

## All the News that Fits Ideologically Skewed Coverage of Immigration at the New York Times

By Jerry Kammer

In June 2011, an article by *New York Times* reporter Marc Lacey splashed cold water on the claim by Arizona border residents that a huge wildfire there had been started by illegal immigrants or smugglers. “As Arizona fire rages, so does rumor on its origin,” read the headline.<sup>1</sup>

“The story of how it started [is] so vivid in some accounts that it sounds as if witnesses were peering through the brush as matches were thrown,” wrote Lacey, the *Times*’s first Arizona-based correspondent. He quoted a U.S. Forest Service official who said that, while the fire was caused by humans, the culprits had not been identified and “everything else is speculation.”

Lacey’s story fit the narrative, advanced frequently in *Times* editorials, that Arizona had been seized by illegal-immigration hysteria and irrationality.

But Lacey’s work on the border fires ignored considerable evidence — including 2006 congressional testimony by a Forest Service official who said illegal border crossers had caused many fires — that made the border residents’ suspicions inevitable,

In that failing, the story supported an ideology that is widespread at the *Times*, the belief that illegal immigrants are a vulnerable class that needs to be protected against racists and nativists who accuse them unfairly of causing a variety of social ills.

Thus conceived as a clash of noble strivers versus snarling nativists, illegal immigration at the *Times* is not subjected to the rigorous analysis of costs and benefits that, under basic rules of journalism, should be applied to any major issue of public policy.

In its coverage of immigration, the *Times* has failed its celebrated institutional commitment “to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of party, sect, or interests involved.”<sup>2</sup> As we will see, that coverage has been marred by defects that produced other epic failures at the *Times*, including its coverage of the national savings and loan scandal of the 1980s, the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1990, and a false rape accusation against Duke lacrosse players in 2006.

Increasingly in recent years, and especially since the failed 2007 attempt to pass a “comprehensive immigration reform” bill, the *Times* news coverage of immigration has reflected the ideology made explicit on its editorial page. That page defends immigrants as a vulnerable class and condemns those who want to enforce immigration laws as nativists and racists.

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This is not to say that the editorial boardroom and the newsroom coordinate their activities, breaching the sacred journalistic firewall. That firewall still stands at the *Times*. But it is to say that the *Times* has demonstrated a broad pattern of hostility toward those who question the benefits of unfettered immigration.

As a result, the *Times* coverage of immigration is Exhibit A for a circumstance acknowledged by Executive Editor Jill Abramson. Shortly after she was named to the post in 2011, Abramson said, “I sometimes try not only to remind myself but my colleagues that the way we view an issue in New York is not necessarily the way it is viewed in the rest of America.”<sup>3</sup>

Journalist William McGowan, whose book *Gray Lady Down* is a lament of decline at the *Times* and a call for reform, described the failure this way: “The paper has either ignored, miscovered or muted the less appealing realities of immigration, especially those involving the illegal immigration that has threatened to swamp the southwestern part of the country in recent decades.”<sup>4</sup>

### “Reading the Paper with Your Eyes Closed”

The most candid acknowledgement of bias at the *Times* was written in 2004 by the *Times*’s first “public editor,” or ombudsman. Daniel Okrent wrote that when it comes to coverage of social issues, “if you think the *Times* plays it down the middle ... you’ve been reading the paper with your eyes closed.” He also cited the paper’s tendency to “tell only the side of the story your co-religionists wish to hear.”<sup>5</sup>

A 2008 column by Clark Hoyt, who was then public editor, described the *Times* newsroom as “secular and culturally liberal.”<sup>6</sup> Hoyt quoted Bill Keller, who from 2003 to 2011 was executive editor, saying that the *Times* was liberal “in the sense that a liberal arts college is liberal — generally secular in outlook, disinclined to take things on faith, non-dogmatic, tolerant of and curious about a wide range of views and behaviors.”

Hoyt added: “I think that is a good definition — and that editors need to be sure that the wide range includes the views of the religious.”

