

**"The Triumph of Nativism" from *A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* by Roger Daniels. New York: HarperCollins, 1990, 265-284.**

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### The Triumph of Nativism

During most of the century of immigration, immigration to the United States remained largely unfettered by government regulation. Most Americans understood that it was necessary to fill up the country and welcomed most of the foreigners who came. That welcome was not unalloyed, and three discreet phases of anti-immigrant activity, or nativism, can be ascertained. Each was a response to a specific aspect of immigration to the United States. The first phase, anti-Catholic, was aimed at Irish Catholic and to a lesser extent German Catholic immigration and flourished from the late 1830s to the mid-1850s. In some respects, it never completely died out. The second phase, anti-Asian much more specific, was triggered by Chinese immigration and flourished from the early 1870s until the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Successor movements would be directed against Japanese in the period from about 1905 to 1924 and against Filipinos in the 1920s and 1930s; this anti-Asian component of American nativism, like anti-Catholicism, has never entirely disappeared. Finally, the third phase, anti-*all* immigrants, began in the mid-1880s, when a movement for general restriction of immigration gained popularity, and finally triumphed in the Immigration Act of 1924, which dominated American immigration policy for the next forty years. There was never a time when nativist attitudes were not present in American society. They existed in the colonial period and are enjoying a revival today. And while nativists have always been able to point to some specific danger, real or imagined—Franklin's fear of the German language and culture taking over Pennsylvania, for example, or the Federalist fears of Irish and French political subversion—successful nativist movements have almost always been linked to more general fears or uneasiness in American society. When most Americans are generally united and feel confi-

dent about their future, they seem to be more willing to share that future with foreigners; conversely, when they are divided and lack confidence in the future, nativism is more likely to triumph.

In the years immediately after the War of 1812, capped as it was by Andrew Jackson's glorious and seemingly providential victory at New Orleans, self-confidence—this period was sometimes called the Era of Good Feeling—characterized the national mood. During the war itself Congress enacted a law prohibiting the naturalization of any Briton who had not formally declared the intention of becoming a citizen before the war started, but it was probably not effective and was repealed soon after hostilities ended. Encouragement of migration to the West and of immigration from Europe again became the order of the day. Congress did pass, in 1819, a law requiring that immigrants be enumerated at the various points of entry, but no bureaucracy was created to do the counting. That was left to customs and other port officials. Naturalization proceeded rapidly, and many states, especially the newer western ones, gave immigrants the right to vote and hold office even before they became citizens. Legal alien suffrage, in fact, would continue at various places in the United States until 1926 when the last state to allow it, Arkansas, changed its laws. Many states treated the declaration of intention to become a citizen as if it were citizenship, and the whole process of naturalization was haphazard: Federal courts, state courts, territorial courts, and even justices of the peace issued certificates of citizenship or, sometimes, simply declared persons to be citizens. There was also much fraud in naturalization, most notoriously in New York City, where the Democratic political organization, Tammany Hall, would routinely arrange mass naturalization "ceremonies," if they can be called that, before tame local judges, often in close proximity to election day.

In politics the Era of Good Feeling did not survive the controversial election of 1824, which Andrew Jackson's supporters insisted had been stolen by a corrupt bargain between aristocrats John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay. It was in just that period that the anti-Catholicism that had been endemic in American life almost from its beginning became what its historian, Ray Allen Billington, called the "Protestant crusade."<sup>1</sup> During most of the eighteenth century it had been the external threat from Catholic French Canada with its Indian allies that had stimulated the ever-present Protestant animus against Catholicism. And even though the American Revolution had been supported by Catholic France, for reasons of state, of course, not ideology, during the

early republic the association of Catholicism and the pope with monarchy and reaction was a given of political debate. What was different about the 1820s and subsequent decades was that, with growing Irish and German Catholic immigration, Catholics and Catholicism could be seen as an internal threat, as subversive not only of republican principles but of the republic itself. In the 1820s anti-Catholicism took a back seat to antimasonry in American politics. The Masons, like the Catholics, were seen as secretive, monarchical, and conspiratorial, and there were, to be sure, many more Freemasons than Roman Catholics in America. The anti-Masonic party, which held a national convention and nominated a presidential candidate in 1832, was the first American third party. But antimasonry, as a political force, did not survive the 1830s, while anti-Catholicism was important at least into the 1960s.

