

The Civil War: No Match for Nativism in 19th Century America

The bold text atop an 1852 advertisement entitled “American Patriot” spelled out many Americans' greatest fear: "Already the enemies of our dearest institutions, like the foreign spies in the Trojan horse of old, are within our gates. They are disgorging themselves upon us, at the rate of Hundreds of Thousands Every Year! They aim at nothing short of conquest and supremacy over us.”¹ This aggressively nativist sentiment was not one new to America; for, from a young age, the country had carried an ideology favoring white Protestants whose descendants had preferably fought in the American Revolution. Despite the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 revealing a period of unity between immigrants and “natives” alike, this time of abated anti immigrant feeling was short-lived. A war fought for American unity had failed to establish a national identity which encompassed those of all ethnicities, instead falling back into the regressive ways of nativist nineteenth century America.

At its founding, the United States was comprised of a predominantly white Protestant demographic. Within a half a century, this demographic had evolved to encompass immigrants from all over the world; so much so that the nation was internationally known as a great melting pot.² However, the strong immigrant identity which America had garnered was not appealing to much of the population whose anti immigrant beliefs prevailed over an understanding of the roots of their country. In fact, the nation’s very own Founding Fathers held incredibly conservative views on immigration. In a letter from George Washington to John Adams in

¹ *The Patriot*, “American citizens! We appeal to you in all calmness. Is it not time to pause?... A paper entitled the American patriot.” 1852. From Library of Congress.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661538/> (accessed February 22, 2018).

² Sukkoo Kim, “Immigration, Industrial Revolution, and Urban Growth in the United States, 1820-1920: Factor Endowments, Technology and Geography,” Washington University in St. Louis and NBER, January 2007, <https://pages.wustl.edu/files/pages/imce/soks/immigration.pdf>.

November of 1794 regarding the question of immigration, Washington wrote “My opinion with respect to immigration is, that except of useful mechanics and some particular description of men and professions, there is no use of encouragement.”³ He repeated this view in a letter to Sir John St. Clair: "I have no intention to invite immigrants, even if there are no restrictive acts against it. I am opposed to it altogether.”⁴ This feeling of nativism had been ignited long before its peak in the nineteenth century, and was only to be further enflamed by an influx of immigrants.

In the early nineteenth century, the United States faced immense industrial and social changes. As the industrial revolution sparked a huge growth in unskilled labor, it brought with it the need for workers to perform this work at low wages.⁵ Enter the Irish and German immigrants who had immigrated to America in masses, yearning for the freedom and opportunity which the foreign land was rumored to provide. Between the 1820s and the 1860s, over 300,000 people came to the United States each year and by 1860, 20% of the American population was foreign born.⁶ This flood of immigrants began to garner strong dissent from native-born Americans who felt threatened by the competition for jobs.⁷ Nativists found further fault in the devotion to absolutist governments of Europe and dedication to the Roman Catholic Pope which they

³ Washington, George. *From George Washington to John Adams, 15 November 1794*. Letter. From National Archives, Founders Online. Letterpress copy, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-17-02-0112> (accessed February 22, 2018).

⁴ Garis, Roy L. *Immigration restriction: a study of the opposition to and regulation of immigration into the United States*. New York: Macmillan. From National Archives, Boston Public Library. Book. <https://archive.org/details/immigrationrestr00gari> (accessed February 21, 2018).

⁵ Sukkoo Kim, “Immigration, Industrial Revolution, and Urban Growth in the United States, 1820-1920: Factor Endowments, Technology and Geography.”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

believed was a threat to the nation's identity.⁸ The latter proved to be such a poignant fear that anti-Catholic feelings exploded into a nationwide campaign of xenophobia. As Catholic immigrants drew public hostility towards their poverty, the diseases they brought with them, and the dramatic rise in crime rates, alcoholism, and poverty that occurred after their arrival, the first party to leverage economic concerns over immigration as a major part of their platform was formed.^{9,10} Boasting more than 1 million members by 1855, The Know-Nothing Party's ethnically-charged dissent was reflected in political cartoon of the time which stated that "none but citizens of the United States can be licensed to engage in any employment in this city" and portrayed highly radicalized images of immigrants "swallowing" the United States.^{11,12} It was with this misguided abhorrence that America entered the Civil War in hopes of emerging a more cohesive union, accepting of nation's diversity.

