

*Lennon and Ono inspired graffiti on the Lennon Wall in Prague, Czech Republic.*



# *LENNON AND ONO*

## *IMMIGRATION TROUBLES*

Valerie Uribe

**J**ohn Lennon vs. The USA: The Inside Story of the Most Bitterly Contested and Influential Deportation Case in United States History is the remarkable story of a battle of wills between John Lennon, his wife Yoko Ono, and then President Richard Nixon. Written by prominent New York immigration attorney Leon Wildes, who represented both Lennon and Ono, the book takes you behind the scenes of one of the most influential and hotly contested deportation cases in United States history.

This landmark case still affects the practice of immigration law today. In fact, many credit President Barack Obama's deferred action proposal as deriving from this case. Under Obama's deferred action proposal, the Department of Homeland Security made use of its prosecutorial discretion to allow certain immigrants to remain and work legally in the United States.

This book is a must-read for John Lennon fans, United States immigrants, and attorneys, particularly those with an interest in immigration law. This true story is eerily relevant today in light of President Donald Trump's proposed immigration reform, particularly the proposal to vet immigrant applicants to ensure that they support America's values, institutions, and people. But how does one define "American values"? What can we learn from this 1972 landmark case?

The size and power of the executive branch has grown throughout United States history, and after Franklin D. Roosevelt won a third term, was curbed by a constitutional amendment. Richard Nixon, elected in 1969, abused the executive power for political and personal reasons, as evidenced by the release of the infamous White House tapes. In one of them, Nixon threatened to have then Attorney General John Mitchell raid the offices of the *Los Angeles Times* because of a story the *Times* had run about the arrest

of thirty-six suspected undocumented workers working for Nixon's nominee for Treasurer of the United States.

President Nixon's personal agenda regarding immigration went beyond his issues with the *Times*. With respect to Lennon and Ono, for example, Nixon was not pleased that they publicly spoke against his handling of the Vietnam War, against his drug policies, and against much of his presidency itself. Nixon felt threatened by Lennon's "dump Nixon" attitude. And just as the Nixon administration had wanted his attorney general to retaliate against the *Los Angeles Times*, his administration did take measures against Lennon and Ono in their deportation case.

President Nixon's retaliation against Lennon and Ono coincided with his 1972 reelection run. Nixon wanted Lennon and Ono removed from the country; Lennon had megastar popularity with young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, who were coming out in droves to rock the vote. A year earlier in March 1971, Congress had passed the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which lowered the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. The states promptly ratified it. The Vietnam War was a catalyst for the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, as its supporters argued, "old enough to fight, old enough to vote." There were 10 million new American voters in the 1972 election, and Lennon and Ono were swaying these new voters to "dump Nixon."

Lennon and Ono faced significant backlash on the extensions of their visas because of their public disapproval of Nixon's administration. As an established immigration attorney, Wildes had had experience assisting clients who faced barriers to visa extensions. He knew something was different about this case from the beginning. In previous cases, Wildes had success communicating and negotiating with opposing counsel. With Lennon's and Ono's cases, however, previously open doors were now closed and Wildes's calls went unanswered. Immigration papers were shuffled and lost. This was despite the fact that Lennon and Ono had strong and legitimate reasons for having their visas

## BOOK REVIEW

extended. Wildes quickly realized these were not typical immigration cases, not because of his clients' celebrity status, but because of the seemingly insurmountable and unfair obstacles that were unjustly put in place.

Visa extensions were important to Lennon as a musician and to Ono on a personal level. Ono was engaged in a heated custody battle over her child from a previous marriage. She had won a temporary custody order over her nine-year-old daughter under United States jurisdiction, but her ex-husband had absconded with their child. The judge held her ex-husband in contempt and entered an order to have him brought before the court, but he disappeared completely. Ono was petitioning an extension of her visa in order to continue the custody battle for her child.

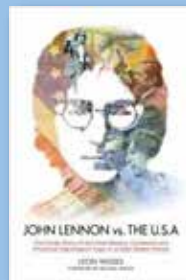
The deportation hearing, originally set for March 16, 1972, was scheduled rather quickly, despite the fact that there is typically a customary grace period for voluntary removals. Moreover, the INS became fixated on John Lennon's prior conviction in Britain for possessing cannabis resin. This conviction had been a nonissue in the past, as Lennon was previously granted a visa and admitted into the United States. In this case though, the prior conviction became one of the many arguments the government used to deny his visa extension.

As the book recounts the story surrounding this historic case, the drama is not confined to the courtroom—Wildes also sheds light on the dirty tricks that occurred behind the scenes. The Nixon administration, for example, wanted Lennon and Ono to know they were being harassed and followed. Maintenance people would arrive at the Lennon household to “check” inside, but would leave quickly when identification was requested. Additionally, two men appeared to be stationed outside Lennon and Ono's apartment. When Lennon and Ono stepped outside, these same two men followed them, wanting Lennon and Ono to know for certain they were being watched.

This incredible true story is better than any daytime drama or reality television show—and I have only scratched the surface. As the volley of the arguments and the facts of this case continue throughout this book, it is fascinating to see our legal system in a David and Goliath-type battle.

Many of my friends who were alive during Nixon's administration see similarities between Trump's rise to the presidency and Nixon's presidency. As Trump settles into his new role as president of the United States, all eyes will be on him to see how he implements the immigration reform he discussed during the campaign.

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*Case in United States History is available through the American Bar Association's bookstore. BASF members receive a 15 percent discount off the list price when using this code at checkout: PAB9ESFB.*