

JOHN TANTON

IMPACT: John Tanton (1934–2019) was an American ophthalmologist, environmentalist, eugenicist, and anti-immigration activist. He advocated population control, English-only policies, and immigration reduction. He founded the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) in 1979, and cofounded the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) in 1985 and NumbersUSA in 1997. Tanton has been recognized as the founder of the modern anti-immigration movement and has had ties to prominent white nationalists and eugenicists.

- **John Tanton was an American ophthalmologist, environmentalist, and anti-immigration activist who advocated population control, nativism, and eugenics.** Tanton’s initial activism was cloaked in environmentalism. According to an August 2010 [piece](#) in Foreign Policy, Tanton “played on fears of American declinism and dwindling resources by fixating on overpopulation.” **Tanton believed a higher population would exhaust the land, and low fertility rates in the United States were threatened by high immigration rates.** From 1967 to 1969, he was the [co-organizer and president](#) of the Petoskey Regional Audubon Society. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Tanton also joined the [Sierra Club](#), Zero Population Growth (now known as [Population Connection](#)), and a number of other [environmental organizations](#).
- According to his posthumous [website](#), “Tanton’s recognition that continued human population growth is a significant contributor to environmental problems lead to his involvement with the Sierra Club Population Committee and to becoming President and board member of Zero Population Growth.” During his time at the [Sierra Club](#), Tanton “brought forward a proposal for the Sierra Club to become an actively anti-immigrant organization with a public stance opposing immigration.” [Population Connection](#) currently aims to lower population growth through ensuring universal ability to “delay or end childbearing.”
- **Although Tanton’s activism continued to incorporate environmentalism, his focus shifted to anti-immigration advocacy in the 1970s. After reading *The Camp of the Saints* (1973), a racist novel that depicts the invasion of the white world by dark-skinned refugees, Tanton began to center his arguments against immigration on race and culture.** The book has been [referenced](#) by Senior White House adviser [Stephen Miller](#), Republican Rep. [Steve King](#) of Iowa, and [Steve Bannon](#), a former adviser to President Trump.
- **In a 1994 publication, Tanton warned of the unlikelihood that the “social, political, and economic systems [of developed countries] can cope with the resultant plethora of languages, religions, races, and ethnicities.”** In an article published in his own [Social Contract Press](#), Tanton [wrote](#) about the intersection of environmentalism and immigration: “North America cannot accommodate huge additional numbers—it is now quite fully occupied, with scarcely any virgin land or untapped resources awaiting settlers.” In a 1998 [publication](#), Tanton further warned that “when mass immigration dramatically changes the racial composition of a community, it dramatically changes the culture as well ... [and] The effect on the majority of Americans is even more pronounced because of the emergence in recent years of an intense movement that is hostile to the European descendants of those who settled and founded this country and to their culture.” **The Social Contract Press, a publishing house founded by Tanton in 1990, prints books and a quarterly journal which has “featured articles by dozens of white nationalists and anti-immigrant extremists.”**
- Tanton helped found several organizations that advocated decreased immigration. In 1979, he [co-founded](#) the [Federation for American Immigration Reform](#) (FAIR), a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. that purportedly “seeks to reduce overall immigration to a more normal level.” In 1982, he [served as](#) vice-chairman of [US, Inc](#), which works to raise millions of dollars for groups [advocating](#) English-only policies such as [US English](#), founded in 1983, and [ProEnglish](#), a [project](#) of US Inc founded in 1994. Tanton additionally [helped found](#) [NumbersUSA](#) in 1997, and the [Center for Immigration Studies \(CIS\)](#) in 1985.
- According to the New York Times, around its founding in 1979 FAIR hoped to enlist union [support](#) by exacerbating concerns about wage erosion and competition for jobs and housing among Black communities. Prominent Democrats lent support to FAIR because of this angle, such as former Senator [Eugene McCarthy](#) and financier [Warren Buffett](#).

