

## **America First**

### **An Excerpt from 2084: An Oral History of the Great Warming**

by James Lawrence Powell

*Sinclair Thomas Jr. is the son of the first and only person to be elected president of the United States from the America First party. I interviewed him by satellite telephone in May, 2084.*

My father told me on more than one occasion that, when he was a young man at the turn of the century, he never imagined that his political views would gain hold not just in countries where one might have expected fascism to rise but here in America. This is just one of a thousand things that have happened by now, in the 2080s, that no one could have foreseen when the century began. But in hindsight, we can see that there were inklings of the potential resurrection of fascism in the increase in anti-immigration sentiment back in those days. Eventually, the threat of being overrun by hordes of starving, thirsty, sick climate refugees from poor countries led many richer countries to turn to a strongman and ultimately to fascism to protect themselves and their borders.

One can trace the roots of neo-fascism to the first decade, when both legal and illegal immigration were rising. Even legal immigration, if it goes too far, can lead to economic losses and concerns over national identity. We had our Mexicans; the Germans their Turks and Croats; the Brits their Pakis and Indians, and so forth. By 2020, strong anti-immigration movements had appeared in most developed countries. The more that heat and drought caused crop failures and widespread famine, the more climate

refugees were on the move, the more the rich countries resisted and the stronger their anti-immigration movements grew.

The threat was greatest wherever a relatively rich country shared a border with a relatively poor one: the United States and Mexico; India and Bangladesh; Libya and Niger; Egypt and Sudan; South Africa and Mozambique; South and North Korea; Brazil and Bolivia. And, Spain and Morocco, separated only by a short stretch of the Mediterranean Sea. In the better-off country in each pair, the anti-immigration movements gradually turned anti-immigrant. As nationalistic, anti-immigrant attitudes became too strong for traditional political parties to ignore, their platforms became more fascist. In some countries, as in America, new parties rose to threaten the traditional ones.

To almost any politician or scholar at the turn of the century, the notion that fascism might appear again would have been risible. To label a person or a government fascist was the worst of insults. Today we have a League of Fascist Nations that proudly bears the emblem of the *fasces*, the bundle of sticks that was the ancient Roman symbol of authority and the icon of the Italian fascists of the 1920s and 1930s under Mussolini. Many in this country now have short memories, but they ought to remember that in this century Germany and the United States were among the first to join the Fascist League, though our membership did not last long.

What happened here in America demonstrates how fascism can arise even in a democracy. It should have been no surprise; after all, Germany in the early 1930s was a democracy. At first, the movement that was to become American fascism appealed to national unity, pride, job access, and cultural identity, each of which bolstered the anti-immigration sentiment

that had become a hot-button political issue by the first decade of this century. Rightist politicians, pundits, and demagogues of every stripe began to demonize illegal Mexican immigrants even as the economies of states like California and Texas had come to depend utterly on their labor. Arizona and other states passed laws that allowed police to demand that those they suspected of being in the country illegally—just suspected, no probable cause necessary—show their papers, a practice that smacked of Gestapo tactics. These anti-Mexican sentiments led to the erection of the border fence, the *Cerco de Largo*. The fence accomplished three things. First, it offended the nation of Mexico, producing hatreds that would haunt the two countries as relations between them broke down. Second, it forced Mexicans to invent other ways of getting into the United States. Third, the less effective the fence at keeping illegals out of the country, the angrier American demagogues became, the louder their voices rose, and the more who supported them. Fascism requires an enemy, preferably one who can appear to be dangerous but who in fact is close to helpless in the face of the might of the State. Mexicans fit the bill.

At first, the foes of immigration found a home in the Republican Party. But as the movement became more vocal and extreme, the anti-immigration forces split off to form the America First party, taking its name from the isolationist movement led by aviator Charles Lindbergh in the years just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. My father became the leader of that party, which nominated him for the presidency in 2032.