By that standard, the *Times*’s coverage of the national immigration debate — which is slanted in favor of illegal immigrants — should include a fair-minded explanation of the concerns of those who advocate enforcement of immigration law. It has failed in that regard, frequently presenting those who complain about illegal immigration as small-minded nativists and racists motivated by irrational prejudice.

Keller’s analogy was remarkable in two respects. First, as the *Washington Post* has reported, nearly 80 percent of the faculty at liberal arts schools have identified themselves as politically liberal.<sup>7</sup>

And second, as we will see, the *Times* has been consistently incurious about the daily reality of those in states like Arizona who have felt overwhelmed by the influx across the Mexican border. The state’s illegal immigrant population soared from an estimated 88,000 in 1990<sup>8</sup> to a peak of 560,000 in 2008,<sup>9</sup> when one in 11 Arizona residents was there illegally.

To Keller’s credit, his own opinion columns have shown a relative broad-mindedness on immigration. And his 1984 story detailing the money and lobbying muscle that California growers applied in the House of Representatives remains one of the few truly investigative pieces the *Times* has produced on the politics of immigration policy. The paucity of investigative effort in a story that features so many powerful interests has left a gaping hole in the *Times*’s coverage of immigration.

Keller may have engaged in wishful thinking about his staff when he wrote, “We do not go into a story with a preconceived notion. We do not manipulate or hide facts to advance an agenda.”<sup>10</sup> That is a concise statement of a

long-established American journalism code. It is not, however, an accurate description of the way in which many *Times* reporters have written about immigration.

### David Leonhardt's Narrow Lens

Even David Leonhardt, an accomplished reporter who in 2011 won a Pulitzer Prize for commentary and is now chief of the *Times*'s Washington bureau, provides an example of biased and blinkered immigration reporting.

In a 2008 story, Leonhardt wrote that the grassroots backlash against illegal immigration that killed immigration reform legislation a year earlier “had a familiar feel to it.”<sup>11</sup> He went on to claim that the familiarity was due to its antecedents in the fury of the Know-Nothings of the mid-19th century and the Ku Klux Klan in the early 20th century. Leonhardt conflated opposition to illegal immigration with hostility toward all immigrants.

Moreover, in a story of 32 paragraphs, Leonhardt used just a few lines to acknowledge rational grounds for the unrest. He recognized the sheer size of the ongoing immigrant wave. And he noted that because “the bulk of illegal immigrants have little education” they have the effect of “holding down wages for the native high-school dropouts who compete for those jobs.”

The brevity of those concessions is also typical at the *Times*, where stories often make a quick feint in the direction of balance before resuming their fixed ideological course. Leonhardt's overriding message was that resistance to illegal immigration was rooted in racist and politically volatile hostility toward immigrants. It was a pathology to be studied only for the sake of being eliminated.

In reporter-as-pathologist mode, Leonhardt presented expert testimony from two scholars.

First, historian Eric Rauchway of the University of California, Davis, said: “As it becomes less and less acceptable to be racist, immigration is not going to be as politically effective” in mobilizing voters.

Then Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks added: “The only scenario I can see for reform is one that tries to damp down the frenzy about illegal immigration.”

Leonhardt included no scholarly discussion of concerns about illegal immigration that are not tainted by racism or frenzy. Had he been so inclined he might have cited an observation by Jencks in the *New York Review of Books* in 2001, when the debate over comprehensive immigration reform was just beginning. Wrote Jencks:

*America's current immigration policy is a vast social experiment. ... It involves two gambles. First, we are betting that rapid population growth will have no significant adverse effect on the quality of our descendants' lives. Second, we are betting that we can admit millions of unskilled immigrants to do our dirty work without creating a second generation whose members will have the same problems as the children of the American-born workers who do such jobs. The United States may be able to double its population without lowering the quality of its citizens' lives, but the odds of its doing so would surely be better if it proceeded more slowly.*<sup>12</sup>

Jencks's observations may seem to be a classic conservative warning about the risks of rapid social change. But coming from such an esteemed liberal intellectual, they demonstrate the complexity of ideological alignments in the immigration debate. Some liberals believe that immigration needs to be restricted in order to preserve the American dream. This point of view is seldom included in the reporting of the *Times*.