When relatively large numbers of Irish and German Catholic immigrants, many of them desperately poor, began to arrive in the late 1820s and early 1830s, what had been a largely rhetorical anti-Catholicism became a major social and political force in American life. Not surprisingly, it was in eastern cities, particularly Boston, where anti-Catholicism turned violent, and much of the violence was directed against convents and churches. Beginning with the burning down of the Ursuline Convent just outside Boston by a mob on August 11, 1834, well into the 1850s violence against Catholic institutions was so prevalent that insurance companies all but refused to insure them. Much of this violence was stirred up by Protestant divines, ranging from eminent church leaders such as Lyman Beecher (1775–1863) to anonymous self-appointed street preachers. Billington notes that:

Frequently crowds of excited Protestants, whipped to angry resentment by the exhortations of some wandering orator, rushed directly to a Catholic church, bent on its destruction. A dozen churches were burned during the middle 1850s; countless more were attacked, their crosses stolen, their alters violated, and their windows broken. At Sidney, Ohio, and at Dorchester, Massachusetts, Catholic houses of worship were blown to pieces with gunpowder. . . . In New York City a mob laid siege to the prominent cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul, and only the arrival of the police saved the building. In Maine Catholics who had had one church destroyed were prevented from laying the cornerstone of a new one by hostile Protestants, and statues of priests were torn down or desecrated.

Nor were the priests themselves safe from public assault. The abuse in public was all but constant. At least two were badly beaten while on their way to administer last rites. In 1854 one Portland, Maine, priest described his ordeal:

Since the 4th of July I have not considered myself safe to walk the streets after sunset. Twice within the past month I have been stoned by young men. If I chance to be abroad when the public schools are dismissed, I am hissed and insulted with vile language; and those repeated from children have been encouraged by the smiles and silence of passers by. The windows of the church have frequently been broken—the panels of the church door stove in, and last week a large rock entered my chamber unceremoniously about 11 o'clock at night.

If convents, churches, and priests were seen as something to attack, nuns were seen essentially as victims, first of the church's authoritarianism, and later as the targets of sexual abuse and worse by priests and bishops. There was a spate of "confessions" of former nuns—or in most instances of persons who claimed, falsely, to have been nuns. The first of these of any significance, Rebecca T. Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* (1835), was relatively mild, described nothing either illegal or immoral, and was concerned mostly with the penances she was allegedly forced to endure. But it quickly sold hundreds of thousands of copies and served as an encouragement for further confessions, which were soon numbered in the dozens. Far and away the most important were Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (1836) and its inevitable successor, *Further Disclosures . . .* (1837). Although the first and more influential book was execrably written, it has been called, with good reason, the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism. Maria, or her ghostwriter, told a lurid and preposterous tale of secret passageways leading from a nearby priests' residence to the convent so that the fathers could exercise their carnal lust on the nuns, and of babies born to nuns there being strangled regularly by the mother superior. Maria herself, according to the tale, was seduced by a priest and made pregnant. Not wishing to see her child murdered, she fled the convent, was rescued, and taken to a hospital, and was eventually saved by a Protestant clergyman who brought her to the United States, where her story was written and published. That Maria was unmarried and pregnant was true. All the rest was fantasy, perhaps psychotic fantasy. Maria had never been a

nun or even been inside the Hotel Dieu convent, and eventually even many of her supporters came to disbelieve her stories, especially after she again became pregnant. Her managers took most of the enormous profits from the books; she spent the rest; and in 1849 poor Maria was arrested for picking the pocket of a customer in a New York whorehouse and died in prison shortly thereafter.

It was against this background of religiously inspired anti-Catholicism, that the political and economic anti-immigrant attitudes of the pre-Civil War decades take on their full meaning. Many of the immigrants, as we have seen, were poor, others utterly destitute. The costs of maintaining the poor were mounting and were borne solely by the port cities and their states. In an effort to regain these costs, some eastern states passed modest head taxes—New York charged \$1.50 for cabin passengers, Massachusetts a simple \$2.00 a head—to be paid by the owners of the immigrant vessels. Not in themselves a great deterrent to immigration, they led the United States Supreme Court to lay down an important principle. In the *Passenger Cases* (1849) the court declared these state laws unconstitutional, holding that the right to regulate immigration under the commerce clause of the Constitution—Article I, Section 9, gives Congress the power "to regulate Commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian Tribes"—was prescriptive. Thus even though Congress had passed no legislation concerning immigration, individual states could not tax it for any purpose, since, as John Marshall had put it earlier, the power to tax was the power to destroy. For the time being the court left the police powers of the states unimpaired: A state could, for example, quarantine a ship on which smallpox or cholera was raging.

This ruling only added supporters to an anti-immigrant bloc that was already flourishing in the country. As early as 1837 a nativist-Whig coalition was able to elect a mayor and council in New York City, and in Germantown, Pennsylvania, a Native American Association was formed that opposed foreign-born officeholders and voters. In New Orleans a similarly named organization denounced the immigration to the United States of "the outcast and offal of society, the vagrant and the convict—transported in myriads to our shores, reeking with the accumulated crimes of the whole civilized world." The major strategies of these movements, which coalesced in the 1840s and early 1850s in the American, or Know-Nothing, party, were to call for a change in the naturalization laws. The most common proposal was to require a twenty-one-year period for naturalization and bar the foreign born from holding any but minor local offices. Other measures proposed in



Congress including forbidding the immigration into the United States of paupers, criminals, idiots, lunatics, insane persons, and the blind. Although such proposals had much support on both ideological and economic grounds, they never had enough to force a vote on them in either house of Congress. At the same time the new Free-Soil party, which would eventually be absorbed into the Republican Party, was advocating a program of continued immigration and land for the landless. The Republican party platform of 1864 stated well the ideological attitude of most Americans toward immigration. A specific immigration plank of that year—echoed in later years—read:

Foreign immigration which in the past has added so much to the wealth, resources, and increase of power to this nation—the asylum of the oppressed of all nations—should be fostered and encouraged by a liberal and just policy.