Though no third party had ever come close to winning the White House, in the prior election of 2028 none of the three parties had been able to capture more than 40 percent of the vote. The Republicans edged out the

Democrats, but America First made a far stronger showing than any third party in American history. By then America First's appeal to nationalism and its anti-immigrant rhetoric had grown so strident that no thinking person could any longer doubt that the party stood for drastic, though unspecified, measures against immigrants. The record third-party vote caused the two majority parties, including the Democrats, to become sharply anti-immigrant, all the while draping themselves in the flag and waving the Bible.

By 2031, polls showed that my father would win the next election by a substantial margin. Soon both Republicans and Democrats had begun to swap their lapel-pin flags for America First buttons. Sure enough, in 2032, my father won in a landslide and America First earned a veto-proof majority in both houses of Congress. Within weeks, photographs of my father began to appear not just in government buildings, as the president's photo always had, but in many offices, homes, and schools. Those lapel pins were seen everywhere—even schoolchildren and housewives began to wear them. The America First salute—a clenched right fist held over the heart—began to replace the handshake. Congress debated rescinding the Twenty-Second Amendment, which limits the president to two terms. After all, that amendment had not existed before 1947, so one could hardly claim it originated with the Founding Fathers.

One of the first pieces of legislation the new Congress passed was the America First Act, which called for the deportation of all illegal immigrants in the country. To find and root them out, the government established the Department of Homeland Purity, drawing its personnel from the military and from police forces. Each American citizen was required to have in his

or her possession an identity card and to display it on demand to officers of the Homeland Purity Police. Legal Mexicans, to show their status, had to wear a cloth label depicting an Aztec sun.

Business owners who employed illegals risked going to jail and a large fine. As noncitizens, illegals were deemed not to have the right of habeas corpus and were to be deported immediately without benefit of trial. If a person had no ID card and an on-the-spot, 15-minute DNA test, the modern equivalent of the Breathalyzer, showed them to be of Mexican descent, they were on their way back to Mexico within days, and a pleasant journey it was not. The government nationalized railroad companies and used them to collect and ship Mexicans without identity papers in railcars back to Mexico. Many did not survive the trip. Those who did languished in the border refugee camps, and large numbers died there, as Mexico did not want them and had no way to way to care for them.

The America First Act was designed to rid the United States of illegal immigrants, but that did not slake the anger of the most rabid America Firsters. By the time of my father's election, California, the Southwest, and Texas were feeling the effects of global warming, as water supplies shrank and the ever rising heat killed crops in the fields. With the illegals mostly gone, party leaders needed to find someone new to blame. Who else but citizens of Mexican descent? I am ashamed to say my father not only went along with this, he encouraged it. That led to the Americans Only Act, modeled on the Nuremberg Laws of the 1930s. The act classified citizens along racial lines and was sufficiently complicated that the government had to issue charts in English and Spanish to explain it, using brown, white, and tan circles. People were classified American if all four of their

grandparents were of “American blood” (white circles). People were “Mexican” if three or four of their grandparents were Mexican (brown circles). A person with one or two Mexican grandparents had mixed blood (tan circles).

Strangely to the America Firsters, ridding the country of all “Mexicans” only made things worse. Now not only were they unavailable to take the blame for the country’s ills, there was no one to perform menial, low-wage tasks. Garbage piled up; strawberries and lettuce rotted in the fields of California, Arizona, and Texas; restaurants in the Southwest had to close; schools emptied; dirt and trash piled up in office buildings. What had been an impending economic collapse soon became a reality.

The leaders of the America First party had assumed that, as the government confiscated Mexican property and drove out Mexican business owners, jobs previously held by Mexicans would open up, allowing deserving Americans to step in and take them over. But by this time in the 2030s, the American economy—and, for that matter, the world economy—was so depressed that typically no one saw any profit in adopting one of the abandoned businesses and running it at a profit.

Without obvious enemies and with the American economy in tatters, the people soon turned away from the America First brand of fascism. Not necessarily to some other party; far more simply lost interest and stopped voting altogether. In the last election in which my father was a candidate, 2044, he drew only 8 percent of the vote, but only 23 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot. Today, of course, the percentage is lower still. Unfortunately, in countries that were not true democracies, fascism lasted

much longer, though eventually, as people had to focus more on their own survival, they had less time to spend blaming minorities and immigrants.