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- In 1988, memos written by Tanton for then-Executive Director of FAIR Roger Conner and other people in his anti-immigration network WITAN—from the Anglo-Saxon word witenagemot meaning a group of wise advisors—were leaked to the press. **Tanton wrote about the possibility of migrants corrupting American politics: “Will Latin American migrants bring with them the tradition of the mordida (bribe), the lack of involvement in public affairs, etc.?”** On conservation and demographics, Tanton expressed concern over the conservation ethics of Asian and Latin American migrants: “perhaps this is the first instance in which those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down!”
- The release of these memos prompted numerous media figures acquainted with Tanton, such as Walter Cronkite and Arnold Schwarzenegger, to disassociate themselves from Tanton and his organization. Through the memos, Tanton additionally provided insight to FAIR’s funding and clarified the nature of their membership: “Our financial growth was heavily based on a small number of major donors [...] We have found few new donors, as reflected by the plateau in our budgets.” Tanton had similar issues with US, Inc’s funding; in its financial statements of 2017, it states that, “one foundation accounted for approximately 62.35 percent of [U.S., Inc]’s contribution revenue.”
- Tanton’s close relationship with a millionaire Mellon family heiress, Cordelia Scaife May, yielded sizable donations from May’s Colcom Foundation. Between 2009 and 2014, May’s Colcom Foundation donated an average of \$3.6 million to FAIR annually, and in 2015 they donated over \$7.4 million, which accounted for 87 percent of FAIR’s total annual revenue. The Colcom Foundation has been labeled a supporter of white supremacy and spreader of white nationalism by immigration advocates in Pittsburgh, where it is based. In 2016 alone, it made donations of over \$20.5 million to anti-immigration groups, of which \$19.1 million went to organizations tied to Tanton, including FAIR, CIS, and NumbersUSA.
- Tanton also created The Social Contract Press (TSCP) under the “parent organization” of US, Inc. **The publishing company releases quarterly journals on “population size and rate of growth, protection of the environment and precious resources, limits on immigration, as well as preservation and promotion of a shared American language and culture.”** According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the company has published articles from “dozens of white nationalists and anti-immigrant extremists” such as Holocaust denier Wayne Lutton and American Renaissance founder Jared Taylor.
- **In spring of 1994, Tanton wrote in the Social Contract that “Both dual citizenship and permanent, lifelong resident alien status are ethically unacceptable. People should commit themselves to one polity or another, and participate fully in efforts to improve its social, political and economic life.”** Tanton also opposed multiculturalism and wanted to ensure immigrants in America would be assimilated: “Commonality is also good and essential to workable social arrangements. Too much diversity leads to divisiveness and conflict.” Tanton’s belief that “Migrants are usually selfish in their motivation” is reiterated in publications of the Social Contract Press.
- In September of 2006, Tanton spoke about immigration and compared it to dieting in an interview with George A. Colburn, claiming, “We’re going to have to cut back on the amount of food we eat. We’re going to need to change the type of food we eat in order to come to a different future. In the same way, that’s our idea of the reform of immigration now—is that we need to examine how many and who and how we’re going to try to enforce the rules.”
- In 1984, Tanton donated hundreds of his correspondences to University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library. **According to the SPLC, “the papers in the Bentley Library show that Tanton has for decades been at the heart of the white nationalist scene.”** Tanton took on a specific interest in what he called “passive eugenics,” which advocates for the improvement of the human gene pool by encouraging only those with positive genetic traits to reproduce. **In an April 1975 paper¹ in support of the practice, Tanton wrote: “Far from being racist or genocidal, [passive eugenics] seeks to**

¹ John Tanton Archive, University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library, Boxes 1 - 14, as reproduced by IREHR

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improve the potential of minority groups, which will do more for their prospects than any increase in numbers which might be foregone through larger family size and reproduction outside the years of reproductive efficiency.” From 1985 to 1994, FAIR received funding from the Pioneer Fund, a group that has previously [attracted controversy](#) for funding eugenicists and efforts to prove the existence of “white intellectual superiority.” Tanton’s papers include letters to controversial ecologist and writer [Garrett Hardin](#), [white nationalist Peter Brimelow](#), and more.