Nativism grew in the pre-Civil War years for a variety of reasons, including a growing uncertainty about the future of the nation. Much of the direction that future would take was decided by the Civil War. The truly dangerous subversive forces, it suddenly became clear, were not foreigners but Southern white Americans; those with a penchant for seeing a conspiracy in every threat no longer had to worry about the pope, the Jesuits, or the crowned heads of Europe: They had instead a homegrown slave power conspiracy to worry about. In addition, immigrants and foreigners had been of great assistance to the Union forces. Whole ethnic regiments, chiefly Irish and German, sustained the Union cause, and the Civil War draft worked even more against the poor—including immigrants—than have subsequent drafts. A drafted upper-class or middle-class individual could, if he wished, legally hire a substitute to go in his place, usually by providing a cash bounty of three hundred dollars or more. A future president, Grover Cleveland, chose this method of avoiding military service, as did the father of Theodore Roosevelt and thousands of other persons, almost all of them native-born Americans. Immigrants, it should be noted, fought in the Confederate armies as well.

As a result of the Civil War, Congress did change the Constitution and the naturalization statute, but not in the way that Know-Nothings and their allies had imagined. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, for the first time established a uniform national citizenship and provided that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States . . . are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they

reside." Intended to protect the rights of the former slaves, it would serve, in the twentieth century, to protect the rights of second-generation Asians. In addition, the abolition of slavery made the phrase *free white persons* in the naturalization statute redundant, and in 1870 Congress made the first significant change in that law since Jefferson's time. A few Radical Republicans, led by Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, sought to make the statute color-blind and refer simply to "persons." In this Sumner and his allies were almost a century ahead of their time: Congress chose instead to broaden the law to allow the naturalization of "white persons and persons of African descent." Asians were pointedly excluded, and in the brief debates it was clear that a desire to exclude Chinese from citizenship was, for the majority, the main point. While the courts would later haggle about what the phrase "white persons" really meant, the intent of Congress was clear: Whites and blacks could be naturalized, yellows could not. This meant that the thousands of Chinese already in the United States and the hundreds of thousands of other Asians who would come in the following eight decades were in a new category: "aliens ineligible to citizenship" by federal law.

Twelve years later, in 1882, a bipartisan majority in Congress passed overwhelmingly the Chinese Exclusion Act. Mistakenly treated by many scholars as a regrettable but relatively unimportant event, the Chinese Exclusion Act was the hinge on which American immigration policy turned, a hinge on which Emma Lazarus's "golden door" swung almost completely shut. Few national figures of any prominence had anything good to say for the Chinese: One who did, Republican Senator George Frisbie Hoar of Massachusetts, insisted correctly that Chinese exclusion represented nothing less than the legalization of racial discrimination. Chinese exclusion passed for a number of reasons. The economic interests of white workingmen in California and elsewhere in the West were surely important factors and influenced the stand that organized labor would later take toward all immigration. But there was also, as Senator Hoar had noted, the important factor of racial prejudice.<sup>2</sup>

The act was a complex one, largely because of the desire not to interfere with American trade with China. Although called an "exclusion" act for political reasons, it actually only "suspended" the immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years. "Merchants" however, were admissible. In addition, the law recognized that many Chinese workers in America went back and forth to China, and so allowed those already in the country to get a federal certificate before departing which would

allow them to come back in. In 1888 Congress cancelled all the outstanding certificates and ended the practice of them. Thousands of Chinese who had left the country in good faith were barred from returning. As he signed the bill, President Cleveland, in a message reeking of election-year politics, said that the

experiment of blending the social habits and mutual race idiosyncracies of the Chinese laboring classes with those of the great body of the people of the United States . . . [has been] proved . . . in every sense unwise, impolitic, and injurious to both nations.

In 1892 the act was extended for another ten years, and in 1902 Congress made it "permanent," or so it thought. Also significant was the fact that, in a whole series of decisions, the Supreme Court ruled that the exclusion of a particular "class" of immigrant was constitutional, thus paving the way for other restrictions.

In the meantime the Court, imbued with the nationalism engendered by the Union victory in the Civil War, reversed a string of previous decisions, going back to 1837, which had allowed the states to exercise "police power" over incoming immigrants. In *Henderson v. Mayor of New York* (1875) it ruled:

It is equally clear that the matter of these statutes may be, and ought to be, the subject of a uniform system or plan. The laws which govern the right to land passengers in the United States from other countries ought to be the same in New York, Boston, New Orleans and San Francisco. . . . We are of the opinion that this whole subject has been confided to Congress by the Constitution [and Congress should deal with it].