## Looking for Elvis Fans on the News Staff

The late Molly Ivins, a legendary reporter and columnist who worked briefly at the *Times* before returning to her native state of Texas, liked to tell the story about why *Times* editors turned to her in August 1977, when Elvis Presley suddenly died at 42. Presley was so young that the paper had not prepared an advance obituary.

“A sort of grave, stately Timesian panic ensued,” Ivins wrote long after leaving the *Times*. “The paper has music critics by the note-load: classical, opera, modern, jazz, even rock. But it just wasn’t the kind of paper where Elvis fans worked. Except for me. They knew I was one ‘cause I have this funny accent.”<sup>13</sup>

Ivins was exaggerating, of course. But her hyperbole made a point that also applies to the *Times’s* coverage of immigration. The *Times* is not the kind of paper where immigration skeptics work. Nor is there much skepticism at many other major publications, where reporters tend to cover the issue more as cheerleading advocates than as independent agents of the broad public interest.

One prominent skeptical reporting voice is that of Leo Banks, a contrarian whose work for the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Review*, *Arizona Daily Star*, and *Tucson Weekly* has described the disruption in the lives of Arizona border residents caused by the smuggling of human beings and drugs across Arizona’s vast southern border.

In the summer of 2011, while Marc Lacey was making his case about borderlands paranoia, Banks presented a compelling case that illegal border-crossers had indeed caused the fire that Lacey reported on. He wasn’t alone. The reporting of *Arizona Daily Star’s* Brady McCombs not only showed that such thinking was justified but questioned an apparent lack of investigative rigor in the matter.<sup>14</sup>

Banks noted the 2006 congressional testimony by a Forest Service official who said, “Large numbers of warming and cooking fires built and abandoned by cross border violators have caused wildfires that have destroyed valuable natural and cultural resources.”<sup>15</sup>

Marc Lacey ignored these stories. But he did follow up on the fires from a new angle. He reported that a borderlands fire was threatening to force the evacuation of 39 Buddhists who were “six months into a three-year solitary retreat that includes a vow of silence.”<sup>16</sup>

The irony was unmistakable. At the *New York Times*, silent Buddhists were more sympathetic than complaining residents of the Arizona borderlands.

Leo Banks reacted to the *Times* treatment of the fires with a what-else-is-new shrug. “It was typical of their approach,” on immigration he said. “When the facts conflict with their ideology, they go with their ideology.”<sup>17</sup>

## Some Reporters Deserve Recognition

Before continuing this examination of the broad failure of the *Times’s* immigration coverage, it is important to acknowledge those at the *Times* who have done admirable work on certain aspects of the story.

Julia Preston has done fine work tracking efforts by state legislatures across the United States to pass laws to manage a problem the federal government has failed to control.

For more than 30 years, from the debates leading to passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act to the collapse of the 2007 drive for comprehensive reform and beyond, Robert Pear has provided stellar coverage of the political and legislative maneuvering in Congress. His usual thoroughness about the legislative process contrasts with the *Times’s* failure to report on the likely demographic and fiscal consequences of that legislation.

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Anthony DePalma in 2005 wrote an eloquent piece about Mexican immigrants who had come in large numbers to New York. He warned that changes in the U.S. economy and their own educational deficits meant that they “risk becoming stuck in a permanent underclass of the poor, the unskilled, and the uneducated.”<sup>18</sup> DePalma’s work was extraordinary for its journalistic rigor. It demonstrated both courageous story selection and street-level reporting that was compassionate and clear-eyed, free of the sentimentality that infuses so much *Times* reporting.

