In Mortal Danger: The Battle for America’s Border and Security Fantasy Themes and Jeremiadic Anti-Immigration Rhetoric

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This project undertakes an analysis of an anti-immigration crusader 2006 screed, In Mortal Danger: The Battle for America’s Border and Security. This principal work by Thomas [Tom] Tancredo served as the rhetorical vision for his unsuccessful campaign for the presidency of the United States in 2008 and his ongoing anti-immigration platform. Many of the stories and discussions Tancredo used in the book are taken from addresses that U. S. representative Tancredo introduced into the Congressional Record. He committed many of his floor speeches to book form in order to gain a wider audience, which consists largely of World Net Daily readers, who share his views and anti-immigration stance. In this essay, we argue that his anti-immigration rhetoric forms a fantasy theme of a world in which there is one U.S. American identity that is void of multiculturalism and outsider influences. This fantasy theme shapes a rhetorical vision that is shared widely among conservative audiences that chains out into broader discourses on immigration, evident in news reports and other conservative groups’ rhetoric on immigration issues.

Keywords: Immigration, Storytelling, Citizenship, Tom Tancredo, Fantasy Themes

Conservatism in modern U. S. American political thought has been on the upswing over the last several decades, with the emergence of the Tea Party movement in 2009 signaling an escalation in conservative rhetoric and emotional investment. Born to an Italian-American second generation immigrant family in Colorado in 1945, Thomas Tancredo is a spokesperson and self-styled shaper of policy for those on the far right extreme of modern U. S. American conservatism. He has long been associated with right wing positions, including his opposition to undocumented immigration accompanied by his calls for immigration reform. The biographical directory of the United States Congress describes Thomas G. Tancredo as a former representative for the state of Colorado. He also ran as a candidate in the Republican primaries for the 2008 presidential election. His stated reason for running was because other candidates did not take a firm enough stance on immigration (McMahon, 2006). Tancredo then ran for governor in Colorado as a Tea Party favorite (Richardson, 2010). He formed the House Committee on Immigration, and stated that he ran to bring the important issue of undocumented immigration to the public. Thomas G. Tancredo’s In Mortal Danger: The Battle for America’s Border and Security (2006) was influenced to some degree by the anxiety/anger-laden worldview shared by many in the United States in a heightened form following the apocalyptic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2011. These events escalated the anxious perception of Americans regarding their relative safety in an unsafe world. Tancredo’s work first reflects this public anxiety and then magnifies and enlarges it.

Beginning with the huge type fonts used for emphasis on the title page to highlight the words “Mortal Danger,” Tancredo has produced a text, which employs inflammatory language and leaps of logic to suggest dire outcomes for the nation if it does not reform and return to what are to him the halcyon values of the 1950s. Pointing fingers of blame at such disparate groups as undocumented immigrants especially from Mexico, Islamic terrorists, “radical” groups ranging from college professors to the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and what he calls the “cult of multiculturalism,” (p. 37) and citing as his sources...
a truly eclectic mix of erroneous appeals to authority. Tancredo writes out of the jeremiadic tradition, an often-used rhetorical construct in 19th, 20th, and 21st century U.S. American political thought. The historical antecedent of the jeremiad is in the writings attributed to the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, said to be the author of the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Lamentations. Many examples of the jeremiad may be noted throughout world literature and political rhetoric. Scholars have noted that the American jeremiad is a tradition distinguished by marked criticism of society and cultural values accompanied by stirring calls for moral reform (Harrell, 2011). Stephenson (2010) cites scholar Sacvan Bercovitch in defining the American jeremiad: “American writers have tended to see themselves as outcasts and isolates, prophets crying in the wilderness. So they have been, as a rule: American Jeremiah, simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream.”

Instances of the American jeremiad can be seen throughout American literature and political discourse, including a proliferation of 19th century examples, some of which Tancredo may have encountered during his time as a high school civics teacher. Harrell (2011) explains that

Jeremiadic discourse has always been a distinguishing construction that exchanged with cultures and governments to aid in the shaping of an idyllic society. In these moralistic texts, the authors acrimoniously lamented the condition of society and its morals in a stern tenor of sustained invective and utilized prophecy as a means of predicting society’s ominous demise. (p. 6)

Examples of the American jeremiad range from the writings of Jonathan Edwards (“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” 1741), to the works of Frederick Douglass between 1863 and 1872, to the 20th century speeches of Martin Luther King. Not all jeremiads are political or religious. Other, more restrained but no less memorable examples, include Rachel Carson’s book, Silent Spring, which warned against the dangers of pesticides. In general, however, highly emotion-charged and often inflammatory indictments of what the author or orator defines as the pressing ills of society or of the soul, linked with passionate calls for reform, are hallmarks of the American jeremiad. To point out that such a rhetorical vision is aimed at shaping the views of its audience is to state the obvious.

Indeed, the study of influential examples of jeremiad in the early years of 21st century America would not be complete without an examination of Tancredo’s In Mortal Danger, which was printed under the auspices of World Net Daily by a small publishing house in Nashville, Tennessee, and has found readers among members of the Tea Party, white supremacist groups, nativist groups, and fellow travelers. In particular, the current study focuses mainly on Part I of the book, subtitled “The American Identity,” in which the author establishes the foundation for his modern American jeremiad. Embarking on a dissection of the American identity in Part I, Tancredo identifies the problems and causes of what he perceives as the ills facing the country, and in so doing lays the groundwork for the remainder of the book. This section of the work is particularly successful in conveying Tancredo’s message. Echoing Part I, the remainder of the book consists of two more somewhat repetitive sections in which Tancredo further develops the themes, while introducing more evidence to bolster his arguments established in Part I.