This meant that the administration of immigration, which had been essentially a matter of laissez-faire, or, in a major immigrant port like New York, the concern of state and local government, now became a federal problem. Since there was no existing federal bureaucracy, the federal government, for a few years, simply subsidized New York to continue to operate its massive immigrant depot at Castle Garden, near the southern tip of Manhattan. To finance this, the federal government, then reluctant to spend much money on anything except Civil War pensions, resorted to a head tax, which began at a modest fifty cents in 1882 and would reach eight dollars by 1917. By 1892 the federal government was able to open its new immigration reception center on Ellis Island, formerly the site of a naval arsenal, in New York Harbor.

By 1932, when it stopped functioning as a reception center for steerage-class immigrants—cabin passengers did not generally have to go there—some twelve million immigrants had passed through it on the way to America.

Most immigrants stayed only a short time on Ellis Island and did not even spend the night there: For them it was truly an "island of hope." For others, especially the tiny minority who were refused admittance, it was an "island of tears." After 1932 it was a detention center for persons who were either refused admittance or were being deported, and during World War II it was used as a temporary internment center for enemy aliens. In 1990, as a part of the National Park Service's Statue of Liberty National Monument, a magnificent museum of immigration was opened in its refurbished main building, although much of the rest of the island was still in a state of disrepair and neglect.

The typical steerage passengers were brought to Ellis Island by lighter or ferry from the ships on which they came. The routine went like this: A physical examination—cursory for most—an examination of documents, checked against shipping manifests, a brief questioning hardly worthy in most instances of the designation *interview*, a gathering up of baggage (which was sometimes brought separately), a visit to the railroad ticket office to purchase tickets or confirm prepaid ones, and the passengers were ready to enter America proper, again by ferry, either to the Jersey shore or the foot of Manhattan. For the minority who had to stay overnight or longer, there were dining, bathing, and sleeping facilities. If anyone was or became ill, there was a hospital on the island with isolation wards for those with contagious diseases and special facilities for those judged to be mentally deranged.

At peak times the island could be chaotic, with thousands of persons being processed in a single day. Although there were recurring scandals about its administration, Ellis Island was, all things considered, a relatively benign institution. While it could be terrifying for the awed newcomer, there were almost always persons on each ship who had been to America before and most knew enough about America to know where they were going. The federal staff tended to be polyglot, as all the languages of Europe had to be handled at one time or another. Fiorello La Guardia, who became New York's greatest mayor, worked as an interpreter on Ellis Island early in his career and left a vivid account of what it was like:

[Many immigrants] were found to be suffering from trachoma, and their exclusion was mandatory. It was harrowing to see families separated. . . . Sometimes, if it was a young child who suffered from

trachoma, one of the parents had to return to the native country with the rejected member of the family. When they learned their fate, they were stunned. They had never felt ill. They could see all right, and they had no homes to return to. . . . [A] large proportion [of immigrants] were excluded for medical reasons [many of them for mental reasons]. I felt then, and I feel the same today, that over fifty per cent of the deportations for alleged mental disease were unjustified. Many of those classified as mental cases were so classified because of ignorance on the part of the immigrants or the doctors and the inability of the doctors to understand the particular immigrant's norm, or standard.<sup>3</sup>

While creating a new immigration bureaucracy, the government began to make rules and regulations for immigrants. Most of these were minor restrictive changes that affected few persons but that cumulatively changed the once-free immigration policy of the United States. In both 1885 and 1887, as a sop to organized labor, Congress enacted laws prohibiting contract labor, but these statutes were never enforced to any meaningful degree. An 1891 statute showed, for the first time, a concern for both the physical and mental condition of prospective immigrants. It barred the immigration of "all idiots, insane persons, paupers or persons likely to become a public charge, persons suffering from a loathsome or contagious disease, persons who have been convicted of a felony or other infamous crime or misdemeanor involving moral turpitude," and "polygamists," this later bar being aimed at Mormons. The statute's laundry list of exclusion is strikingly similar to that of the Know-Nothings, omitting only the blind, although most of those would be excluded under the "likely to become a public charge" (LPC) rubric. Yet, despite the growing number of excluded classes, relatively few immigrants were either excluded or deported. In 1905, for example, the first single year in which a million immigrants arrived, deportations and exclusions combined also reached a new high—12,724 persons—which represented barely more than 1 percent of the total. This figure does not take into account the number of those who were stopped or dissuaded from coming. Steamship companies, which had to bear the expense of returning rejected immigrants, instituted pre-embarkation checks, and many immigrants, fearing rejection, simply did not try to come.

