Minutemen Collide.”⁷⁹ It was an almost cartoonishly distorted melodrama, with stereotypical heroes and villains.

But Downes was entirely earnest and deadly serious. He presented the story as a tale of “America unraveling” in a face-off in the parking lot of Pruitt’s furniture store.

On one side of Downes’s stage were mariachis and “children dancing in Mexican folk costume.” On the other side were Minutemen and “white racists.” In the middle was notorious Maricopa County sheriff Joe Arpaio.

The bias of his piece becomes apparent with a look at other news sources, particularly the *Arizona Republic*, which offered a nuanced view of the opposing sides.

As *Republic* columnist Laurie Roberts told the story, the trouble began “when day laborers began gathering in front of (the) store, making customers uncomfortable and leaving trash in their wake.”⁸⁰ That prompted store owner Roger Sensing to seek help from the sheriff’s office, whose officers not only shielded customers from angry protestors, but also arrested illegal immigrants.

The leader of the Downes good guys, immigration activist Salvador Reza, got all the good lines. Said Reza of the illegal immigrants: “They actually are people with a work ethic that would make the Puritans proud.”

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Downes gave Sensing no lines at all, just this indirect quotation: “Sensing says he needs armed officers to protect customers from jornaleros” (day laborers). Downes shot down that claim in the next sentence: “Mr. Reza calls that ridiculous.”

Laurie Roberts didn’t find it ridiculous at all. She reported that according to Sensing, the law officers “cut down on trash, public urination, and customer intimidation.”⁸¹

Downes described the “racists” trying to drown out the music of three balladeers, with shouts of “Born in the U.S.A! K.K.K! Viva la Migra!” He said they yearned “for a new era, when the Mexicans disappear and everything gets pure and legal again.”

Roberts found decent people with respectable concerns on both sides of the story. Said one of those who were invisible to Downes, “Not one of these people is against immigration. We have laws in this country, bud. There’s a proper way to enter this country.”

Downes drew a provocative portrait of decency versus bigotry. For Downes, the story encapsulated the entire immigration debate in Arizona. Sensing and his supporters were sneering symbols of the state’s psychosis.

But *Republic* reporter Casey Newton presented Sensing as a decent man whose cause attracted many decent people and a few extremists. It noted that more than half of Sensing’s employees were Hispanic. It reported on his anguish that some people might think he was prejudiced against Hispanics: “I’m thinking, do they think I’m racist? It’s really sad. We feel like we’ve been a good part of this community.”⁸²

Downes sees no such humanizing detail, not in Phoenix, not anywhere where the intensity of illegal immigration has stirred the backlash that the *Times* once warned against. His vision is skewed. His impressions are indelible.

Five years after those street demonstrations, Downes gave the Phoenix story the power of Manichean myth. He described the demonstrations as “a now-legendary series of confrontations that drew Minutemen, vigilantes, and white supremacists to one side of the street, and Mr. Reza and his supporters, accompanied by traditional dancers and musicians, to the other.”⁸³

What happened in Phoenix, like what is happening across Arizona and across the United States, is far more complex than Downes believes. It is also more worthy of fair-minded observation and commentary than has been provided by our most influential newspaper, Arthur Sulzberger’s *New York Times*.

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