Charlie LeDuff, who left the *Times* in 2007, described the Dickensian world of immigrants and other workers at a pork processing plant in North Carolina. In 2004 he presented this crisp summation of the causes for rising tension in Arizona: “The signs of strain are everywhere: emergency rooms closing, overcrowded schools, families living in garages, homes converted to hiding places, and gangland-style crime.”<sup>19</sup>

But while LeDuff’s story identified the growing problem, the *Times* has made remarkably little effort to make that story come alive by explaining its dimensions and illustrating its effects on the lives of ordinary Americans in Arizona and elsewhere. The lack of such reporting is evidence that reporters and editors simply don’t see the story. It suggests a field of vision that is constricted by ideology.

The best reporting on any matter of public policy often begins with a reporter’s skepticism, a suspicion that something may be wrong, that there are problems to be examined, costs to be measured, conventional wisdom to be challenged. On immigration, it would begin with a suspension of belief in the romantic notion that immigration — all immigration — is a story of national renewal and redemption to be defended and celebrated rather than probed and questioned.

Immigration reporting, in short, should be hard-headed, but not hard-hearted. It should be shaped more by a skeptical curiosity than by an unquestioning sensibility. It should be as concerned about the world of our grandchildren as it is nostalgic about the world of our grandparents.

*Washington Post* columnist Robert Samuelson has identified journalistic group-think as a cause for the muted coverage. “Immigration is considered noble,” he wrote. “People who critically examine its value or worry about its social effects are subtly considered small-minded, stupid, or bigoted. The result is selective journalism that reflects poorly on our craft and detracts from democratic dialogue.”<sup>20</sup>

### Nina Bernstein: Reporting as Advocacy

At the *Times*, no reporter has been a more dedicated and determined advocate for illegal immigrants than Nina Bernstein. Combining compassion for the immigrants with outrage at the wrongs they have suffered, she has written many emotional stories of illegal immigrants caught in the vast, impersonalized, and sometimes negligent immigration enforcement and detention system.

The headlines from three of her stories offer a characteristic sample of her empathetic approach.

From 2006: “Young Woman fears Deportation, and Mutilation.”<sup>21</sup>

From 2007: “A Jail Suicide Darkens a Family’s American Dream.”<sup>22</sup>

From 2009: “Mentally Ill and in Immigration Limbo.”<sup>23</sup>

The monotone drumbeat of Bernstein’s advocacy reporting has driven some critics of illegal immigration to distraction. They include Mickey Kaus, who in 2007 wrote this commentary in *Slate* as Bernstein began to report on the debate about comprehensive immigration reform legislation:

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*In my experience, Bernstein's the most tendentious and biased reporter on the paper — that would be the famed liberal bias — and she's almost certain to weave a cocoon that will help restrict Times readers to utter marginal irrelevance as debate proceeds.<sup>24</sup>*

Although Bernstein's approach is tendentious, her work in exposing abusive treatment of illegal immigrants in federal custody is admirable. That reporting, informed by tenacious legwork, is in the tradition of investigative reporting that calls authorities to account for the misuse of power.

The problem with Bernstein's reporting is that her sensibility is so finely tuned that her watchdog instincts don't catch the scent of facts that don't support her conclusion that illegal immigrants are noble strivers and innocent victims.

Bernstein's tendency to allow critics of illegal immigrants room for little more than a drive-by quote and her passion for cataloguing the suffering of the vulnerable leave gaping holes in her stories. She appears incapable of acknowledging the accumulating costs imposed on society by the influx of millions of poor, poorly educated, and unskilled immigrants, many of them in the country illegally. To reporters like Bernstein, such questions apparently suggest a surly nativism.