As we have seen, both the volume and source of immigration began to change at the end of the nineteenth century. By 1920, with a total population of 105 million, nearly 14 million were foreign born, and

another 22 million had at least one foreign-born parent. Thus the 36 million immigrants and their children constituted more than a third of the entire population. While we know that these people contributed greatly to our national existence and are the ancestors of many of us, many Americans at the turn of the century felt that their way of life was threatened by what they called the "immigrant invasion." American Protestant leaders regarded Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Jewish immigrants with alarm. Some Americans perceived the immigrants as contributing disproportionately to crime and, even worse, dangerous radicalism.

There were also objections to immigrants on economic grounds: The trade union movement saw the seemingly inexhaustible supply of European workers, willing to work for almost any wage, as a threat to the standard of living of American workers. "We keep out pauper-made goods, why not keep out the pauper?" ran a standard AFL argument that made an analogy between the protective tariff and proposals to limit immigration. Such sentiments were not confined to American-born workers. During the depression of the 1890s, for example, surveys taken by the Michigan Bureau of Labor indicated that the foreign-born worker was as "emphatic in condemning immigration as his American brother." The depression also seems to have helped the growth of a new wave of anti-Catholicism. The most prominent anti-Catholic organization was the American Protective Association, which was founded in 1887 and had perhaps half a million members by 1893–94. Strongest in the Middle West it appealed mainly to middle-class whites and revived many of the Know-Nothing proposals, with even less effect. These seemingly rational aspects of restrictionist thought—the one motivated by perceived economic disadvantage, the other by perceived religious disadvantage—had continuing importance in restrictionist sentiment. But lurking behind and sometimes overshadowing these objections to continued immigration was a growing and pervasive racism, a racism directed not against non-white races, but against presumed inferior peoples of European origin. Lines by the genteel poet and novelist Thomas Bailey Aldrich (1836–1907) caught the spirit and the fears of many middle and lower middle-class Americans. In "The Unguarded Gates," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1882, Aldrich complained:

*Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,  
And through them passes a wild motley throng,  
Men from the Volga and Tartar steppes.*



*Featureless figures from the Hoang-Ho,  
Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt and Slav,  
Flying the Old World's poverty and scorn;  
These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,  
Those tiger passions here to stretch their claws,  
In street and alley what strange tongues are these,  
Accents of menace in our ear,  
Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew.*

However curious it may seem today, by the late nineteenth century many of the "best and the brightest" minds in America had become convinced that of all the many "races" (we would say "ethnic groups") of Europe one alone—variously called Anglo-Saxon, Aryan, Teutonic, or Nordic—had superior innate characteristics. Often using a crude misapplication of Darwinian evolution, which substituted these various "races" for Darwin's species, historians, political scientists, economists, and, later, eugenicists discovered that democratic political institutions had developed and could thrive only among Anglo-Saxon peoples. It was axiomatic, therefore, that these intellectuals and others in the grip of what Barbara Miller Solomon has called the "Anglo-Saxon complex" should view the immigration of that era with alarm and organize to raise the bars against it. The census of 1890, which, as the historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932) announced, signaled the end of the frontier in America, demonstrated to these elite leaders that immigration was changing, and changing for the worse, the composition of the country. In 1894 a group of young Harvard graduates formed the Immigration Restriction League, which became the most influential single pressure group arguing for a fundamental change in American immigration policy. According to one of its founders, Prescott F. Hall (1868–1921), the question for Americans to decide was whether they wanted their country "to be peopled by British, German and Scandinavian stock, historically free, energetic, progressive, or by Slav, Latin and Asiatic races [this latter referred to Jews rather than Chinese or Japanese] historically down-trodden, atavistic and stagnant."<sup>4</sup>

The league and its chief political spokesman, Henry Cabot Lodge (1850–1924), the scholar in politics, one of the first to receive a Ph.D. in history from an American university and who represented Massachusetts in Congress from 1887 until his death, chose to work for a literacy test as the best way to improve the quality of the incoming immigrants. The twenty-two-year crusade for a literacy test, first introduced in Congress in 1895, is instructive. It passed the House in 1895,

1897, 1913, 1915, and 1917, and was passed by the Senate on all but the first of those occasions. But it was vetoed by presidents as diverse as Grover Cleveland, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson.

The various veto messages are also instructive. Cleveland, in 1897, attacked it as "a radical departure" from established policy and, echoing what the Republican party had said in the post-Civil War years, argued that the "stupendous growth" of the nation had been "largely due to the assimilation and thrift of millions of sturdy and patriotic adopted citizens." He pointed out that "the time is quite within recent memory when . . . immigrants who, with their descendants, are now numbered among our best citizens" were also branded as "undesirable." Cleveland was not impressed with literacy as a barrier:

It is infinitely more safe to admit a hundred thousand immigrants who, though unable to read and write, seek among us only a home and an opportunity to work than to admit one of those unruly agitators and enemies of governmental control who can not only read and write, but delights in arousing by unruly speech the illiterate and peacefully inclined to discontent and tumult.

