

Resistance and Resilience 3-D

By Larry Kleinman¹

*Fear, ever-present.
Immigration agents sweeping in without warning:
...questioning anyone 'foreign' looking,
...arresting a father or mother in front of their children,
...stonewalling appeals for humanitarian "discretion",
...separating families indefinitely,
...drag-netting workplaces,
...enlisting local police collaboration,
...seemingly with no end in sight.*

The description sounds like it was “ripped from the headlines”. And it could have been...from the headlines in 1977 or 1982 or 1985.

And, of course, from today’s headlines as well.

It’s terrifying, exhausting and demoralizing. We feel and we know that we must stay in the fight. *But how?*

As described below, one broad takeaway from the similar resistance waged decades ago is the need to **(re-)define “victories” and avoid becoming crushed by the quantity and frequency of defeats.**

Eighteen months in...and (at least) *thirty* to go

Since Inauguration Day 2017, our movement has waged countless battles against the multi-pronged assault on immigrants. We can claim key victories, mostly on the litigation front and at the state/local level, especially in the cities, where most immigrants live. Overall, though, we’ve lost ground and we’ll certainly lose more in the thirty months that remain of this Administration. Even if an electoral wave on November 6th sweeps away Republican control of Congress, we can count on Trump to accelerate the anti-immigrant offensive. In the unlikely event that Trump resigns or is removed, Pence’s only change would probably be toning down the rhetoric.

There’s a mounting and alarming toll: on immigrants and mixed status families, on immigrant communities and immigrant-serving organizations, and on our nation and body politic. For most organizers, community navigators, immigration legal services workers and immigrant organization leaders, there’s an accumulation of stress and trauma—direct and indirect—that threatens our well-being and impairs our effectiveness. Fatigue and burn-out are palpable and growing threats to sustaining our resistance.

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Much of what we're experiencing—and resisting—today was the norm in the pre-IRCA “amnesty” times of the mid-1970s thru the mid-1980s. A good deal of it has existed continuously for nearly a century.

Resisting “La Migra”

That was our mission in 1977, when we—a handful of Chicano activists and progressive legal practitioners (myself included) in Oregon—responded to escalating INS raids by forming the Willamette Valley Immigration Project (WVIP). Every month, somewhere in Oregon, squads of agents descended on fields and labor camps, factories, apartments, movie theaters, and dance halls. Our strategy combined community organizing and “know your rights” outreach, with deportation legal defense, family immigration services, litigation, and advocacy to build a community base and to confront/slow the INS. WVIP was part of a modest wave of local efforts spawned by two national organizations: the Centro de Acción Social Autónomo and the National Lawyers Guild.

Powered initially by little more than our righteous anger and mostly aspirational legal strategies, we soon hit the wall. It wasn't a border-type wall (that went up years later). It was a wall of community fear cemented by INS intimidation. A year or so in, we had to confront the fact that we were “losing” way more than “winning”. We managed to catch INS off-guard and pulled off a few attention-getting wins. But we prevented very few deportations. Despite knowing their rights, most workers understandably gave in to INS threats and pressure.

We came to internalize and adjust to the reality that *we were engaged in an indefinite low intensity war*. We could have realistically expected to meaningfully impact only a very small portion of INS operations. We were way over-matched but we saw that we were not entirely defenseless. We had to adapt. Tactically speaking, INS waged an intermittent war on the community and we—in classic guerrilla fashion—combined deep community organizing and due process legal maneuvering to mount occasional ambushes.

Eventually, INS agents mostly avoided coming to our town of Woodburn because they (rightly) anticipated that they'd probably net fewer arrests and might well have to do much more work than usual to convert arrests into deportations. Our organization and our community came to see that as our signature “victory”.²

“Low Intensity War”

If the immigrants' right movement must embrace the notion that we are, again, in a kind of war, it seems important that we understand its characteristics.

² *Resisting La Migra*, a narrative of WVIP's key battles with the INS—victories and defeats—is available at <https://pcun.org/category/larrys-writings>. WVIP and its worker base went on to found PCUN, Oregon's farmworker union, in 1985.

The War on Immigrants, like all war, employs violence to subjugate and destroy. This Administration has unleashed and openly sanctioned psychological and physical violence at levels well beyond standard “law enforcement.”