Because a singular American identity is central to Tancredo’s lamentation about the lost glories of the America of the 1950s, accompanied by a strong indictment of the causes of this Paradise Lost scenario (cf. the tradition of Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets), a

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1 Because of Tancredo’s repeated use of “American” and “America” throughout his text, we have also used those terms in this essay to reflect his framing of what “American” means. Scholars have critiqued the use of “American” and “America” as U.S.-centric, rather than reflecting the entirety of the Americas, including Canada, Mexico, Central America and South America. In some places, we have used United States or U.S. American to reflect this critique.
close reading of the text is both justified and is intended to provide a useful tool in understanding Tancredo. Viewing Tancredo’s work through the lens of Bormann’s (2007) work on fantasy theme analysis and its implications for understanding the rhetorical vision of an author or orator, further elucidation of the text may be achieved. Ultimately, we argue that this rhetorical vision is constructed through fantasy themes related to defining a singular U.S. American identity through the denial of multiculturalism and the construction of outsiders as terrorists. The implications of such rhetoric are found in broader discourses on immigration as moderate politicians and other rhetors have adopted and adapted such anti-immigration rhetoric as their own.

**Immigration Discourse in Communication Studies**

The United States has a long history of poor treatment of people viewed as undesirable. Historians Balderama and Rodríguez (2006) have documented the tenuous Depression-era relationship the United States and U.S. American industries have had with Mexican labor. Beginning at a time when the United States began restricting Asian and European labor, U.S. industrialists often recruited Mexican nationals to fill the need for labor in expanding industries including agriculture, mining, and transportation. The Great Depression changed the climate for immigrants, with many individuals and organizations convinced Mexican immigration was responsible for the financial woes of the country. Balderama and Rodríguez note early examples of Mexicans being portrayed as a burden on the government, as being “un-clean,” and carriers of disease. A large coordinated effort to portray Mexican nationals as a threat preceded the wholesale deportation of people who “appeared Mexican,” including many people born in the United States and others who were also legal citizens. Flores (2003) notes the often-problematic relationship with immigration in U.S. history and the long association of disease and criminality associated with the “illegal alien.” Flores focused on “three performative acts” utilized during the 1930s to reduce the numbers of Mexicans in the U.S., that is, criminalization, deportation, and “the creation of a hostile climate” (p. 375) as represented through the portrayal of Mexican immigrants in the media.

Ono and Sloop (2005) examined various negative representations of immigrants and the rhetorical strategies reported in various media outlets that led to California’s passage of Proposition 187 in 1994. Designed to deny undocumented immigrants state-provided benefits, including education, healthcare, and financial assistance, Proposition 187 is considered to have served as a catalyst for other restrictive legislation throughout the country. Ono and Sloop describe “narrowcasting” as those messages that were designed to resonate with “specific in-group members” rather than messages that are designed for wide-spread public consumption (p. 13). They also contended that messages were targeted to a specific in-group that then transitioned into mainstream discourses on immigration-related issues.

DeChaine (2012) provides further insight into the nature of immigration rhetoric as it moves into the 21st century (Sowards, 2013). In this edited collection, Ono (2012) investigates the border and its effects on individual perceptions of the moving line that defines the border in the minds of conservatives. Ono’s examination of immigration rhetoric includes a border that attaches itself to the physical body of the immigrant: “The body is a readable text, is discursive, and therefore may be understood to have meanings that need to be controlled, disciplined, deported, imprisoned, or discarded” (p. 30). While Ono looks at the traveling border, Chávez (2012) investigates the security ideograph and masculinized rhetoric surrounding the “Secure Border Initiative” and the increasing militarization of the southwestern border. Chávez suggests that the rhetoric of security allows conservative ideology to frame the discourse and debate, and that scholars need to move away from security and rhetorics of militarization to counter this popular trope. Haisan and McHendry (2012) also focus on citizen...
vigilante groups like Minutemen Civil Defense Corps and the Minuteman Project. Increasingly, neoconservative policies of militarization on the border are accepted as a logical defense, a prophylactic against further danger.

Other scholars also focus on conservative rhetoric related to immigration, such as Demo’s (2005) analysis of INS immigration rhetoric and sovereignty tropes exemplified by the 1993 Operation Blockade in El Paso, Texas by the U.S. Border Patrol, and California’s Proposition 187, the 1994 initiative to prevent undocumented immigrants from using government services, that was eventually found to be unconstitutional. Fletcher (2009) examines conservative rhetoric in the Minutemen’s belief that “illegal aliens” bring to the United States a “host of social ills” including, “crime, filth, disease, ignorance, and shoddy work ethics” (p. 224).

