

Xenophobia in American Politics: The “Know Nothing Party” of the 1850s and the Trump-Pence Neo-Fascist Republican Agenda for 2017

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Glossary

Xenophobia = *an intense or irrational dislike or fear of people from other countries*

Nativism = *the policy of protecting the interests of native-born or established inhabitants against those of immigrants*

Summaries of the First 4 Points of Lawrence Britt’s 14 Characteristics of Fascism That Apply to the Trump/Pence GOP

1. *Powerful and continuing expressions of nationalism. From the prominent displays of flags and bunting to the ubiquitous lapel pins, the fervor to show patriotic nationalism, both on the part of the regime itself and of citizens caught up in its frenzy, was always obvious. Catchy slogans, pride in the military, and demands for unity were common themes in expressing this nationalism. It was usually coupled with a suspicion of things foreign that often bordered on xenophobia.*

2. *Disdain for the importance of human rights. The regimes themselves viewed human rights as of little value and a hindrance to realizing the objectives of the ruling elite. Through clever use of propaganda, the population was brought to accept these human rights abuses by marginalizing, even demonizing, those being targeted. When abuse was egregious, the tactic was to use secrecy, denial, and disinformation.*

3. *Identification of enemies/scapegoats as a unifying cause. The most significant common thread among these regimes was the use of scapegoating as a means to divert the people’s attention from other problems, to shift blame for failures, and to channel frustration in controlled directions. The methods of choice—relentless propaganda and disinformation—were usually effective. Often the regimes would incite “spontaneous” acts (aka “false flag operations”) against the targeted scapegoats, usually communists, socialists, liberals, Jews, ethnic and racial minorities, traditional national enemies, members of other religions, secularists, homosexuals, and “terrorists.” Active opponents of these regimes were inevitably labeled as terrorists and dealt with accordingly.*

4. *The supremacy of the military/avid militarism. Ruling elites always identified closely with the military and the industrial infrastructure that supported it. A disproportionate share of national resources was allocated to the military, even when domestic needs were acute. The military was seen as an expression of nationalism, and was used*

whenever possible to assert national goals, intimidate other nations, and increase the power and prestige of the ruling elite.

The pre-Civil War 1850s was an era when there was serious political instability and economic uncertainty partly because of the fear of a rising immigrant population without a concomitant increase in job opportunities. There was, as yet, no stable two party political system in the US. Because of these realities, a relatively new, very inexperienced political party, popularly known as the Know-Nothing Party, came out of nowhere and won 43 seats in the US Congress in the national election of 1856.

Although the existence of the new party was no secret, the names of its members were a closely kept secret. "I don't know" was the preferred answer when the press asked about the party's behind-closed-doors meetings and conspiratorial agendas. And so the pejorative label "know-nothing" was quickly applied to the group. It was a well-deserved title.

The Know-Nothing Party had originally named itself the **Native American Party**, although the name obviously did not refer to the real, non-white "native" Americans who had occupied the land for the previous 10,000 years - and then had it stolen from them. What the party meant by the designation "native" was "native-born", and membership was limited to white people who were born in the USA. Only white Protestants were allowed in the party, and it specifically excluded Roman Catholics, most of whom were recent immigrants from Europe. The party soon changed its name to the American Party.

