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## **In Porous Border, GOP Sees An Opening Candidates Take Hard Line To Rally Conservative Base**

*By Jonathan Weisman*

ORO VALLEY, Ariz. -- When 11-term Rep. Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.) announced his retirement, he bestowed his endorsement on soft-spoken state Rep. Steve Huffman. Only someone in his own moderate mold, Kolbe declared, could prevail in a demographically diverse district stretching from the affluent foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains above Tucson to the rugged border of Mexico.

But when the long-simmering issue of illegal immigration boiled over this year, Huffman lost his favored status in the Sept. 12 Republican primary in the 8th Congressional District and was gasping to keep up with anti-immigration firebrands in his party -- and even with some in the other.

"Stop the invasion," conservative Democrat Bill Johnson bellowed at a candidates' forum last week, as the sun set through the picture window of the Church of the Nazarene here.

"Not only can we secure the border -- we *must* secure the border," trumpeted former state representative Randy Graf, widely considered the new front-runner for the Republican nomination.

There seems to be little doubt that a hard line against illegal immigration is the safer position in a GOP primary. But many Republicans believe, in a year when many national trends are not blowing their way, that it is also the safer position in a general election.

It is a counterintuitive strategy: The way to win a swing district is not with a campaign aimed at swing voters. Instead, the goal is to motivate conservatives with anti-illegal-immigration appeals, hoping they overcome their disenchantment with GOP policies in Washington.

Of course, Republicans also hope to snare independents and even some wayward Democrats with the immigration issue. But they plan to do it with hot words -- not with the cool centrism that is more typical in districts where both parties have run competitively.

In a way, this strategy borrows from President Bush's rally-the-base approach to winning reelection in 2004, even though it is based on spurning Bush's stance on the immigration issue. Like Kolbe, the Bush administration wants tough border security measures combined with new, legal avenues toward work and citizenship for the country's estimated 11 million illegal immigrants. Many conservatives fear this would be a de facto amnesty for undocumented workers.

It may be little surprise that immigration is a flash point in this district, which is 18 percent Hispanic. But the issue echoes in House campaigns around the country, and the tenor of the debate on the Republican side has grown increasingly unified and increasingly punitive.

In Upstate New York, Republican state Sen. Raymond A. Meier has made a border crackdown and opposition to "amnesty" for illegal immigrants centerpieces of his race to hold the seat of retiring Rep. Sherwood L. Boehlert for his party. House Republicans held an immigration field hearing this month in Dubuque, Iowa, where Rep. Jim Nussle is retiring from his highly competitive seat, to let Republican candidate Mike Whalen highlight his proposal for a tough employment-verification system for immigrant workers.

Last week, House Republican field hearings in San Diego explored the societal and governmental costs of illegal immigrants' use of health-care facilities and welfare. Another in Houston looked at "the criminal consequences of illegal immigration." One near here, in Sierra Vista, examined the nation's strained technical capacity to monitor "the efforts of terrorists and drug cartels" trying to "infiltrate American soil."

At a field hearing Tuesday in Gainesville, Ga., Rep. Charles Whitlow Norwood Jr. (R-Ga.) brushed off complaints by those who wanted a more balanced witness list. "What I wanted was witnesses who agree with me, not disagree with me," he told reporters.

Some believe rigidity is what voters are seeking. Randy Pullen, a Republican National Committeeman from Arizona, pointed to national polls of Republican voters that indicate illegal immigration is a close second behind fighting terrorism on the list of GOP priorities. In that sense, opposition to a porous border may be to November 2006 what opposition to gay marriage was to November 2004.

"If we turn out our base, we win," Pullen said. "In states like Arizona, [illegal immigration] is the issue. There is no other. But nationally, when that much of your base feels so extremely strong about an issue, you need to take notice."

Mike Hellon, a former Arizona GOP chairman running in the primary here, said, "Not since the Watergate year of 1974 have I seen an issue so dominant in an election."

The race to succeed Kolbe promises to be one of the most tightly contested, expensive House races this cycle; the prize is one of only a handful of open seats in swing districts. Bush carried this district in 2004. But so did Democratic Gov. Janet Napolitano. Independent congressional analysts have labeled the seat one of the Democrats' best pickup chances.

But a race that was expected to pit moderate against moderate on issues such as Iraq and Medicare now seems likely to have a much sharper edge. Like Kolbe, Huffman, a former aide to the retiring congressman, embraces "comprehensive" immigration changes, including a robust guest-worker program for some illegal immigrants and future immigrants.

But other Republicans say Kolbe and Huffman miscalculated the district's mood. Graf, who took 43 percent of the primary vote in an anti-illegal-immigration challenge to Kolbe two years ago, jumped into the race to oppose a guest-worker program and excoriate any candidate offering a path to citizenship for those in the country illegally.