Chavez (2008) further explores the “Latino Threat” narrative in media texts, particularly magazine covers. Chavez analyzed competing narratives in media representations of the Minute Men patrol efforts and the immigrant marches in the spring of 2006. Chavez investigates the existing “truths” surrounding the Latino Threat narrative where media representations portray current Latino immigrants differently from previous immigrant groups, that is, that they are unwilling to assimilate, which audiences may see as the destruction of a U.S. American way of life. Sowards and Pineda (2013) also contend that such narratives individualize responsibility and attempt to criminalize behaviors, such as use of health care facilities or public schools.

DeChaine (2009) similarly notes that the signifiers “illegal immigration” and “illegal alien,” link historically to other signifiers including “criminal,” “communist,” “animal,” and “dirty” by rhetorically stigmatizing and effectively “alienizing” its subject (p. 51). DeChaine also observes that the Tancredo phrase of “doing a job the Federal Government won’t” is repeated by Simcox of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps (MCDC) (p. 53). MCDC members frame “illegal immigration” as an invasion and a crime, and promote their organization as “America’s ultimate defense against foreign invasion and terrorism” (p. 53). Brown (2011) also analyzed Tancredo’s rhetoric, and noted themes related to American identity and how such identity is defined by the negative. In particular, Brown observes that “One possible objective within the rhetorical construction of negativity, especially within the confines of defining national identity is exclusivity, simply put, not everyone possesses the characteristics or qualifications to be considered a part of our community,” a specific rhetorical feature of Tancredo’s rhetoric (pp. 13-14).

In the context of identity, Tanno (2004) explores the need to identify on the biographical level (as Spanish), the historical level (as Mexican-American), the cultural level (as Latina), and on the political level (as Chicana). One’s ability to self-identify is a form of empowerment “when being ‘American’ does not yield empowerment and acceptance” (p. 39). Similarly, Pineda and Sowards (2007) argue that flag waving during the 2006 immigration protest marches in response to HR 4377 demonstrates cultural citizenship, civic virtue, and democratic participation. Pineda and Sowards propose that vocal, public opposition in the democratic process is a constitutionally protected form of participation in the democratic ideals of the country. Elsewhere, Sowards and Pineda (2013) also explore immigrant narratives in popular culture, contending that these narratives attempt to create sympathetic portrayals of undocumented immigrants, but may have the counter-effect of reinforcing individual rather than collective approaches to addressing immigration issues.

DeChaine and others note that Tancredo’s rhetoric constructs not just the immigrant in negative terms as communication scholars have suggested (e.g., Brown, 2011; Chavez, 2008; DeChaine, 2009, 2012; Flores, 2003), but also shapes and reinforces a singular U.S. American identity, one that erases multicultural influences and defines the immigrant as outsider/terrorist. To more fully understand the implications of Tancredo’s vitriolic rhetoric, we
use fantasy theme analysis, which is a particularly apt lens to understand the creation of rhetorical vision. According to Foss (2007), “symbolic convergence theory is based on two major assumptions,” first, “communication creates reality;” and secondly, communication shapes “individual meanings for symbols [to] converge to create a shared consciousness or community consciousness” (pp. 109-110). For Bormann (1982), “there is a connection between rhetorical visions and community consciousness, that sharing fantasies is closely connected with motivation, and is an important means for people to create their social realities” (p. 289). Foss notes, “evidence of the sharing fantasies includes cryptic allusions to symbolic common ground” (p. 110).

Tancredo: Second Generation Immigrant and a Life in Politics

Tancredo showed early interest in conservative politics, joining a college Republican organization and the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), described on its website, as “the principal outreach organization of the conservative movement.” (Young America’s Foundation, 2012). Although he publicly spoke in favor of the Vietnam War while a college student, in 1969 he was classified as ineligible to serve, due to a history of depression and anxiety, and therefore avoided military service in the war he supported. By 1976, he had entered politics, winning election to the Colorado House of Representatives and has remained politically active throughout his life (Mulkern, 2005). Ultimately, Tancredo served five terms in the United States House of Representatives. Tancredo was the first chairperson of the House Immigration Reform Caucus (HIRC). Burghart, Ward, and Zesking (2007) hold HIRC members responsible for introducing “some of the most punitive legislation proposed during the last two House sessions.”

Tancredo released In Mortal Danger: the Battle for America’s Border and Security (2006) as a warning. Many of the positions and stories recounted in the text are from Tancredo’s addresses to the floor of the House and, as such, are part of the Congressional Record. It should be noted that this use of previously composed speeches in a somewhat non-topical and disorganized scrapbook fashion produced a rather disorganized manuscript, in which he rambles and jumps from one subject to another. However, he returns repeatedly to his vision, reinforcing his rhetorical view in layers of examples and exhortations. To his desired audience, the impact is apparently strong.

Currently, Tancredo is a contributor to World Net Daily; his weekly column covers politics and immigration. Tancredo remains a staunch critic of the current administration, as well as the previous presidency of George W. Bush. Tancredo uses his policy disputes with President Bush and Carl Rove in In Mortal Danger to enhance his vision. Tancredo presents himself as a lonely defender, fighting for the continued existence of the America of “our Founding Fathers” and of his grandparents. Members of Tancredo’s discourse community continue to consume Tancredo’s rhetoric; he maintains a continued presence in various media events, and Tancredo’s message continues to resonate with his audience.