Bernstein would have done well to consider the possibility that such questions come from thoughtful people with honorable intentions and legitimate concerns. In 2006 one of them wrote:

*The demographics of America are changing inexorably and at lightning speed, and the claims of new immigrants won't fit neatly into the black-and-white paradigm of discrimination and resistance and guilt and recrimination.*

The author was then-senator Barack Obama, writing in *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*.<sup>25</sup> He went on to express this concern, which is so conspicuously absent in Bernstein's view of the immigration story:

*[T]here's no denying that many blacks share the same anxieties as many whites about the wave of illegal immigration flooding our Southern border — a sense that what's happening now is fundamentally different from what has gone on before. Not all these fears are irrational. The number of immigrants added to the labor force every year is of a magnitude not seen in this country for over a century. If this huge influx of mostly low-skill workers provides some benefits to the economy as a whole — especially by keeping our workforce young, in contrast to an increasingly geriatric Europe and Japan — it also threatens to depress further the wages of blue-collar Americans and put strains on an already overburdened safety net.*

Such concerns do not intrude into Bernstein's field of vision. A story from 2007 is a particularly striking demonstration of her bias and the failure of *Times* editors to restrain it.

The story was published as the Senate was about to begin its epic debate on the comprehensive reform legislation. Bernstein sounded an alarm about the negative consequences of a proposal to issue green cards on the basis of a point system. The proposal would have provided more spaces for skilled immigrants and fewer for the extended family of immigrants already established in the United States.

Under the proposal, green cards based on family relations would have been reduced from 87 percent of the total to 62 percent, while those based on skills would have risen from 13 percent to 38 percent.

Bernstein did not conceal her bias against the proposal, which critics at the *Times* editorial page and ethnic organizations attacked as "elitist" and "anti-family." Her story quoted six sources opposing the reform but only one supporting it.

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Bernstein made no mention of the fact that similar point systems had been established in Canada and Australia, where income inequality is not as severe as it is in the United States. She said nothing of the proposal's roots in the 1997 report of the federal commission that was headed by civil rights icon Barbara Jordan until her death in 1996. The commission concluded that the existing pattern did not serve the national interest. It asserted that:

*Only if there is a compelling national interest — such as nuclear family reunification or humanitarian admissions — should immigrants be admitted without regard to the economic contributions they can make. The reunification of adult children and siblings of adult citizens solely because of family relationship is not as compelling . . . . The highly skilled are, in effect, new seed immigrants who will petition for admission of their family members. The educational level of the spouses and children of highly educated persons tends to be in the same range. Hence, our society benefits not only from the entry of highly skilled immigrants themselves, but also from the entry of their family.<sup>26</sup>*

Bernstein provided no such context in her story. Pressing her case, she quoted an immigrant from Bangladesh who said the current system should not be changed. Citing his niece, a graduate student in science at NYU, he said, “Bottom line, instead of bringing those people already educated from over there, we have the opportunity to be homegrown Ph.D.’s.”

The story burned through 1,600 words — 92 percent of its total — before one source spoke in lonely support of the reform. It was Yale law professor Peter Schuck, who said this of federal policy to distribute green cards:

*We have a very valuable resource that we are distributing, and we ought to do it in full consciousness of what we want to absorb in the way of immigrants. The country can't simply throw up its hands and say, “We've done it this way for the past few generations, so we just should go on doing it.”*

Having made that quick gesture toward balance, Bernstein went right back to one of her six ideological allies. “Professor Gerstle points out that immigrant families who helped populate the city over the last 40 years have become part of its lifeblood. ‘They’re New Yorkers, aren’t they?’ he asked. ‘A lot of Americans may think that’s not American, but it isn’t foreign.’”

Unfortunately, such astonishingly tilted immigration reporting is not foreign at the *New York Times*. To borrow a phrase from David Leonhardt, Bernstein’s story had a familiar feel to it.

## Barlett and Steele

Donald Barlett and James Steele, two-time Pulitzer winners and one of the most respected investigative reporting teams in the history of American journalism, are prominent among the few reporters who have been openly skeptical about the wave of immigration to the United States that began in the late 1960s. They have suggested that while the influx clearly serves certain stakeholders, it impairs fundamental national interests.

