

November 14, 2008

EDITORIAL

The High Cost of Harsh Words

Words have consequences. Steve Levy, the Suffolk County executive, is learning that the hard way during a horrible week. Seven teenagers were arrested and charged in the fatal stabbing last Saturday of Marcello Lucero, an Ecuadorean immigrant, on a street in the Long Island village of Patchogue.

The apparent lynching caused shock and anger across the country. Politicians, religious leaders and villagers gathered Wednesday in Patchogue to console the victim's relatives and to condemn racial hatred. Mr. Lucero's brother, Joselo, spoke movingly in English and Spanish of how strangers' words of support had made him feel like part of a larger family.

Mr. Levy was not there. He later called Joselo Lucero, who asked him to please stay away from public remembrances.

Mr. Levy's past harsh words and actions against undocumented workers have now left him cornered with a tragically limited ability to lead the county in confronting a brutal act that surely pains him as much as anyone.

Local lawmakers often complain about immigration, but Mr. Levy went much farther than most. He founded a national organization to lobby for crackdowns. He went on "Lou Dobbs." He tried to deputize county police to make immigration arrests and to rid the county work force of employees without papers. He sought to drive day laborers from local streets, yet rigidly opposed efforts to create hiring sites. Even as tensions simmered in places like Farmingville, a hot spot for anti-immigrant resentment, Mr. Levy would not budge.

He parroted extremist talking points, going so far as to raise the alarm, utterly false, that illegal immigrants' "anchor babies" were forcing Southampton Hospital to close its maternity ward. He denounces racist hatred, yet his words have made him a hero in pockets of Long Island where veins of racism run deep.

All that came back to haunt Mr. Levy this week, when an evil act underscored the need to draw together. Immigrant advocates assailed him for having poisoned the atmosphere. Some called for his resignation. With tactless self-pity, Mr. Levy complained to Newsday that the killing would have been a one-day story anywhere but his home turf. He laments that people overlook his recent, far more measured tone on the issue. He insists that people have a distorted picture of him. Mr. Levy needs to realize that distortions cut both ways.

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)