



MANY VOICES, ONE DREAM

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Chapter IV: Moving Forward By Tamar Jacoby

The dozen women in the focus group had nothing but complaints. There were too many people speaking Spanish in the supermarket. There were too many new kids in their kids' classrooms. The emergency room was so crowded, patients with emergencies couldn't see doctors – and all of these problems created by people who weren't even paying taxes in the first place.

But something surprising happened as the focus group wore on. It took about 15 minutes – no more. Grumpy as all the women were, many of them grasped right away that there was something different about the big blonde at the head of the table. She wasn't just angry at circumstances, as they were. She didn't like foreigners, period – particularly, it started to seem, a certain kind of foreigner. And unhappy as the other women were about the immigrants arriving in their town, this made them uncomfortable – very uncomfortable. Nobody used the word "bigot"; maybe they didn't even think it. But watching the group from the other side of a mirror, I could almost see the other women inching their chairs away from the blonde.

With comprehensive reform dead in the Senate, we're heading into a difficult stretch in the immigration debate. It's unlikely that Congress will take up the issue this fall except perhaps to appropriate money for stepped-up enforcement. State and local governments are sure to press ahead with their own punitive crackdowns. The politics of '08 aren't going to help matters. It's going to be easier for candidates on both sides of the aisle to play to voters' fears than to talk about how they would solve the problem. And there will be plenty of voices like the big blonde – loud, angry, anti-immigrant voices.

The one small shred of hope – the little bit of string reformers have to work with – is the way the other women in the focus group distanced themselves from the blonde and her ugly talk. How to take advantage of their unease? Personally, I don't think it will help to call her and others like her names. Hitting back with the r-word – "racist" – only polarizes the debate, and it's not a particularly effective way of winning over the undecided.

Conventional wisdom, particularly since the Senate defeat, holds that the mood has shifted and the public – an overwhelming majority of the public – has turned virulently anti-immigrant. But polling doesn't bear this out. More likely, today as in the past, no more than 20 to 25 percent of Americans are truly anti-immigrant, determined to build a wall and send 12 million foreigners home. Another 20 to 25 percent is fundamentally

favorable to newcomers. And most are somewhere in the middle: frustrated, anxious, irritable, but also potentially pragmatic – like the majority in the focus group. Bottom line: most voters could go either way, depending on which side makes the most effective appeal. In 2007, the naysayers carried the day, fanning the public's fears and igniting its anger. But that doesn't mean reformers can't find a way to win – can't find a more persuasive way to speak to the silent majority who think like most of the women in the focus group.

How? If 2007 taught us anything, it's that we reformers spoke too much to people's heads, with arguments based on rationality and common sense, while the other side appealed to something much deeper and more visceral. So the question we have to answer now is where's the emotional power in our case and how do we drive it home more effectively?

Is it a deeper, more hard-hitting version of our economic argument: pointing not to the nation's labor needs but to consumers' pocketbooks and to the possibility that without immigrants, the vital, vibrant, growing America we take for granted will become a thing of the past? Is it a blunter, more muscular appeal to pragmatism: hammering home that we can't deport 12 million people and need, for our own safety's sake, to bring them under the rule of law? Or is it perhaps a case that draws more deeply on voters' values: showing that immigrants want to learn English and become part of their new nation, that far from freeloaders seeking something on the cheap – whether government benefits or “amnesty” – they're here to work and build a stronger America?

Which of these arguments is likely to be most persuasive? Which – or which combination – will be strong enough to counter the firepower on the right? We don't know – and we urgently need to find out.

But even in this, our darkest hour, I take heart from the discomfort of the women in that focus group. They and voters like them will be tested – sorely tested – by the inflammatory rhetoric of the '08 campaign. But I'm still betting that in the end their instinctive decency and pragmatism will win out. And we reformers have to be ready to take advantage of it when it does.