

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Time to hit back against anti-Latino bigotry

The Miami Herald
Jul. 22, 2007

Here is what the National Council of La Raza -- the biggest U.S. Hispanic organization -- should do at its annual meeting in Miami this week: draw from the experience of African Americans and Jewish Americans by launching an all-out campaign to expose anti-Latino bigots in the media, entertainment and politics.

The recent immigration debate in the Senate, which ended with the defeat of a bill that would have given a path to citizenship to many of the 12 million undocumented workers, has given way to the biggest explosion of anti-Hispanic sentiment I have seen since I arrived in this country three decades ago.

Most Hispanics feel the same way. A new nationwide poll by Bendixen and Associates says 76 percent of U.S. Hispanics agree with the statement that "anti-immigrant sentiment is growing in the United States," and 62 percent say this phenomenon has directly affected them or their families.

Few Hispanics believe statements by rabid anti-immigration radio and television hosts who say they only oppose "illegal immigration." When asked what fuels the current anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States, 64 percent of Hispanics in the poll mentioned one factor: "racism against immigrants from Latin America."

Indeed, in recent times we have heard statements on radio and television that go far beyond the boundaries of fair debate over the need to fix the U.S. immigration system, and that twist the facts in ways that make it difficult to believe in the good faith of those who make them.

It's not just what fearmongers such as CNN's Lou Dobbs or radio talk show hosts Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage allow to be said in their shows, which systematically blame Hispanics for many of America's ills. Prominent academics such as Harvard University political scientist Samuel Huntington are getting away with sweeping statements such as "America's Latino immigration deluge . . . constitutes a major potential threat to the cultural and possibly political integrity of the United States."

While the 44 million Hispanics are the biggest minority in America, you don't see the kind of nationwide protests, legal actions or calls for boycotts on a scale that you would probably see if these statements were directed against African Americans or Jewish Americans.

When you visit the website of the NAACP, one of the first things you see is an 'NAACP `Stop' Campaign' headline, which is a call to action against racism in the media.

The NAACP and other African American groups regularly launch name-and-shame campaigns, and most recently forced the firing of radio host Don Imus over an April comment calling the Rutgers University women's basketball team "nappy-headed hos."

The Jewish Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has been exposing racism in the media since 1913.

But when you go to The National Council of La Raza's website, you don't find a similar emphasis on fighting bigotry. The group's main theme is "Ya es hora!," a voter registration drive conducted alongside the Spanish-language Univisión network and other Latino organizations aimed at adding two million new Hispanic votes for the 2008 election.

La Raza President Janet Murguía conceded in an interview Friday that Hispanics need to do more to fight back against bigotry in the media.

"We do need to rethink our strategy; there is no question about it," Murguia told me.

"But the key change that we need to focus on is to make sure that we can influence the outcome of elections. Getting madder doesn't necessarily help, but getting smarter will help."

My opinion: The National Council of La Raza and its sister institutions are doing the right thing with their "*Ya es hora!*" citizenship drive. But they should also launch a nationwide "*Ya basta!*" campaign to identify, name and shame those who systematically bash Hispanics.

If anti-Hispanic sentiment is allowed to keep growing, we will soon have an underclass of 12 million immigrants that will feel not only frustrated by not having a legal path to citizenship but increasingly insulted by the mainstream media.

And social exclusion mixed with frustration can be a dangerous cocktail, as we've seen in the violent 2005 riots by Muslim youths in the suburbs of Paris.

The time for Hispanics to say "*Ya basta!*" is now, before it's too late.