

December 24, 2005

## Capitol's Pariah on Immigration Is Now a Power

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

DENVER, Dec. 21 - For nearly a decade, Representative Tom Tancredo, Republican of Colorado, has been dismissed by his critics as little more than an angry man with a microphone, a lonely figure who rails against immigration and battles his own president and party.

So radical were his proposals - calling for a fence along the United States border with Canada, for instance - and so fierce were his attacks on fellow Republicans who did not share his views that many of his colleagues tried to avoid him. Mr. Tancredo said [Karl Rove](#), President Bush's senior adviser, had told him not "to darken the doorstep of the White House."

But last week, the man denounced by critics on the left and on the right suddenly emerged as an influential lawmaker. Pressured by conservative constituents angered by the continuing flow of illegal immigrants into the United States, Republicans rallied around Mr. Tancredo to defy the president and produce the toughest immigration legislation in more than a decade.

Mr. Tancredo and his allies fought successfully to strip the measure of any language offering support for Mr. Bush's plan to provide temporary legal status for illegal immigrants working in the United States. And he helped win support for provisions that once seemed unthinkable to many lawmakers, like the construction of five fences across 698 miles of the United States border with Mexico.

Mr. Tancredo did not get everything he wanted. He still wants a moratorium on legal immigration, soldiers on the border, a longer fence (and one along the border with Canada) as well as a law that would deny citizenship to children born to parents who are not citizens or permanent residents. And many Republicans and Democrats say it seems unlikely that the border security bill passed by the House last week will become law in its current form, if it ever becomes law at all.

But as a jubilant Mr. Tancredo returned to his office here this week, there was little doubt that he had become a symbol of the ascendancy of deeply conservative thinkers in the bitter Republican debate over immigration policy. The lonely firebrand had become the man of the moment, and he could not help but marvel at the wonder of it all.

"I would have said to you a month ago or so, 'Yeah, it's definitely the case that I am a pariah,' " Mr. Tancredo, 60, said. "And a lot of people don't want to get near me for fear of being tainted or something."

"But it has changed, and I have had the greatest feeling of respectability lately," he said, laughing. "I joke with people all the time now. I say, 'I've got to find a new issue because I'm way too mainstream.'

"I'm, like, respectable and respected. I mean, it leaves me speechless."

It leaves his critics outraged.

Advocates for immigrants sent press releases after the House passed the border security bill, accusing the Republican Party of threatening vulnerable immigrant communities by catering to the extreme right. Business leaders, who had pushed their traditional allies in the Republican Party to support Mr. Bush's guest worker plan, fumed.

Republicans, like Representative Jeff Flake of Arizona, who lost the battle to include at least a mention of the guest worker plan in the bill, shook their heads in frustration. Asked whether Mr. Tancredo and his allies had more success in the negotiations over border security than did supporters of Mr. Bush's plan, Mr. Flake responded, "You bet."

But Mr. Flake said he believed that many Republicans voted for the bill because they believed it would never become law. Mr. Bush had said that immigration legislation should include his guest worker proposal, which would allow those currently in the United States illegally to work here legally for a few years before being required to return home and, if they chose, apply for re-entry. And the Senate is expected to take up such a measure next year.

With midterm elections looming, Mr. Flake said, many Republicans simply wanted to address voter concerns about securing the border.

"We weren't so much making law as making a statement here," Mr. Flake said. Mr. Tancredo's allies countered that his support from fellow Republicans was more than a matter of political expediency; they said it signaled a shift in the immigration debate.

"Tom was like an Old Testament prophet crying out in the wilderness, and finally people are starting to listen," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigrant Studies, an advocacy group that wants strict limits on immigration.

Mr. Tancredo laughs at the furor. He is genial and ruddy faced, a grandson of Italian immigrants who loves hunting and keeps Oliver L. North's "Mission Compromised" on his bookshelf. And as he settled in a chair this week to ponder his career, his hands sliced and diced the air. ("It's the Italian in me," Mr. Tancredo said, describing his gestures. He says he sees no contradiction in his strong views and his own immigrant ancestry.)

After he was first elected to Congress, in 1998, Mr. Tancredo tried to draw attention to his stance on immigration by giving late-night speeches on a House floor almost entirely devoid of spectators but broadcast by C-Span. He created an immigration caucus, got 16 Republicans to join and became its leader.

Today, Mr. Tancredo has a caucus with about 90 members and a reputation as a go-it-alone politician willing to sacrifice almost anyone - including his colleagues - to his passion for enforcing and tightening the nation's immigration laws.

In 2002, he read a front-page article in The Denver Post about parents who were struggling to send their son to college. They were ineligible for financial aid because they were illegal immigrants. Outraged that the family felt comfortable enough to appear in plain view, Mr. Tancredo called the immigration authorities and asked to have them deported.

He has infuriated members of his own party by attacking President Bush and by siding against Republicans in Congressional races when their opponents share his views on immigration. Mr. Tancredo said he got into a shouting match with Mr. Rove after telling The Washington Times that Mr. Bush would have blood on his hands if he did not toughen the nation's immigration laws. Mr. Tancredo said that was when Mr. Rove told him not to darken the White House's doorstep.

"What kind of guy is this," Mr. Tancredo said of Mr. Bush, "who picks and chooses the laws he enforces?"

The White House declined to characterize the Bush administration's feelings or Mr. Rove's feelings about Mr. Tancredo. When asked about him, Erin Healy, a spokeswoman for the White House, said, "We worked with a number of members in the House on immigration reform."

The border security measure would make it a federal crime to live in the United States illegally, which would turn millions of immigrants into felons, ineligible to win any legal status. The bill would make it a crime for employees of social service agencies and church groups to shield or offer support to illegal immigrants.

The legislation would also require the mandatory detention of some immigrants, would withhold some federal aid from cities that provide immigrants with services without checking their legal status and would decrease the number of legal immigrants admitted annually by eliminating a program that provides 50,000 green cards each year.

"This is a gesture to the xenophobic wing of the party, and that is alarming," said Cecilia Muñoz, a vice president at the National Council of La Raza. "It threatens extraordinary harm to people."

Mr. Tancredo fears that moderate Republicans, allied with the White House, business leaders and immigration advocates, may derail his efforts by sinking the bill. And so he is considering taking extraordinary measures, including running for president in 2008.

"We just took one more island in the chain leading to Tokyo," Mr. Tancredo said, using World War II imagery to describe the battle to pass the House immigration bill. "But there are still a lot of bloody battles to fight."