Evidence of Tancredo’s polemic, nativism, and racist intent beyond his book is bountiful. Tancredo has introduced legislation calling for making English the official language of the United States. Five weeks prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks, Tancredo introduced legislation intended to begin a moratorium on all immigration, including legal immigration, temporary student immigration, and work-related provisional immigration (Burghart et al., 2007). Tancredo points to Miami, Florida as an example of how unchecked immigration can change the very nature of America, “…You could just pick it up and move it someplace. You wouldn’t know you’re in the United States of America. You would certainly say you’re in a Third World Country” (Kovacs, 2006). Tancredo (2007) has called the National Council of La Raza “… a Latino KKK without the hoods or nooses.” In a 2010 article in The Washington Times, Tancredo called for President Barack Obama’s impeachment because “he is a more serious threat to America than al Qaeda.” Tancredo
continued by noting that the President is willfully ignoring the constitutional mandate “to protect states from invasion” after refusing to increase border security. In an address to the first “Tea Party” convention, Tancredo (2010) seemed to advocate for voter suppression by saying “People who could not even spell the word ‘vote,’ or say it in English, put a committed socialist ideologue [sic.] in the White House, name is Barack Hussein Obama.” Tancredo also called for Immigration and Naturalization officials to raid the offices of Senator Dick Durbin during a Dream Act event (Preston, 2007) because Durbin had invited three high school students who were potential beneficiaries of Dream Act legislation. Tancredo uses “protecting America’s borders” to imply something more complete than physical borders. Ultimately, Tancredo wants a homogeneous America like the idealized America of the 1950s.

**Fantasy Theme of American Identity**

*In Mortal Danger: the Battle for America’s Border and Security* is Tancredo’s jeremiadic warning to America, the America that he believes was intended by the Founding Fathers, versus the United States that radical multiculturalists have created. The book emphasizes themes of an idealized past, the destruction of our common traditions, the clash of civilizations, and resistance to other languages and Islam. In the first chapter, Tancredo recounts the reason “our forefathers” came to this country: “they were driven by a passionate resolve to provide the best possible lives for their families, to freely practice their religion, to build wealth through farming and industrial activities, and most important to govern themselves” (p. 21) [e.g. limited government and enhanced individual freedom]. Tancredo warns of pending doom with the fate of Western civilization in the crosshairs and impending return to the dark ages as a possible outcome. He postulates that “Islamofascism” and the “cult” of multiculturalism, working in conjunction with “elites,” academics, and certain groups within the political establishment, are working to destroy Western civilization and America (p. 37).

Therefore, *In Mortal Danger: the Battle for America’s Border and Security* is a cautionary admonishment to U.S. Americans who are searching for the idealized U.S. based on history and tradition versus the United States that is under assault by forces from within and outside of the country. Tancredo begins to develop his rhetorical vision with his dedication to Madeline Cosman, Ph.D., renaissance scholar, attorney, and speaker of the nativist vein. Cosman promotes the idea that immigrants bring diseases including Chagas, polio, and leprosy into the country. Buchanan and Kim (2005) note that Cosman is not a medical doctor although “she talked endlessly about disease.” Tancredo presents excerpts from Cosman’s (2005) article in the *Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons* (JAPANDS), “Illegal aliens and American medicine: The seen and unseen.” For the record, the journal has questionable academic credentials (e.g., see Mencimer, 2009). In this article, Cosman begins by indicting the American system that requires hospitals to render aid, describes the value the medical system places on unchecked “anchor babies,” lists the previously mentioned contagions “illegal aliens” are responsible for, and closes this article with a plan to “prevent medical cataclysm,” which she calls CRAG: “Close America’s borders;” “Rescind the citizenship of anchor babies;” “Aiding and abetting illegal aliens is a crime;” and “Grant no new amnesties” (pp. 8-9). Tancredo expands on Cosman’s concepts, giving credence to the themes of “otherness,” invasion, disease, and militarization, accepting her identification of the true defenders of “our” values and ideals to halt the invasion of the United States.

Tancredo’s fantasy discourse on U.S. American identity continues by recounting the origins of the American nation. Tancredo’s vision of the United States begins with the founding of the country based on freedom of religion and commerce. When England interfered, the colonies revolted and a nation was born. However, Tancredo’s vision of America as a destination for those seeking similar liberties and freedoms is clouded by the specter of undocumented
immigration. For Tancredo, the undocumented immigrant corrupts the pure and noble effort of documented immigrants past and future. According to Tancredo, America is “the greatest nation on earth” and “the last bastion of Western civilization.” He attempts to arouse his audience into action by using various allusions to past glory and idealized times. To him, the real meaning of being an American is that selfless devotion to the American creed that Tancredo alludes to when he refers to the America of the 1950s. He writes that currently, America is under assault by forces that do not share or uphold the “symbols or the substance of the land of the free and the home of the brave” which to him are core values (p. 22). There are various forces working in conjunction for the destruction of America, including “radical college professors,” “large national radical Hispanic groups like LULAC and the National Council of La Raza,” and members of Congress “who are easily spooked by the threat of a massive Hispanic voting bloc…” (p. 15). Tancredo complains that the previously mentioned disregard for the symbols of this country including the significance of Columbus Day. Tancredo’s rhetorical vision/fantasy theme concludes that the increased pressure on re-thinking Columbus as a hero is one of the many assaults on our symbols by the cult of multiculturalism to “destroy our heritage” (p. 27).