Though tensions remained high leading into the 1860s, the secession of the southern states in the winter of 1860-61 caused such an uproar throughout the North that any concerns

⁸ *The Patriot*, "American citizens! We appeal to you in all calmness. Is it not time to pause?... A paper entitled the American patriot."

⁹ Boissoneault, Lorraine. "How the 19th-Century Know Nothing Party Reshaped American Politics," *Smithsonian Magazine*: 2017.
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/immigrants-conspiracies-and-secret-society-launched-american-nativism-180961915/>.

¹⁰ David Bennett, "Immigration and Immigrants: Anti-immigrant Sentiment," *Gale Digital Collections 19th Century U.S. Newspapers Database*, 2012.
https://www.gale.com/binaries/content/assets/gale-us-en/primary-sources/newsvault/gps_newsvault_19thcentury_usnewspapers_immigration_essay.pdf.

¹¹ Leslie, Frank. "Know-nothingism in Brooklyn." *Cartoon*. New York: Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 1881. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Wood engraving.
<https://lccn.loc.gov/2001696515> (accessed February 23, 2018).

¹² "The great fear of the period That Uncle Sam may be swallowed by foreigners: The problem solved." *Cartoon*. San Francisco: White & Bauer, [between 1860 and 1869]. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Lithograph. <https://lccn.loc.gov/98502829> (accessed February 23, 2018).

surrounding ethnic disloyalty were quickly put to rest as Union troops rushed to the defense of the flag in the wake of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter.¹³ German soldiers were even noted to stress to their fellow countrymen “how important it was . . . to defend a united nation, because they had fought against ‘the provinciality of petty states’ before,” further aiding in breaking previously-held immigrant stereotypes.¹⁴ Immigrant service in the war, and especially the enthusiasm with which foreign-born volunteers selflessly rallied in defense of the Union, was an important indicator of how these men and their communities respected their adopted nation. With this initial triumph of comradery between native American and immigrant alike at the outbreak of conflict, it was expected that the following years of war would prove a bonding experience for all people supporting the Union as over 200,000 German and 150,000 Irish-born men proudly volunteered alongside their native-born American counterparts.¹⁵ But alas, this was not the case. With the exception of a striking decline in nativist activity after the Confederacy’s surrender at Appomattox, the Civil War did little to sufficiently combat the nation’s animosity towards immigrants.¹⁶ This was truly tragic, as what had begun as a crisis of two nationalisms soon became the crisis of one.

There is little doubt that the war required a boost of morale to prompt any attempt for national unity. This came in the form of Abraham Lincoln’s vision of the nation and Union, as presented in his Gettysburg Address and Emancipation Proclamation. Both works wielded tremendous influence on Union morale and contributed to a boost in tolerance towards

¹³ Ryan Keating, “Immigrants in the Union Army,” Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech, 2010

<http://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/immigrants-in-the-union-army.html>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ David Bennett, “Immigration and Immigrants: Anti-immigrant Sentiment.”

immigrants, with the former instilling nationalism in the hearts of many Americans by calling on them to defend “a new birth of freedom” and to ensure “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”¹⁷ Though more controversial than the Address, the Emancipation Proclamation was praised by the Union for its boldness in the face of conflict, but furthermore being called “a triumph of nationalism” by historians.^{18,19} However, within a year of both works, it became all too clear that this nationalism would be short-lived. As ironically penned by Lincoln in 1862, “The sooner the national authority can be restored the nearer the Union will be ‘the Union as it was.’”²⁰ Little did President Lincoln know that restoring the Union would mean reinitiating the legacy of nativism in America; one which would not only extend to the end of the century, but target an entirely new group of immigrants.