“Low intensity” is, of course, not the experience of those most directly affected, but rather of the broader population. For the most part, ICE is rarely present in any given community. Intensity does vary considerably depending on factors such as local/state policies and politics affecting the level of police cooperation, as well as the visible activism of influential allies and/or adversaries.

The Administration’s War “3-D” meta-strategies

By my count, the Administration has announced and/or launched at least three dozen major anti-immigrant offensives. Courts have enjoined some, others await regulatory or bureaucratic action. And surely more are on the drawing board.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions and the Administration’s other war commanders all plainly understand that they cannot muster the logistical, legal, and political force needed to remove even a major fraction of the immigrants without status. To greatly augment their War’s direct impacts, they encourage Trump’s incessant and pointed hate rhetoric and rely on it to elevate fear and fatigue, inducing surrender.

The 3-Ds of intended outcomes are: *self-Deportation*, *self-Detention*, and *self-Demobilization*.

“*Self-Deportation*” seeks to pressure some portion of immigrants to leave “voluntarily.” Mitt Romney made it the centerpiece of his immigration platform in 2012. Today it’s the War’s central goal and, by now, has forced out as many as several hundred thousand immigrants.

“*Self-Detention*” best signifies the intended outcomes of countless repressive initiatives designed to pressure or demoralize immigrants into a de facto, self-imposed “house arrest.” The unmistakable messages are: “*don’t go to work, school, or clinic, don’t apply for benefits, don’t petition for your spouse, don’t apply for citizenship, don’t be ‘enumerated’ in the 2020 Census.*” For those who can’t handle the isolation and deprivation, there’s “self-deportation”.

“*Self-Demobilization*” is the Administration’s hoped-for effect of targeting some undocumented immigrants who take visible leadership. It’s a goal of the “Build The Wall” drumbeat and National Guard deployments, of “mandatory” federal criminal prosecution for border entry without inspection, and so much more. The core messages are “*don’t organize, don’t speak up or defend yourself, and don’t come to this country.*”

What’s different now...and (sort of) the same

Seen in the long view, these trends seem like reversions to pre-Obama Era paradigms:

- ICE freed of internal and executive branch restraints, a virulent resurgence of the “vigilante” culture which the Obama Administration tried to root out or discourage;

- Big-scale raids arresting hundreds at work-places;³
- Almost non-existent favorable exercise of discretion in enforcement;⁴
- Shifting USCIS from a “benefits service” to a “fraud detection” oriented operation;⁵

Though not completely new, these trends—a mix of negative and positive—seem markedly different than in past eras:

- The communications explosion, providing us instant and mass-scale connectivity, but also plaguing the community with a morass of disinformation, rumor, and...
- The President’s relentless demagoguery and degradation of fact, dominating public debate, a gateway for imposing dictatorship;
- ICE’s capacities and powers: more agents, mass hearings, advanced technology, massive information sources, private detention facilities, and the “instant final removal orders”⁶ severely undercutting resistance strategies which rely on due process;
- Major expansion of immigration legal services, especially community-driven program and pro bono defense, including litigation;
- Meaningful protection, solidarity and support from progressive city and state governments,⁷ all of which was utterly inconceivable in the 1970s or 1980s;
- Assertive federal district and circuit courts demonstrating much less deference to executive powers.

Mindset and strategies for combat and life in a Low Intensity War environment

To paraphrase a Civil Rights anthem, if we’re to wake up every day with our minds set on freedom—and not on *failure*, we also have to have our minds set on resilience.

That can start with this simple definition: “*resilience is the ability to rapidly return to ‘normal’ both physically and emotionally after a stressful event.*”

³ The recent meat-packing plant raid in Morristown, TN resembles the 2008 Iowa raids and the Reagan Administration’s 1982 “Operation Jobs” campaign. (Google “Immigration Service Operation Jobs” and click on the excerpt from Ana Raquel Minian Andjel’s 2012 book *Undocumented Lives: History of U.S. Mexico Migration 1965 to 1986.*)

⁴ Historically speaking, the Obama Administration’s 11/20/14 policy shift to priority-only enforcement represented a huge shift that we can now see more clearly after the Trump Administration eliminated and repudiated it.

⁵ In the pre-Department of Homeland Security days, when USCIS and ICE were one seamless INS, application adjudications tended to be more hard-edged and adversarial, as well.