Hellon started with conciliatory rhetoric, then embraced a harder line on immigration. Frank Antenori, a former Green Beret and Iraq combat veteran, entered the fray, saying he had sat on a mountaintop with night-vision goggles and helped apprehend illegal immigrants.

Democrats said they savor the prospects of a primary victory for one of the immigration firebrands, who they think are too conservative for the district. Huffman agrees, making Graf's "extremism" the centerpiece of his campaign. "An extreme candidate cannot win the general election," he said.

But other Republicans here say moderation is no virtue on this issue. Hellon said Kolbe's endorsement probably cost Huffman some Republican support. With conservative voters so demoralized, said Hellon, if Huffman won the nomination they would rather sit out the vote in November with their eyes on 2008.

"A vote for Steve Huffman is a vote for the politics of Jim Kolbe. There may have been a time when those politics were valid -- not anymore," said local conservative radio host Charles Heller.

"There is a frustration among the base, and that's why we're going to be successful in this primary," Graf said. "Conservative Republicans in this district have not had a reason to go to the polls to vote for a congressman for quite some time because this congressman has not represented them."

Some voters do not see it that way. On a street in Warren, near what is left of a once-bustling copper mine, Annette Walton was talking to the few customers trickling in for lunch at her no-name diner when she turned to politics.

"Most of those immigrants coming across are working jobs that most people here don't want anyway," she said. "Most of them are good people trying to get a better life. It's a smokescreen, is what it is."

But even some Democrats worry that immigration hard-liners may be accurately gauging the temper of the times -- and that the GOP has found an antidote to its woes.

In the liberal enclave of Bisbee, a picturesque 19th-century mining town spilling down the walls of Tombstone Canyon, the talk among Democratic partisans congregating in artist studios and cafes was of the Bisbee police officer who was pulled off the beat, put into his National Guard uniform and stationed a few miles away at the Naco border post.

"So stupid," said Susan Rohrbach over tea at a Bisbee coffee shop.

But, she added, the anger of the few diehard Democrats in the district may be nothing compared with the rage being stoked among the Republicans by the anti-immigration push.

"I'm afraid that is the right strategy, at least in this state," she said.

At a Graf rally last Monday at Trail Dust Town, a Tucson tourist stop, the talk wasn't over whether to build a wall on the border with Mexico, but what kind.

"Jewish-style," counseled Lee Ewing, 70, referring to the Israeli barrier being erected around the West Bank. "Double-layered, with a berm in between and razor wire."

Ewing railed against Bush's immigration policies, saying he failed to deploy enough resources on the border, and against the war in Iraq, where "2,600 Americans have died . . . for nothing." But given the choice to vote for a Republican vowing to clamp down on illegal immigration and a Democrat promising a new course in Iraq, he said he would not hesitate to vote Republican.

At the Bakers Dozen donut shop in Sierra Vista, Sally Hawk of Huachuca City held her tongue as her husband, Jim, fretted over a Republican Party in control of the House, Senate and White House but "doing nothing." Then, when talk turned to the illegal immigrants flowing over the border, she chimed in hesitantly: "I think they ought to shoot them. I don't have anything against Mexicans. I just want them here legally."

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Most of the Democratic candidates are confident that their broader assault on Republican policies will prevail in November. Former Tucson anchorwoman Patty Weiss, who is locked in a contest for the District 8 nomination with former state senator Gabrielle Giffords, said candidate coffees and house parties regularly pass without a word about immigration as she talks up universal health care, education and environmental quality.

Giffords said the GOP thrust can be parried with a tough Democratic response that blames Republican inaction for the crisis that illegal immigrants have visited upon resource-strapped schools, health-care systems and law enforcement agencies.

"We're mad here in Arizona," she said. "The Republicans can try to say they're going to come in on a white horse on the immigration issue and save the day, but they have been in power for six years, and they have done nothing."

David Green, a retired journalist and independent voter, milled uncomfortably last week on the fringes of the Graf rally, still very much undecided about his vote in November. Don't be fooled, he said, by the 100 or so Graf supporters so confident a Republican would win the seat. Illegal immigration is just one of the discontents of the district, he added, and it could well work against the Republicans.

"The feeling is, 'I'm fed up with illegal immigration. I'm fed up with Iraq. I'm fed up with gas prices. I'm fed up with nothing being done about the minimum wage,' " Green said, as black thunderheads rolled down the mountainside and chased the rally into Trail Dust Town's faux Old West opera house. "The general attitude is, 'Whoever's in, I want him out.' "