In general, according to the president, the bill was "illiberal, narrow, and un-American."

The bill had passed Congress in 1897 in part due to the anxieties caused by the depression of the 1890s, still rated as the second worst in American history. Its passage in 1913, 1915, and 1917, represented convinced majorities in both houses and probably a majority of the electorate. Taft's veto was essentially economic, although it did make the point that illiteracy resulted more from a lack of opportunity than from lack of ability. The bulk of his message consisted of the formal opinion of his secretary of commerce and labor that the United States needed labor and that "the natives are not willing to do the work which the aliens come over to do."

Two years later the bill passed again, and this time Woodrow Wilson vetoed it. His message ignored the economic arguments. It stressed, as was Wilson's wont, ethical principles. Immigrants, Wilson insisted, came seeking opportunity, and the bill would reject them "unless they have already had one of the chief of the opportunities they seek, the opportunity of education." His veto was sustained in the House by a mere four votes.

Two years later, in February 1917, the bill passed for the fourth time under entirely changed circumstances. World War I had greatly re-

duced immigration, especially that from Europe. The figures for the period July 1, 1915–June 30, 1916, showed total immigration below 300,000, with fewer than half the total from Europe. In addition, more than 125,000 left the country during the year, so net immigration was just over 150,000, as opposed to 900,000 for the last prewar year. The pressure of continuing immigration obviously had little effect in 1917.

What did have an effect was the heightened sense of American nationalism engendered by Wilson's preparedness program and the imminent break with Germany. This nationalism was not merely positive; it was also clearly antiforeign. As such, it cut across the lines established in the continuing debate over America's involvement in Europe's war. Interventionists and noninterventionists alike tended to polarize the differences between "good" America and "bad" Europe. In addition, some of the most powerful voices against restriction, such as the German-American Alliance, found their influence largely negated by a national atmosphere which tended to equate "hyphenated Americanism" with disloyalty and subversion. In these circumstances, Wilson's 1917 veto, an echo of his 1915 message, had little effect. The House voted to override, 287 to 106, while in the Senate only nineteen senators supported the president while sixty-two went against him. That a strong and still-popular president should influence so few senators just three months after his reelection is a good indication of how the war fever had strengthened the nativist climate of opinion.

The 1917 legislation was the first significant general restriction of immigration ever passed; in the future all adult immigrants would have to be literate, although, in the case of family immigration, if the husband were literate the wife need not be. The test was a fair one. Unlike the Australian law at that time, in which the examiner could choose the language(s) in which the immigrant was to be tested, literacy was defined as being able to read in any recognized language, including Yiddish and Hebrew. (Extreme nativists had wanted the bill to restrict immigration to those literate in English, but that had little congressional support.) The other major aspect of the 1917 act was the creation of a "barred zone," described in degrees of latitude and longitude, which kept out all Asian immigrants except Japanese and Filipinos.

Ironically the literacy test, a nativist goal for more than two decades, did little to restrict immigration, although, of course, it may have deterred some from attempting to come. During the last full year in which it was the major statutory bar to immigration—July 1920 to June 1921—more than 800,000 immigrants entered the country. About 1.5 percent (13,799 persons) were denied admission on some ground or

other, a mere 1,450 of whom were barred by the long-debated test. Rising standards of literacy in Europe had vitiated the impact of the law, which, had it been passed in the 1890s or earlier, would have had much more effect. Despite its ineffectiveness, the passage of the literacy test was an important victory for the forces of immigration restriction. They would reap even greater benefits in the hypernationalism of the postwar era.

While some restrictionists had been concentrating on the literacy test, others had been raising other barriers. The first of these had come in 1903 as part of the reaction to the assassination of President William McKinley by a native-born anarchist with a foreign-sounding name. For the first time Congress demanded an inspection of the political opinions of prospective immigrants. In words that have since become too familiar the law added to the excluded categories "anarchists, or persons who believe in or advocate the overthrow by force and violence of the Government of the United States . . . or the assassination of public officials," words aimed at those "unruly agitators" Cleveland had fulminated against.

Another restriction resulted from a revival of West Coast anti-Asian sentiments, directed at Japanese immigrants who, in the early twentieth century, seemed to pose the same kind of threat that Chinese had in the nineteenth. A succession of chief executives—Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson—used their influence to suppress popular anti-Japanese immigration measures so as not to offend the increasingly powerful Japanese government and relied on executive action, such as the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907–08, under which Japan cut off immigration by withholding passports to laborers.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, by 1917 the immigration policy of the United States had been restricted in seven major ways. Admission was denied to Asians (except for Japanese and Filipinos, the latter because they were held to be American nationals); criminals; persons who failed to meet certain moral standards; persons with various diseases; paupers; assorted radicals; and illiterates. After the war was over, the nativist spirit grew, fed by the patent failure of stated American war aims—Europe was clearly not safe for democracy—and a growing hysteria about domestic radicalism, much of it perpetrated by foreigners or persons with "foreign-sounding" names, a hysteria known to historians as the Red Scare. In addition, by late 1920, as Congress reassembled, the nation's press was filled with scare stories about the flood of undesirable immigrants on their way from war-ravaged Europe. The immigration data suggested no such flood: In 1919–20, 430,000 had entered but 288,000 had left.