Continuing to expand upon his rhetorical vision for establishing an American identity, Tancredo warns his audience of an organized plot to introduce a “cult of multiculturalism” and its agenda of undoing American institutions and eliminating the “melting pot” that is [or was] America. Multiculturalism, according to Tancredo, interrupts the assimilation process. Tancredo uses his immigrant grandparents as an example of the melting pot; his grandparents “either worked or they starved” (p. 22). He proudly states that his grandparents knew “that certain things became very important—like learning English” (p. 22). He avows that they had to work their way out of poverty if they wanted to aspire to the “American Dream” (p. 22). But he deplores that in today’s America, immigrants know they do not need to leave their language or attachments behind; they only need to swear their allegiance to the cult of multiculturalism. It is clear that in Tancredo’s writing, the term “cult of multiculturalism” is used as a symbolic cue or trigger, cf. classic fantasy theme analysis. It signals this specific rhetorical community’s identification of the “other.”

In a sweeping and highly generalized combination of two distinctly separate topics, Tancredo interweaves the immigration problem with his second great concern for the future of the nation, multiculturalism. He suggests that the mass demonstrations regarding immigration in March and April of 2006 were manifestations of a growing movement that is demanding much more than another blanket amnesty, for, as he explains, the demonstrators and their advocates seek to prevent America’s right to defend her borders. The mass demonstrations were portrayed as immigrant-rights protests, but Tancredo warns that their real message is: “we are here, we are not going home, we demand the right to cross your borders any time we choose, and we demand our human rights” (p. 14). Building on this theme, Tancredo warns his audience of the backers of these large protests, which he identifies as the Catholic Church and other religious institutions, the Service Employees’ International Union, and Spanish-language media. Tancredo continues by arguing that “large national radical Hispanic groups like LULAC and the National Council of La Raza and many school districts—in some cases actually encouraged—students to participate” [in the marches] (pp. 14-15). He complains that rather than honoring the wishes of the “297 million Americans” who were not protesting in the April and May 2006 demonstrations, the media focused on the spectacle of protestors (p. 15).

Warming to his topic, Tancredo writes that America is “intoxicated with the idea of multiculturalism” (p. 22). He groused that new immigrants soon surmise that there is no reason to learn English or leave their old affiliations behind. For Tancredo, “some say” we are “soft” and “self-centered,” and that we cannot survive without an
indentured class to maintain our fields and factories (p. 23). Tancredo contests the argument that immigrants come to the country to do jobs Americans will not do, writing, “I did those same jobs when I was younger, as did my children” (p. 23), although he does not actually provide any examples of the work he claims to have done. Reinforcing the development of his fantasy theme, Tancredo extolls his idealized American of the past, who he says valued honesty; today, he charges that America values cheap labor over honesty. Tancredo questions whether today’s America is not like the hedonistic, failed societies of past civilizations, but he does see something worth redeeming. Every time Tancredo attends a swearing-in ceremony for new citizens, he welcomes them to the country and thanks them for doing it the “right way” (p. 23). Tancredo reinforces that point by transitioning into a refutation of illegal immigration in the next sentence, suggesting that we mock the entire immigration process every time we offer the same benefits to “illegal” immigrants, rights reserved for legal immigrants.

Tancredo reinforces his vision with the writing of Arthur M. Schlessinger, Jr. on John Stuart Mill. According to Tancredo, Schlessinger described Mill’s work as postulating that there are two elements that define a nation, a desire “to be governed together” and a common understanding based on a shared history or “heritage” (p. 29), and that different languages make it difficult for democratic nations to exist. Extending Mill’s argument as conveyed by Schlesinger, Tancredo charges that multiculturalism divides and segregates America. He continues that radical multiculturalism “exacerbates” the “balkanization of America,” writing “we need to confer citizenship only on those desirous of severing all ties to their country of origin…” (p. 205, emphasis in the original).

Focusing on the educational system as a means of teaching cultural values, Tancredo charges that the cult of multiculturalism has a major influence on the education system. Tancredo uses Black’s (2005) summary of the “insidiousness of this cult . . . at least three generations of young Americans believe” their “land is populated by men and women who are homophobic, bigoted, misogynistic, exploitive, environmentally insensitive, and morally corrupt” (p. 8). Tancredo charges that rather than teaching young people that they are part of the greatest nation on earth, we are teaching them to hate America. Tancredo proposes a congressional resolution mandating that every student graduating from American schools be able to “articulate an appreciation for Western civilization” (p. 51). Tancredo focuses on the picture of the invasion of our borders from “without” with a Macaulay poem, “Horatius at the Gate,” (cf. Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), a 19th century favorite which recounts the story of how a few brave defenders gave their lives to slow an inevitable barbarian invasion of their home [Rome] (p. 51). He ends the section with a quotation from Will Durant speculating on Rome’s open embrace of many cultures and her reluctance to educate the masses as a possible reason for Rome’s end. It must be noted that Tancredo uses Durant as quoted by David Keene during a Center for Immigration Studies panel discussion. In actuality, Will Durant referenced western civilization in a relatively non-biased manner.