In 1996 Barlett and Steele wrote in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*:

*At current levels, legal immigration in the 1990s will dwarf every previous decade in American history. No other industrial country has allowed in so many workers in so short a time, depressing wages and living standards.<sup>27</sup>*

In 2006 they wrote in *Time* magazine:

*Washington’s failure to control the nation’s borders has a painful impact on workers at the bottom of the ladder and, increasingly, those further up the income scale. The system holds down the pay of American workers and rewards the illegals and the businesses that hire them. It breeds anger and resentment among citizens who can’t*

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*understand why illegal aliens often receive government-funded health care, education benefits and subsidized housing. In border communities, the masses of incoming illegals lay waste to the landscape and create costly burdens for agencies trying to keep public order. Moreover, the system makes a mockery of the U.S. tradition of encouraging legal immigration. Increasingly, there is little incentive to play by the rules.*<sup>28</sup>

As Barlett and Steele sounded the alarm about the influx of illegal immigration, they noted that its effects were particularly severe in Arizona. In a 2013 interview, Steele said the *New York Times* coverage of the immigration controversy had been influenced by both its Manhattan-centric view of immigration and its fixation on such polarizing political figures in Arizona as Republican leader Russell Pearce and Maricopa County sheriff Joe Arpaio.

“Immigrants have long been seen as the fabric of New York City,” said Steele. “The city is filled with illegal immigrants working their butts off. New Yorkers see someone working hard and they think ‘That’s the spirit of America.’ And then they look at someone like Arpaio or Pearce, who they think are despicable, and that makes them discount anyone who questions illegal immigration.”<sup>29</sup>

Reporters at the *Times* and elsewhere have fixated on the excesses of such figures as Arpaio and Pearce. The two men are the swaggering embodiment of the stereotype of Arizona as arrogant and intolerant. Stoking their archetypal allure, Arpaio relentlessly pursues publicity while Pearce wears a perpetual scowl. He kept two portraits of John Wayne in his office until he was recalled by voters weary of his excesses.

The two men are so easily accessible and irresistibly quotable that reporters often see little reason to look for less dramatic material in the state’s streets, schools, and neighborhoods.

### An Extreme Fixation and Missing the Story in Arizona

Six months after the 2006 Barlett and Steele article in *Time*, the Sunday magazine of the *New York Times* published a long story from Arizona that illustrates the paper’s fixation. It was written by former *Times* executive editor Joseph Lelyveld.<sup>30</sup>

Lelyveld mentioned Pearce 19 times. He made 37 mentions of Randy Graf, a Pearce ally and a border Minuteman who would be defeated by Democrat Gabriel Giffords in a race for the House of Representatives.

Lelyveld featured claims by “anti-immigrant zealots” that the illegal flow across the border is “an invasion” and that that migrants who die from exposure to desert heat “get what’s coming to them.” He reported sympathetically on the plight of illegal immigrants attempting to adjust to life in Arizona.

But Lelyveld failed almost entirely in illuminating the daily concerns of the ordinary Arizonans who propelled passage of a series of state laws aimed at stopping illegal immigration.

Lelyveld’s one reference to such discomfort was loaded with bias when he attached it to his description of a Minuteman whose candidacy for the Mesa City Council drew votes from “that portion of the community that is permanently riled by their newer neighbors’ tendency to hold big parties in front yards instead of on more seemly rear patios, and to play loud, unfamiliar music in an unfamiliar language.”

A 2010 story on BBC radio offers a striking contrast to the Lelyveld piece. It presented a vivid, nuanced explanation of the human dimensions of the story in Arizona.<sup>31</sup>

BBC reporter Rob Walker spoke with the angry Russell Pearce. But he was more interested in telling the story from the street level. He gave equal weight to the stories of both illegal immigrants and those who were upset about the influx. He reported from neighborhoods in Mesa and Phoenix where long-time residents spoke with a restrained dignity about their frustrations and feelings of being overwhelmed. Said one:



*We've got more problems than we can handle, and this has to stop. There needs to be some rules. What we've got now is just chaos. We're losing the simple things that make a society a society, but no one wants to step forward because they're afraid of crossing some line and being called a racist.*

### A Pattern of Ideological Bias and Poor News Judgment

The *Times's* immigration coverage invites comparisons to three other epic reporting lapses at the most influential newspaper in the United States.