Even for the year in progress, immigration levels were not even back to prewar norms: Just over 800,000 entered while nearly 250,000 left. Yet such was the panic that in the space of one week in December 1920, a bill was introduced into the House suspending all immigration for a year and, without any hearings being held, it was passed by a vote of 296 to 42. The Senate, partially in response to frenzied protests from the National Association of Manufacturers and other employer groups, shelved that thoughtless bill. It substituted the so-called Dillingham quota bill, introduced by its resident expert on immigration, William P. Dillingham, a Vermont Republican who had headed the United States Immigration Commission of 1909–11. The quota plan, whose original authorship is unclear, was based on the notion that the best way to inhibit immigration was to limit, first of all, the total number to be admitted in any one year, and second, to assign percentages of that total to particular nationalities on the basis of the number of people from that nation already here. Using the 1910 census, the latest available, the Dillingham plan ignored Western Hemisphere immigration: There would be no quotas for Canada, Mexico, or any other New World nation. As long as the existing barriers remained in effect, Asian immigration was already shut out, except for Japanese, who would get a tiny quota, and Filipinos who could not be kept out. Europeans would be limited to 5 percent annually of the number of foreign-born Europeans in the country as of 1910, assigned in proportion to the nationality recorded in the census. This produced a quota of about six hundred thousand slots per year for Europe, the bulk of which would go to British, Germans, and Scandinavians and presumably would not be fully utilized. The Dillingham plan also assumed that, as new census data became available, the quota would be revised accordingly. There was, thus, a certain amount of equity and fair-mindedness in the plan. The only serious objections voiced in the Senate to Dillingham's plan was that it was not restrictive enough. It passed the Senate easily; like the House measure it replaced, it was a one-year "emergency" measure. The House somewhat reluctantly accepted the Dillingham principle of national quotas but insisted on lowering the percentage from 5 to 3 percent, producing a quota of three hundred fifty thousand. The Senate agreed, and the measure was sent to President Wilson just before his second term expired. As one of his final acts, he used the pocket veto, thus avoiding the inevitable override. The delay caused was about sixty days, as President Warren G. Harding called Congress into special session. The bill was reenacted and was so noncontroversial that it passed the House without recorded vote and the Senate by a vote of

seventy-eight to one, and Harding signed it. In May 1922, Congress extended the Dillingham plan for two more years, thus setting the stage for a full-scale debate on immigration restriction in the election year of 1924.<sup>6</sup>

Before discussing that, however, one additional change in American law should be noted—a change stemming from the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the vote and made them, for the first time, full citizens of the nation. The rights of female aliens had not much concerned the Congress. By some common-law doctrines, the citizenship of the wife followed that of the husband. An 1855 act said that resident alien women who married American citizens were automatically citizens. The so-called Expatriation Act of 1907 provided that an American woman, naturalized or native born, who married a foreigner, lost her citizenship. This angered many women, and in 1922 Congress passed the Cable Act, which ended that discriminatory practice *except* for those female citizens who married "aliens ineligible to citizenship," that is, alien Asians. Most of the women who did so were second-generation Asian Americans. This inequity lasted until 1931 when it was repealed. Other and more enduring provisions of the Cable Act insisted on alien women becoming naturalized separately, although certain requirements did not have to be met if the husband was already a citizen.

A snapshot of the United States in 1924 would have revealed a nation relatively prosperous by contemporary standards but riven by social conflict and confused by social change. John Higham has coined the phrase *tribal twenties* to describe the ethnocultural struggles of those years, struggles between an old-stock, Protestant, smalltown, and rural America and an immigrant-stock, Catholic, and big-city America. The issues over which they fought—apart from immigration restriction—included prohibition, fundamentalism, and the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan. Other aspects of modernization—the emancipation of some young women, greater sexual freedom—were opposed by the majority of both groups. Prohibition, which seemed in the late 1920s a permanent part of American life even to such a sophisticated opponent as Walter Lippmann, endured only to the end of 1933. The triumph of Calvin Coolidge in 1924 over progressives within the Republican party coupled with the nomination of a Wall Street lawyer by the Democrats—who refused to denounce the Klan by name at their 1924 convention—seemed to signal a long era of conservatism. Four years later the election of Herbert Hoover, who represented all the old American values, over the second-generation Irish Catholic American from the