Continuing his criticism of multiculturalism, Tancredo congratulates his Hispanic colleagues in the House for honoring the achievements of Hispanic Americans but wonders why race-based caucuses exist. In contrast, Tancredo promotes assimilation, for after September 11, 2001, Tancredo witnessed Americans uniting “as a people against the threat of international terrorism” (p. 32). In order for America to preserve the traditions of Western Civilization, we must unite in order to face further assaults on our culture and way of life.” He writes, “we should not be divided along racial and ethnic lines;” “no hyphenated

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2We use the term Hispanic here because of Tancredo’s usage, rather than Latina/o, the preferred term by many Latina/o scholars.
Americans, please” (p. 32). That includes original peoples, or, as he puts it, no “Native-Americans” but simply, Americans (p. 34). He believes that multiculturalism is destroying the unity needed to preserve the nation: Americans must be united in the face of global terrorism.

As illustrated through these examples, a central theme for Tancredo is America’s identity crisis, particularly in U.S. American religions. Tancredo uses Sun Tzu’s admonition to know your enemy and know yourself to further demonize [“illegal”] immigrants. Tancredo believes that there is a real war between the United States, Western Civilization, and Islamofascism. Tancredo quotes an 1899 [emphasis added] statement by Winston Churchill disparaging “Mohammedanism.” Churchill, who was, after all, a product of his era, used references of rabid dogs, sloppy agricultural practices, and misogynistic and patriarchal practices to describe any region where Islam was the norm. Tancredo notes that there are over seven million Muslims in the United States, with 130,000 in Dearborn, Michigan, where they have built “at least sixty mosques” and “had the look of a spruced-up Islamabad” (p. 73), which he deplores. Again, he points out that the cult of multiculturalism requires no assimilation, “calls to prayer are announced, in Arabic, from loudspeakers, and all signage is written in Arabic” (p. 73). Tancredo finds the idea of a standard call to worship for a non-Christian religion repellant.

Moving from lamentation and indictment to solution, Tancredo then outlines what we should do to protect our country. Tancredo’s response to a question on a radio show on what America’s response should be to a nuclear attack on American soil refers to “taking out their holy sites” (p. 78). And he charges that the cult of multiculturalism revels in its near-universal condemnation of the mere suggestion that the West might ponder putting such a possibility on the table” (p. 78). In “Our American Identity,” Tancredo attempts to link together a sweeping generalization of the cult of multiculturalism, hate of American customs and ideals, Islamofascism, and lax protection of our borders. Quoting FBI Director Robert Mueller Jr.’s testimony before Congress in 2005, Tancredo writes that individuals connected with al Qaeda adopted false Hispanic identities to blend into American society. Using this and other similar instances as his justification, he proceeds to merge his discussion of undocumented immigrants with that of terrorism. It must be noted that Tancredo’s inclusion of the Canadian border seems an afterthought; the Canadian border is mentioned two times throughout the entire text while Mexico and the Mexican border merit sixty-nine mentions.

Tancredo begins this “solutions” section with the following purported evidence: Richard Clark, the Bush and Clinton counterterrorism czar noted that of the over 17,000 people missing in the United States, some are from countries of concern. Further, Tancredo points out that “In 2003, the Border Patrol ‘snagged’ about 39,000 illegal immigrants from countries ‘other than Mexico,’” including some “special interest aliens” (p. 81). He claims that authorities are well aware of training camps near Matamoros where “a large number of people” are “trained in paramilitary warfare and exotic explosives” by the Zetas (p. 81), and that these training camps are visited “by a variety of ethnic groups, including Arab [sic.] and Asian nationals” (p. 80). Tancredo further reports that FBI director Robert Mueller, in his annual report to Congress, described a smuggling operation “organized by Hezbollah that had operatives cross the Mexican border to carry out possible terror attacks inside the United States” (p. 81). Tancredo expressed surprise that this intelligence was not reported to Congress before the annual report to the Congressional subcommittee in charge of financing, complaining that no report was released to Congress or released to the public, that the news “was buried in routine testimony” (p. 81).

Tancredo closes this section of In Mortal Danger with a discussion titled “The War on Terror comes to our Backyard.” Herein, Tancredo recounts that Sheriff Sigfredo Gonzalez Jr.’s “biggest fear is that the smugglers will bring terrorists and dirty bombs in to this country through his county” (p. 84). He writes that
Gonzalez is frustrated with the lack of support he receives from the United States Border Patrol. For example, as he tells it, Sigfredo’s men heard “people marching in cadence,” “approximately thirty men dressed in black and marching in twos” (p. 85) but because “the deputies were out manned and out gunned, they quietly observed” (p. 85). Later, nineteen of the men were apprehended and one was a member of the original Zetas. Similarly, the Sheriff in Jim Hogg County warned readers of the local newspaper that citizens and ranchers had spotted men dressed in military fatigues “wearing ‘professional-looking’ backpacks and walking in military cadence” (p. 85). Again, “In another Tex-Mex border county,” deputies discovered cylinders with Arabic writing, which caused the sheriff to produce a training CD that featured a picture of Osama bin Laden and urged his “officers and agents” “to stop looking for him [Osama] and start looking at the mega-drug cartels running rampant south of the border” (p. 86).

