

Sidney A. Swensrud (1900-1996)

One of the most important, but lesser known heroes of the modern immigration reform movement was the American business leader, Sidney A. Swensrud.

Born the youngest of five children to an Iowa farm family, Swensrud rose from being the janitor of his one-room schoolhouse to become the youngest ever chairman of the board of Pittsburgh-based Gulf Oil Corporation (later acquired by Chevron) at age 50. His concern about U.S. immigration policy stemmed from a paper he wrote about the danger of world overpopulation after discovering the English philosopher and economist, Rev. Thomas Malthus, as an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota.

Malthus's ideas about the inevitable conflict between exponential human population growth and man's ability to expand agricultural productivity resonated deeply with Swensrud's own experience as a youth growing up and working on a farm.

After college, Swensrud got a master's degree, graduating "with distinction" from the Harvard Graduate School of Business. He pursued a career in business and rose quickly to become vice president of Standard Oil of Ohio, and then chairman of Gulf Oil Corporation. His gift for numbers and experience in the oil industry reinforced his conviction that human population growth would inevitably outstrip earth's resources, as he watched new oil and gas fields become increasingly difficult to exploit and increasingly costly to find.

After retiring, Swensrud devoted his time, resources, and considerable business acumen to several philanthropic and population organizations including the Association for Voluntary Surgical Contraception and International Planned Parenthood. Soon after the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) was founded in 1979, he joined its board, steering it through an early and near-fatal financial crisis to put it on a sound financial foundation that continues to this day. In 1987-1988, he served as chairman of FAIR's Board of Directors and made major contributions to critical policy decisions the organization faced.

Although his father was a Democrat, Swensrud became a staunch Republican. Having lived through two world wars, he was deeply patriotic and adamantly opposed to sacrificing the safety, security, or economic wellbeing of his countrymen for the sake of corporate growth or profits. He would be appalled at the "American-workers-last" position of many big business groups and CEOs of American corporations today.

Sidney A. Swensrud was a major figure in the founding and development of the modern immigration reform movement. It would be a shadow of what it is today without his vision, perseverance, and leadership.