The first involved flagrant bias in its 2006 reporting of rape allegations against members of the Duke lacrosse team. The second was its inability to identify the political influence buying and regulatory failures that led to the savings and loan scandal of the late 1980s. The third was its blindness to the widespread alienation in Sandinista-ruled Nicaragua and the resulting grassroots support for the Contra revolt, which reporters at the *Times* and elsewhere presented as an artifice of President Ronald Reagan's conservative administration.

The collapse of journalistic integrity in the *Times* coverage of the Duke story was examined in the book *Until Proven Innocent: Political Correctness and the Shameful Injustices of the Duke Lacrosse Rape Case*.<sup>32</sup>

The authors claim that the *Times* ignored exculpatory evidence, sought to prop up the morally bankrupt case of a rogue prosecutor, and smeared the unjustly accused athletes in a reckless journalistic crusade.

Writing in *New York* magazine, Kurt Andersen quoted an unnamed *Times* alumnus who said: "You couldn't invent a story so precisely tuned to the outrage frequency of the modern, metropolitan, *bien pensant* [right-thinking] journalist."<sup>33</sup>

Journalist Michael Barone said the failure included the *Times* and activist groups who ignored fair play and due process in demanding their own form of justice. He wrote:

*The "Group of 88" Duke professors, journalists for the New York Times and the Durham Herald-Sun, and heads of black and feminist organizations all seemed to have a powerful emotional need to believe. A need to believe that those they classify as victims must be virtuous and those they classify as oppressors must be villains.*<sup>34</sup>

Two decades before it indicted the Duke lacrosse team for crimes the athletes did not commit, the *Times* missed the burgeoning scandal of fraud, looting, and political influence buying in the national savings and loan industry.

In that failure, it had plenty of company in the American press corps. *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz said the press had been lulled into inattention by its own laziness and by a mythology that had drifted over the story like a warm, sleep-inducing fog. That mythology both glorified the high-risk financiers of the newly deregulated S&L industry and allowed them to bathe in the warm glow of the Bailey Building and Loan in "It's a Wonderful Life."<sup>35</sup>

The inability of journalists at the *Times* and elsewhere to see past the mythology of the savings and loan industry allowed the emergence of a system that privatized profit and socialized loss. It concentrated its benefits in a relative few while dispersing its costs among American taxpayers.

In a similar way, the journalistic failure on immigration can be traced to the romantic mythology of immigration. That mythology has led many reporters to suspend skepticism about a system that has concentrated the benefits of illegal immigration among low-wage employers, ethnic interest groups, and the politicians who support them. The American public must deal with the consequences.

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*Times* reporters also were part of a systemic journalistic failure in Nicaragua. There, the leftist Sandinistas, whose revolution had seized power from a brutally corrupt government, faced a challenge from a force known as the Contras, some of whom received funding and training from the United States.

Political scientist Robert Leiken told the story of the many American reporters, their mindset fixed by their dismay at the tragic American intervention in Vietnam, who regarded the Contras not as the embodiment of an insurgent Nicaraguan nationalism, but as imperialist tools. The chickens came home to roost in 1990, when shocked reporters had to inform their readers that the supposedly beloved Sandinistas were routed in national elections by an opposition identified with the supposedly reviled Contras.