Tancredo builds on his theme of invasion, with the complacency of a government that will not enforce existing laws, by recounting a December 2005 report by the Department of Homeland Security indicating the “arrest of dozens of terrorist operatives” (p. 86). Tancredo states that the officials reported identifying up to “fifty one people from countries known to support terrorist activities” since the Border Patrol and the Joint Terrorism Task force began tracking arrests from countries like Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Syria (p. 86). The 2005 report was the first time Tancredo had seen information “regarding suspected terrorists inside the United States” despite his numerous attempts to secure this information (p. 86). He adds that in 2005, Texas Congressman John Culberson released information about an Iraqi with ties to al Qaeda who had been arrested, and cites Arizona congressional representative J. D. Hayworth, who reminded the public “that for every illegal border crosser caught at the border, another three make it in” (p. 87).

Tancredo finishes this section with several dramatic interrogatives: is the infiltration of the nation through its “porous borders” a wakeup call? (p. 87). “Where are they? What are they planning? Where are they planning to strike? When? How many are there?” (p. 87). “How rough do the seas have to get before we know the storm is about to engulf us?” (p. 87). The fantasy theme and rhetorical vision Tancredo presents to his conservative community is overwhelmingly negative, even paranoid, in this section, and surely generates anxiety among his readers.

Intensifying the argument and rhetorical vision alike, the author next turns to graphic descriptions of various massacres, some but not all, linked to terrorism. First, Tancredo recounts his trip to Beslan, North Ossetia, Russia, in 2004, after a school invasion resulting in hostage taking and a massacre perpetrated by approximately 36 suspected Chechen Islamic militants. Linking an isolated act of adolescent violence with organized terrorism, he explains that his district in Colorado was the location of the Columbine school massacre and that he went to Beslan to offer condolences to the citizens of another massacre that he considers similar to the Columbine incident because of the shared school ground settings. Tancredo graphically describes the scattered body parts, numbers of casualties including children and, importantly, applauds the subsequent governmental changes that Vladimir Putin put in place. He states approvingly that Putin rolled back “some democratic reforms, reinstating Stalinist measures and controls,” he dismissed some party officials, replaced others and proposed the elimination of party selection for public officials” (p. 92). The horrific details of this tragedy that Tancredo offers so graphically serve to heighten the resonance of his rhetorical vision and undoubtedly have a powerful impact on the audience who share in his fantasy theme, linking them in a shared fantasy chain. Having overwhelmed his audience with myriad examples giving ample reason for alarm, he writes that he would not advocate suspending habeas corpus but would support “common sense measures such as terrorist profiling, eliminating all immigration from terrorist-sponsoring nations, and securing our borders” (p. 98).
Ultimate Lamentation:
A Prophet Not Respected

Thomas Tancredo describes what he feels is the imminent danger other cultures pose to “Western civilization” in general and the United States in particular. Tancredo recalls a United States of a different time, where immigrants who aspired to the promise of the American Dream left their old loyalties and fidelities behind. They may have spoken their language of origin at home, but they spoke English in public in order to survive. Tancredo reminds his audience that, in the America of the 1950s, people respected the customs, institutions, and concepts of civic duty, including respect for religious institutions and tradition. In the past, Tancredo affirms, people knew that the United States was the greatest nation in the world, which was their reason for immigrating. They came “to join a new, exciting nation built not from conquest but on ideals” (p. 32). However, Tancredo laments in the best jeremiadic tradition that, in his shared fantasy vision, the United States is being invaded by hordes of people who refuse to adapt to our heritage or ideals, as illustrated by the 2006 pro-immigrant rights protests.

He contends that the United States is being undermined by the force and influence of “the cult of multiculturalism,” which is a major symbolic cue or trigger in his fantasy theme version of reality. One need only recall the arguments of the radical right to understand the efficacy of this cue in triggering a fantasy chain of understanding of reality. To further his argument against multiculturalism as enhanced by a push toward the proliferation of the acceptance of various languages rather than an insistence on English only, Tancredo gives examples of cities that are burdened by multiple translations of official documents, such as Denver, Colorado.

Off and on throughout the somewhat disorganized text, Tancredo often breaks into the development of his major fantasy theme to self-analyze as a pure, noble politician by repeatedly reminding his audience of his dedication and commitment to his constituents. He excoriates politicians who lose sight of their original reason for taking office, proclaims his independence from the confines of party conformity, and indictsthe leader of his party (President George W. Bush at the time) in the process. Tancredo admits his stance on undocumented immigration has alienated him from money sources within his party, but writes that his concern with dealing with the problems undocumented immigration inflicts on the country is its own reward. Tancredo laments the loss of several congressional leadership positions he [might] have had if he were not so vocal in his protestations. However, Tancredo affirms that “Western civilization, as epitomized by the American experience” is worth saving even as he contends that our (radical Islamist) enemy/enemies use religion as “fuel” for their mission as they see death as a pathway to “endless sensual pleasure.” Resoundingly, Tancredo feels that Islam is a threat to the future of Western civilization and the United States. Not stopping there, he argues that Islamists, terrorists, undocumented immigrants [read Mexican nationals], the proponents of the “cult of multiculturalism” and assorted misguided liberal and intellectual groups—all, collectively, are the enemies who are putting our nation “In Mortal Danger.”