- Tanton wrote² extensively to multimillionaire and eugenicist Robert K. Graham, and enlisted his help in attempting to start an [organization](#) called the Society for Genetic Education (SAGE). In a May 1996 letter to Graham, Tanton thanked him for a \$5,000 contribution “towards SAGE’s prospects.” On September 18, 1996, Tanton provided feedback for a paper written by Graham and insisted that it should be carried as a publication, but not “the front-line rationale for SAGE.” He further wrote: “Do we leave it to individuals to decide that they are the intelligent ones who should have more kids? And more troublesome, what about the less intelligent, who logically should have less? Who is going to break the bad news [to less intelligent individuals], and how will it be implemented?” This idea of selective breeding is a fundamental policy pushed by eugenicists, and was [favored](#) by the Nazis, who sought to “[create] a better human race through selective breeding.”
- **On August 8, 1997, Tanton wrote³ to academic and political scientist Samuel Huntington. In the letter, Tanton expressed his fears for “Western civilization” and its decline:** “The situation then is that the people who have been the carriers of Western Civilization are well on the way toward resigning their commission to carry the culture into the future. When this decline in numbers is coupled with an aging of the core population, which means fewer bellicose young males willing to defend the home territory, and with an ideology that such defense is somehow morally illegitimate, it begins to look as if the chances of Western Civilization passing into the history books are very good indeed.” He also warned, “the core peoples are being replaced by more reproductively vigorous stock from abroad.”
- Huntington has been [quoted and published](#) in Tanton’s Social Contract. **In a Summer 2016 article titled “Some Quotes Concerning Islam,” an excerpt of Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations stated: “Three different compilations of data thus yield the same conclusion: In the early 1990s Muslims were engaged in more intergroup violence than were non-Muslims, and two-thirds to three-quarters of intercivilizational wars were between Muslims and non-Muslims. Islam’s borders are bloody, and so are its innards.”**
- Tanton also kept close communication⁴ with Harry Weyher, lawyer and former president of the Pioneer Fund. On December 17, 1981, Tanton wrote to him requesting \$100,000 for a new Media, Research, and Educational proposal for FAIR. On November 14, 1991, Tanton shared an article he translated from German with Weyher titled “Why Are Blacks Such Successful Runners? Discoveries About Men and Their Bodies.” The article, a book review of Mark McCutcheon’s *The Compass in the Nose*, stated that the world was composed of the “Caucasian, Negroid, and Mongolian” races, and attempted to link environmental conditions to purported racial differences: “Those who live under primitive environmental conditions have, as a rule, the highest development of the senses. For example, an Eskimo has a much more highly developed sense of smell than a Caucasian ... The African bushman has an acute sense of hearing and vision.”
- On January 30, 1995, Tanton asked Weyher: “Do you know of any studies on where male aphrodisiacs are most commonly used around the world? It seems that the main market is the orient - very interesting, considering that in general, male Orientals are less well equipped than those of some other groups.”

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

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- **Tanton established connections within the US government through his stances on immigration and advocacy of English as the official language of the United States.** Former California Senator SI Hayakawa aided Tanton in founding US English to abolish bilingual teaching in schools, printings, menus, and more. In an April 1988 speech⁵ titled “English: The Door to Opportunity,” Tanton claimed that the organization boasted 300,000 members and its stated goal was “to maintain for the United States the benefits of a common tongue; and to help minimize conflict along linguistic and ethnic lines.” In a letter from Hayakawa in 1982, he wrote Tanton was “an extraordinarily intelligent and dedicated citizen.”
- Representatives of ProEnglish, another organization founded by Tanton, testified at Congress in 2012 in support of Congressman Steve King’s English Language Unity Act of 2011 bill, which works to make English the only official language of the country. As of 2019, according to ProEnglish, the group had met with President Donald Trump six times to discuss official English-only legislation.
- **While Tanton died in 2019, his wife, Mary Lou Tanton, has continued his anti-immigration advocacy. She is the founder and president of the US Immigration Reform Public Action Committee (PAC).** According to NBC News reporting, Republican Representatives Dave Brat, Mo Brooks, Steve King, and Lou Barletta as well as John James, a businessman and military veteran, and Kris Kobach each received \$500 to \$2,000 from the PAC in 2018. In 2019, the PAC donated between \$1,000 and \$1,500 to the campaigns of King, Kobach, and Maria Espinoza, founder of the non-profit Remembrance Project dedicated “to families of those killed by undocumented immigrants.” Donors to this PAC include supporters of eugenics and forced sterilizations. The PAC was officially terminated in April 2020.

⁵ Ibid.