Antebellum America was home to great economic, social, and political change; however, this change did not apply to the hatred harbored towards immigrants prior to the Civil War. Ethnic citizens faced tremendous pressure in the antebellum period, as their arrival coincided with the Second Great Awakening—a religious revival that was, in part, a reaction to the changing nature of American society and, particularly, the social instability that accompanied

¹⁷ Lincoln, Abraham. *The President's dedication address at Gettysburg*. Pamphlet. New York: Miller & Mathews. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, *GLC06811*. Print, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/content/presidents-dedication-address-gettysburg> (Accessed February 24, 2018).

¹⁸ Lincoln, Abraham. *First emancipation proclamation*. Manuscript. Albany. From Library of Congress, The Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana. Manuscript/ Mixed Media. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/lprbcsesm.scsm0921> (Accessed February 21, 2018).

¹⁹ Mark Neely Jr., *Lincoln and the Triumph of the Nation: Constitutional Conflict in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 152.

²⁰ Lincoln, Abraham. *A LETTER FROM PRESIDENT LINCOLN; Reply to Horace Greeley. Slavery and the Union The Restoration of the Union the Paramount Object*. Letter. New York: The New York Times, August 22, 1862. From The New York Times Archives. Letterpress copy. <https://www.nytimes.com/1862/08/24/archives/a-letter-from-president-lincoln-reply-to-horace-greeley-slavery-and.html> (Accessed February 24, 2018).

industrialization.²¹ The renewed attempt to preserve an American culture was further threatened by the arrival of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, as well as more than eighty thousand immigrants from China arrived between 1870 and 1875.²² Though Chinese immigrants, brought to America by companies that had contracted to supply cheap labor to mines, railways, and other enterprises needing unskilled labor, had helped construct the first transcontinental railroad, the public's volatile reaction resulted in government action against immigration.^{23,24} The Chinese Exclusion Act, signed by President Chester A. Arthur on May 6, 1882, prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers, as "in the opinion of the Government of the United States the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof."²⁵ This new federal law was the first to prevent a specific ethnic group from immigrating to the United States, reflecting the nation's belief that "there is urgent necessity for prompt legislation on the subject of Chinese immigration... to prevent the Chinese hordes from invading our country in number so vast, as soon to outnumber the present population of our flourishing States... They never assimilate with our people, our manners, tastes, religion, or ideas. With us they have nothing in common."²⁶ With the implementation of brutal immigration restrictions at the end of the 1800s, no further proof was needed to solidify

²¹ Ryan Keating, "Immigrants in the Union Army."

²² David Bennett, "Immigration and Immigrants: Anti-immigrant Sentiment."

²³ "Key Dates and Landmarks in United States Immigration History," Harvard University Library Open Collections Program, <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/timeline.html>.

²⁴ David Bennett, "Immigration and Immigrants: Anti-immigrant Sentiment."

²⁵ *An Act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to the Chinese*. Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, Forty-Seventh Congress 1st Session, Ch. 117-120, 126. From Library of Congress, *General Records of the United States Government*.

<https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/47th-congress/session-1/c47s1ch126.pdf> (Accessed February 25, 2018).

²⁶ "Report of the Select Committee on Immigration," National Humanities Center, 2005, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/people/text9/1892report.pdf>.

that the century of the Civil War did little to rewire the American inclination towards anti-immigrant feelings.

From the earliest of colonial times, the United States had portrayed itself as a sanctuary for the world's victims of oppression and poverty. However, anti-immigrant sentiment has pervaded most of the nation's history, reaching a peak in the nineteenth century. Though the visible patriotism exhibited by ethnic citizens in the spring and summer of 1861 momentarily quelled fears surrounding immigrant disloyalty and worked to unify the north under a common cause, immigrants continued to face intense hostility in the decades following the Civil War. In the words of Reverend Josiah Strong, “. . . immigration not only furnishes the greater portion of our criminals, it is also seriously affecting the morals of the native population.”²⁷ The sweeping tide of nativism which had wreaked havoc on the nation at the start of the century ultimately proved to be an inescapable fate.

²⁷ Strong, Josiah. *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*. Book. New York: Baker & Taylor for the American Home Missionary Society. From National Archives, *American Libraries*. Print. <https://archive.org/details/ourcountryitspo07strogoog> (Accessed February 24, 2018).

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