⁶ The auto-reinstatement of previous final orders of removal, a procedure which became law in 1996 but is only now becoming a central element of strategies targeting the immigrants most vulnerable to summary deportation.

⁷ Mostly in the forms of limiting cooperation with ICE, public funding of deportation legal defense, drivers card, professional licensing, and in-state tuition and some scholarship funding, plus aggressive, mostly successful litigation to defend these measures.

Every deportation feels like a defeat, but is an especially “stressful event” when it involves a long-term resident deeply rooted in family and community. We experience and carry an accumulation of those traumas. But that’s become typical in this low intensity war.

“Typical” can’t come to mean “acceptable.” Rather, it must be “endurable,” no easy feat.

One disservice we can do to ourselves is to calculate our worth, or the worth of our resistance as a “simple sum” with a formulaic “bottom line” of “victories minus defeats.” That will be a negative number, adding to our psychological burden. *In a low intensity war, we strengthen our resilience when we **unqualifiedly value our victories**—like INS’s apparent avoidance of Woodburn—and find paths to **acknowledge but move past defeats**.*

Elements of a resilience posture

Resilience is as unique as each of us. It has no set formula, but experience suggests these as possible approaches relevant to our era:

- Re-imagine “resistance”. For undocumented immigrants in a self-Detention environment, ***living your daily life is an act of resistance***. This casts resistance much more inclusively than our reflexive notions of protests and campaigns because it takes head on what President Franklin Roosevelt famously called out as “fear itself” during the depths of the 1930s Depression.
- Think—and reinforce—community resilience. The focus on “self-care”, essential though it is, carries, for some, a connotation that individuals are to blame, thereby deepening a sense of guilt. A related concern is “resilience” (mis)used to normalize or even glamorize trauma.
- Summon the power of our “foundational” experiences. At the recent gathering⁸ on resistance and resilience, one leader described keeping and occasionally bringing out the clothing she had kept from that day she crossed the border as a young child.
- Maintain, build and share a local narrative of the value and contributions of intact families and the loss to community, economy, and psyche that each divided family occasions. *We continue this struggle in the names of those unjustly forced to leave.*
- Prioritize connection with our base. Back in the day, house visits and phone calls were the primary means. That kind of personal interaction often served as a brief respite from the fear. It reinforced our bond in ways that mobilization outreach and social media interaction sometimes don’t.

⁸ A three-day gathering in June at the CAPACES Leadership Institute convening 21 immigrant rights’ leaders from 15 organizations in the national Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FIRM) network. Going forward, the CLI will organize and host a similar gathering every June. The gathering employs peer conversation and the CLI’s “Seven Dimensions” method for understanding and dealing with “dilemmas” facing movement leaders in sustaining themselves in the work.

- Connect with folks in other strands of the social justice movement. How are they coping with anger, fear and guilt? What renews their strength and resolve?
- Remember or visualize heroism from the darkest times of struggle. The *outcomes* of iconic struggles color our present-day sense of them: lunch counter sit-ins and “freedom rides” on interstate buses catalyzed decisive breakthroughs in dismantling segregation in public accommodations. Try to imagine and learn about how it *felt at the time*, when risk of injury and death was acute and breakthrough was anything but assured.
- Remind ourselves that the pendulum of struggle will swing back, powered less by grand events and more by the accumulation of countless small acts of struggle. These include acts that slow the swing away from human rights and acts that gather/align our forces for the swing back. Interestingly, as recently reported in *The Intercept*, key anti-immigrant leaders think that *they’re* already losing. In their narrative, even their dream Attorney General, their presidential champion-in-chief, and his sway over Republican congressional leaders will fail to permanently curtail immigration while the white population shrinks and the Latino population grows.

The *Así Se Puede* spirit

The immigrants’ rights movement has long embraced the farmworker movement’s aspirational slogan, *Si Se Puede*. The sense of hope and resolve that it conjures has launched and sustained countless drives to turn back repression, demand justice and make change happen. We continue to apply that spirit to the challenges of turning back Trump’s “3D” war on immigrants.

To find our ways of moving past our defeats and appreciating our victories, we also need what the CLI calls the *Así Se Puede* mentality: Think of it as “Thus, We Can.”