KNOW NOTHING PARTY

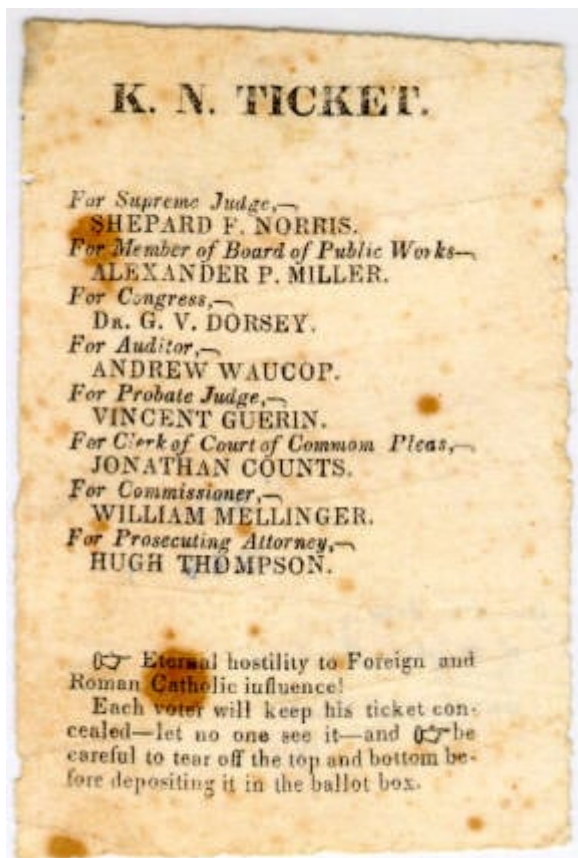
- **Nativists** = Americans who opposed immigration
- **Know-Nothing Party** = nativists who supported immigration restrictions to protect jobs and culture of native-born Americans
- Wanted to keep Catholics out of political offices and wanted immigrants to live in the U.S. for 21 years before becoming citizens



The Know-Nothing Party enshrined nativism and virulent xenophobia in its founding document. By today's standards, it was a white supremacist party and its members would

have been good Ku Klux Klan members when that “Christian” organization came into existence after the racist South “lost” the Civil War – pledging on their honor to “rise again” (a pledge still taken quite seriously 150 years later by Confederate Flag-waving, gun-toting southerners in the Tea Party wing of the GOP).

The fact that they actually chose **“Native American Party”** as their official name at their birth was evidence for why they may actually deserve their “know-nothing” nickname, for they appeared not to know the history of the genocidal way that their American ancestors had dealt with the real native Americans just a generation earlier. What was particularly ironic is the fact that their ancestors had at one time been non-native-born immigrants themselves.



Because of the rash of European migrants in the mid-1850s (many of whom couldn't speak English) there was naturally a lot of fear of job competition with desperate poor people who would work for subsistence (or lower) wages. So an often hysterical fear of those foreigners arose and politicians exploited those fears. This “xenophobia” and the resultant violence that that fear generated was largely directed at Roman Catholicism which was practiced by the immigrants that came from Ireland and southern Germany.

The young and inexperienced Know-Nothing Party reactionaries were unashamedly racist and also religiously pious, and it turned out to be a flash-in-the-pan reality as more and more moderate and open-minded Americans rejected the vile nature of the party's goals.

A Party of Religious Fanatics and Unprincipled Demagogues

A Catholic Bishop, J. L. Spalding, said that the Know-Nothings were

“the depraved portion of our native(-born) population....It was not

the American people who were seeking to make war on the church, but merely a party of religious fanatics and unprincipled demagogues who as little represented the American people as did the mobs whom they incited to bloodshed and incendiarism. Their whole conduct was un-American and opposed to all the principles and traditions of our free institutions.”

The know-nothing movement reached its peak in the mid-1850s, and by 1859 it had essentially disappeared from national politics. But the ideology obviously did not disappear.

The irrational fear of foreigners and fear of foreign religions that characterized the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s has a lot of similarities to the “America First” party of Donald Trump’s xenophobic GOP and the white supremacist Tea Party that sprang up after Barack Obama became America’s first black president.

Just like today’s right-wing parties in America, the Know-Nothings were again energized by the perception that America’s immigration policies were too liberal. And a lot of narrow-minded voters throughout American and world history have easily become irrational haters of misunderstood or falsely demonized foreigners. And those fears are typically fanned by media outlets that thrive on controversy. Xenophobia became normal and will probably always be easily made to be considered normal. Racial conflict still sells newspapers and biased TV news shows.

Xenophobia is Incompatible with Sermon on the Mount Christianity

Of course, the Know-Nothing Puritanical/Calvinistic Protestants, never having been carefully taught the primacy of the ethics of the non-violent Jesus as summarized so well in the Sermon on the Mount, were not very likely to be truly merciful to the stranger or to lovingly feed the hungry immigrant or to offer shelter to the homeless ones, as Jesus instructed his followers to do.

The helpless refugees who came to America’s “welcoming” shores may have been trying to escape political persecution, pestilence, poverty, homelessness and starvation or they may have been innocent victims of war, simply trying to psychologically or spiritually heal from their traumatizing experiences at the hands of war’s killing soldiers, secret service torturers and ruling tyrannical elites who were trying to maintain their wealth and power by any means possible.