Like the reporters who would be transfixed by the arrogance of Arpaio and Pearce in Arizona, the American press corps in Nicaragua were fixated by the swagger of some of the Contra spokesmen. They recoiled from what Leiken described as “their expensive clothes and expansive bellies in the swank hotels of Miami and Tegucigalpa.” He quoted a dissident Contra who said the leadership was so unattractive that it appeared they “had been designed to their critics’ specifications.”<sup>36</sup>

So strong was this stereotype, which Leiken described as “the invincible conventional image of Sandinista popularity,”<sup>37</sup> that it was widely accepted by reporters who overlooked the abuses that the Sandinistas inflicted on the people. Failing to notice the widespread peasant support for the counter-revolution, reporters formed their hostile views based on their experience of a different kind of Contra, who came pre-packaged as a villain.

Whether in Arizona or Nicaragua, when reporters’ imaginations are seized by powerful ideological bias, they repeat the dangerous futility of Graham Greene’s fictional *Quiet American*, a man who in a book by that name was “impregably armored by his good intentions and his ignorance.”<sup>38</sup>

Julia Preston, who now reports on immigration at the *Times*, was reporting for the *Washington Post* during this period. While Leiken praises Preston as “one of the most thoughtful journalists who covered Nicaragua,”<sup>39</sup> he notes how she, too, failed to appreciate the frustration of the Nicaraguan people with the Sandinistas. That experience may explain why her later reporting shows more journalistic rigor and skepticism than generally prevails in the *Times*’ coverage of immigration.

The *Times*’ decision to open an Arizona bureau in 2010 seemed to provide reason for optimism that the paper would provide more insightful coverage. But Marc Lacey’s reporting was remarkably superficial in its examination of the conditions that massive illegal immigration had imposed on the state — its effects on schools, neighborhoods, social welfare systems, and the job market.

Lacey’s reporting from the border distorted not only the issue of border fires but also the effects of the border fence. “The much-ballyhooed border fence has not just made it more difficult for illegal immigrants to slip across from Mexico into the United States,” he wrote. “It has also become an obstacle, researchers say, for migrating bears.”<sup>40</sup>

Lacey’s interest in the environmental considerations of the border fence was so selective that he failed to mention a major dimension of the story — the fence’s beneficial effects in such environmentally vulnerable areas as the Organ Pipe National Monument. There, park rangers hailed its obstruction of smugglers who used to drive trucks across the unfenced border, ripping up the desert landscape as they went.

Nor did Lacey note the fence’s beneficial effects at Arizona’s Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. Refuge manager Michael Hawkes said that before it was built, “We were getting 250,000 (illegal immigrants) coming through here every year. We had all the damage done (to the land) by the vehicles. We had banditos coming up, robbing, raping, murdering people. Our buildings were getting broken into; vehicles were getting stolen. It was a real war zone down here. It was a real mess.” He said the fence had cut illegal crossings there by 80 percent.<sup>41</sup>

Hawkes made this acknowledgement. “There’s a downside to the fence because wildlife can’t get through,” he said. But he rejected the claim that the fence was an environmental disaster, adding, “Overall, it has been a blessing.”

The blessing was invisible to Marc Lacey.

### An Obsession and Its Consequences

Marc Lacey’s reporting from Arizona brings to mind Daniel Okrent’s comment that readers have their eyes closed if they think the *Times* plays it straight on social issues. His inability to see important facets of the story presents a contrast with his acute vision while covering another controversial social issue, the struggle for gay rights.

Lacey has covered that story not only in the United States but also in Mexico, Cuba, and Jamaica. He has played a prominent role in fulfilling publisher Arthur Sulzberger’s well-known mission statement about diversity: “We can no longer offer our readers a predominantly white, straight, male vision of events and say that we, as journalists, are doing our jobs.”<sup>42</sup>

The late journalist Marjorie Williams said Sulzberger’s vision of diversity “has obsessed the newspaper of record.”<sup>43</sup> In attempting to implement that vision, the *Times* has produced immigration reporting that has often obscured or distorted one of the most important stories in American life.

That failing is severe precisely because the *Times* is so influential. It affects not only public opinion but also the work of reporters around the country who might otherwise look more deeply into a story of great complexity and profound consequences. The *Times* has failed in its coverage of immigration, and we are all the poorer for it.

## End Notes

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