Tancredo insists he is a voice of reason, the last defense against the cult of multiculturalism. And Tancredo has allies, for a veritable Greek chorus of anti-immigrant voices joins Tancredo at World Net Daily. Working in unison, they strive, like Pamela Geller, whose byline on World Net Daily is “Protecting the West,” to prevent a foreign invasion. Geller (2011) wrote Stop the Islamization of America: A Practical Guide to the Resistance (World Net Daily) and recently won a Federal case allowing her to display a poster containing the message “Support Israel, Stop Jihad” in the New York subway system (Weiser, 2012). Continuing this anti-diversity platform, Buchanan’s (2006) State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America and his (2011) Suicide of a Superpower: Will America Survive to 2025? (2011) invoke similar vitriolic rhetoric. Suicide’s
liner-notes state, “America was born a Western Christian republic…but is being transformed into a multiracial, multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic stew of a nation that has no precedent in the history of the world.” And consider Phyllis Schlafly, president and founder of the Eagle Forum and another World Net Daily Contributor. Schlafly writes about “women’s issues” and voter fraud; her last published book, coauthored with George Neumayr, No Higher Power: Obama’s War on Religious Freedom was also published by Tancredo publisher World Net Daily. Together, the writers contribute to a paranoid discourse that Alex Pareene of Salon has called “the biggest, dumbest wingnut site on the internet” (2011).

Indeed, Tancredo and his cohorts reinforce the militarized border trope that Chávez (2012), Demo (2005), and DeChaine (2009, 2012) investigate. Tancredo entered the 2008 election because he felt candidates on both sides were not addressing an issue in reference to which Americans are “at odds” with their leaders. Tancredo’s idea of immigration reform changed from supporting a complete moratorium into espousing a self-deportation scheme that included dropping the 14th Amendment because it privileges Mexican mothers who “come to the United States just to give birth” (p. 165). In his work, Tancredo effectively subverts moral action; his rhetoric has become part of the civic discourse. Rather than submit recognized scholarship to buoy his arguments, Tancredo begins his tome with a dedication to Cosman whose specialty is far divorced from the subject matter of modern American politics, but who does not hesitate to freely label the immigrant as illegal, unclean, unwilling to assimilate, and unwilling to learn or speak English. Tancredo represents a faction of Americans who use hateful rhetoric to undo the democratic underpinnings of United States governance. Tancredo builds a central fantasy theme of American exceptionalism that at once places the America of his grandparents and the founding fathers against the unclean, diseased other. In his worldview, Tancredo’s America is threatened, and he and his allies will stop at nothing to prevent the collapse of the United States and its ideals and values.

Tancredo effectively builds a fantasy upon a “fear of small numbers” (Appaduri, as cited in DeChaine, 2009) in the larger population, followed by appeals to tradition and authority, to ultimately ostracize the invader. Of particular import is Tancredo’s cavalier attitude regarding the Dream Act and his willingness to reinterpret the 14th Amendment. Tancredo would punish young people who, through no fault of their own, were brought to the United States by their parents at an early age. Potentially, this would victimize youth who are fully assimilated and know no other culture than predominant U.S. culture. He calls for “returning” fully assimilated, U.S. educated youth to a country they do not know and cannot relate to. In his view, the parents’ “violation” of the sovereignty of Tancredo’s America therefore warrants the destruction of young lives. For Tancredo, his country is in danger of imminent destruction. Ironically, on one hand, Tancredo condemns the hypothetical unwillingness to assimilate while casting out fully assimilated youth. Tancredo uses time-tested means of creating a fantasy theme based on an alien invasion, uncleanliness, and criminality. Tancredo’s invaders interrupt the traditions and vision of our founding fathers. Their radical multiculturalism and unwillingness to be bound by a common language disunites America. Tancredo offers a vision of a Rome [read America] free of barbarian invaders, perhaps seeing himself as being like noble Horatius, stemming the tide of an invasion at America’s borders.

Tancredo is one voice on a roster filled with right wing, culturally insensitive, homophobic, bigoted, misogynistic, exploitive, environmentally insensitive, and morally corrupt anti-multiculturalists, the very indictment Tancredo implies that “three generations of young Americans believe” (p. 46). That Thomas G. Tancredo continues to garner attention is evidence that his rhetorical vision resonates in the collective imagination of the radical right. His messianic worldview, expressed in chaotic and inflammatory
language, and dramatically conveyed by the vehicle of a shared group fantasy, leaves a significant impact on his audience. Thomas Tancredo and the political faction he represents are dangerous. Historically, nationalism and natavistic rhetoric leads to violence; Burke (1973), for one, recognized the importance of careful analysis of politicized discourse and scapegoating in his work, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” (see Sowards & Pineda, 2013, for more detailed analysis). Bormann’s fantasy theme analysis is an important tool for the systematic analysis of Tancredo’s message. If, indeed, Bormann’s two major premises are correct, Tancredo does work toward creating social reality for his audience while designing his constructed message with the inevitable goal of creating a symbolic common ground. Tancredo’s vision of a homogenous, exclusive America with no room for cultural validation is an invitation for a violent reaction and is ultimately unworthy of a nation promoting ideas and values associated with freedom of expression. The rhetorical visions embedded in Tancredo’s In Mortal Danger are visions many share. However distasteful, ignoring inconvenient rhetoric prevents us from learning, for we ignore the rhetoric of Thomas G. Tancredo at our peril. As such, it is of vital importance for communication scholars to continue using close textual examination of symbolic convergence and fantasy theme analysis as a means to continue to analyze and deconstruct anti-immigration rhetoric.

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