sidewalks of New York, Al Smith, was taken as further evidence of the conservative ascendancy. We can now see that, although Smith lost badly, he carried every nonsouthern large city except Los Angeles, the first Democrat ever to do so. Similarly, in Chicago, when longtime Republican Mayor William "Big Bill" Thompson was challenged by second-generation Czech immigrant Anton Cermak, he derided him as "pushcart Tony." Cermak's measured response, that his folks had not come over on the *Mayflower* but had come to America as fast as they could, was effective in polyglot Chicago—Cermak was elected in 1931—but it would not have played in Peoria. And Peoria was still more representative of America than Chicago. The Peorias of America, and smaller towns, rural areas, and many big-city dwellers as well, supported immigration restriction. In retrospect, it is now clear that, insofar as the old order was concerned, restriction of immigration came too late. The coming-of-age of second- and third-generation voters in the 1930s, the impact of the Great Depression, and the political leadership of Franklin Delano Roosevelt would transform American politics. But in the 1920s no such change appeared on the horizon, and it was in the decade's tribalized atmosphere that the old notions about immigrants as national assets would be scrapped and a restrictive immigration policy adopted that would endure, largely unchanged, for almost four decades.

By 1924, when the extended quota law was due to expire, the new system, proposed originally as a one-year emergency, seemed already to be conventional wisdom. The nativist forces in Congress, led by Albert Johnson, a Republican from Washington State who headed the House Committee on Immigration, were not only intent on making the quota system permanent but also wanted to make it more restrictive. The major goal was to cut the total number and, even more important, to move the baseline census back from 1920, where it should have been according to Dillingham's original notion, to 1890. This, of course, as restrictionists openly stated, would make the discrimination against more recent immigrant groups even more pronounced. Johnson calculated that this would cut the annual Italian quota from forty-two thousand to four thousand, that of the Poles from thirty-one thousand to six thousand, and so on. More moderate restrictionists wanted merely to keep the quotas of the 1922 act. This had held down immigration, during the two years it was in effect, to some six hundred thousand persons annually, about half of them from Europe. The moderates lost; the 1924 act set up a two-stage system. Phase one, which was supposed to last until 1927 but actually lasted until 1929, was what Johnson had

proposed: a change to the 1890 base and a reduction of the quotas from 3 to 2 percent. This system allowed in some three hundred thousand annually, about half of them from Europe. Phase two—whose effectiveness cannot really be judged because the Great Depression of the 1930s caused major changes in immigration patterns, was intended to be even more restrictive. The quotas were to be based on a scientific study of the origins of the American people going back to the first census of 1790. Even with precise data, which were not (and are not) available, such a study would have been of dubious validity, but its effect was predictable. The switch to national origins further increased the percentage allowed to the British Isles, Germany, and Scandinavia and reduced all the others. One additional change, with little numerical effect, further tightened Asian exclusion. It abrogated the Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan by barring Japanese totally as "aliens ineligible to citizenship." Since the Japanese quota would have been fewer than two hundred a year, this was intended as an international insult and was so taken by the Japanese government and people. The 1924 law also tightened the administrative apparatus and made deportation for a variety of causes much easier.

Congress thus wrote the assumptions of the Immigration Restriction League and other nativists into the nation's statute books. Those assumptions had become, by then, part of the national climate of opinion. President Calvin Coolidge, who signed the bill into law, had published an article when he was vice president entitled "Whose Country Is This?" In it he made clear his adherence not only to the theory of Nordic supremacy but also to the notion that intermarriage between "Nordics" and other groups produced deteriorated offspring. To cite but another example of the prevalent "racism" of the American 1920s, this is how Congressman Johnson, chief author of the 1924 act, justified that legislation three years later:

Today, instead of a well-knit homogeneous citizenry, we have a body politic made up of all and every diverse element. Today, instead of a nation descended from generations of freemen bred to a knowledge of the principles and practice of self-government, of liberty under law, we have a heterogeneous population no small proportion of which is sprung from races that, throughout the centuries, have known no liberty at all. . . . In other words, our capacity to maintain our cherished institutions stands diluted by a stream of alien blood, with all its inherited misconceptions respecting the relationships of the governing power to the governed.

... It is no wonder, therefore, that the myth of the melting pot has been discredited. ... The United States is our land. ... We intend to maintain it so. The day of unalloyed welcome to all peoples, the day of indiscriminate acceptance of all races, has definitely ended.

Whatever one may think of Johnson's racial theories, which in slightly different form became the official ideology of Nazi Germany, most Americans at that time desired the goal he sought—restriction of immigration. And, in retrospect, without in any way endorsing his or others' theories about racial superiority and inferiority, it is easy to see that some kind of limitation of immigration was not only all but inevitable but probably desirable. There were and are limits to the number of immigrants a developed country can absorb. The real tragedy is not that immigration was restricted but that the criteria used to do so were blatantly discriminatory and that the essentially false notions about the dangers of immigration were so firmly fixed in the American consensus that, in the following decade, it seemed politically impossible to adjust the system to save the lives of those fleeing tyranny and death.