Emma Lazarus' famous anti-tyranny poem (apparently now newly obsolete in the brave new world of America's xenophobic Republican Party supporters) is engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty that has inspired so many millions of refugees since it was gifted to America by France in the 1870s. The plaque says "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me." But the Statue of Liberty wasn't there in the 1850s.

So rather than welcoming beaten-down refugees into the New World, the Know-Nothings had their armed thugs administer beatings, shootings, and torchings of Catholic homes and Catholic churches. They even tarred and feathered a Jesuit priest, sending a clear message to other tired, poor, abused refugees who happened to have been indoctrinated into an "alien" religion.

The clear message was that they should self-deport - or else.

The Know-Nothing's Xenophobic "America First" Political Party was not Actually America's First

The Federalist Party of the early 1800s (frequently boasted about by the likes of the NeoCon Newt Gingrich) was probably the first xenophobic political party in the history of America.

During the administration of the Federalist Party president, John Adams, (POTUS # 2 - 1798-1802), that party pushed for the passage of America's first Alien Act, which allowed the president to deport any and all "aliens" that he regarded as potential threats to the republic.

Even more draconian laws, which are still on the books, were passed during World War I and in the Constitution-shredding Bush-era laws that were hastily passed immediately after 9/11/01. And, it must be mentioned, on New Year's Eve, 2011, when nobody was looking, President Obama signed the "[National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012](#)" (NDAA 2012).

Buried deep inside of what is supposed to be next year's annual Defense appropriation bill (that decides how many more hundreds of billions of dollars of bankrupting national debt with which the Pentagon will be further strangling the US economy for the next year), suspected native-born citizens can now be legally arrested without charge, and they can be kept in hidden prisons without charge and with no explanation to concerned loved ones, for as long as the president desires - if he thinks the arrestee is a possible threat to national security!

And there were other such "America First" movements that were indirect heirs of the Know-Nothings. As one example, American aviation hero Charles Lindbergh, who had been wined and dined and duly bamboozled by Adolf Hitler when he and his wife toured Germany in the mid-1930s, led an American First movement that truly believed in the political agendas of Adolf Hitler.

Lindbergh and his followers trusted an infamous sociopathic dictator who was famous for his total lack of compassion and his serial lying, just like most corporate lobbyist-duped politicians tend to do in America. They believed that America should be isolationist-minded and refrain from interfering even with outrageous violent movements such as European fascism and its xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Slavic, anti-minority agendas. To Lindbergh and his followers, America First meant that America should always do what is selfishly best for America and keep its hands off of the problems of foreign issues, no matter how evil.

The History of Xenophobia in American Politics

The recent resurgence of the Christian Militias, Christian Dominionists, Christian Theocrats, the Pseudo-Christian Tea Party populist movements and now Trump's and Pence's xenophobic movement should give pause to all true patriots who love American democracy. Trump's campaign rhetoric has successfully recruited millions of short-sighted voters to his cause and, in the last couple of election cycles these groups have come out of nowhere to wield significant - albeit often dysfunctional - power in the US Congress. It should not be a surprise to discover that many of these xenophobic and racist-leaning legislators have come from formerly pro-slavery and segregationist states. The perceived rapidity of the movement should also remind us about what Christian supremacist and Islamophobe Ralph Reed (decidedly not a Sermon on the Mount-type Christian) once said:

“What Christians have got to do is take back this country, one precinct at a time, one neighborhood at a time and one state at a time. I honestly believe that in my lifetime, we will see (America) once again governed by Christians....and Christian values....I want to be invisible. I do guerilla warfare. I paint my face and travel at night. You don't know it's over until you're in a body bag. You don't know until election night.” — Ralph Reed (Republican Christian Coalition executive director 1987-1989)

But the beneficiaries of all acts of genocide, just like the beneficiaries of inherited wealth, are typically unaware of the fact that they don't deserve the land or the privileges that accrued to them from the criminal acts and cruelty of their forefathers (or the sociopath-creating indulgent parenting style of doting parents in the case of any number of punitive, conscienceless and independently wealthy conservatives like Donald Trump).

America's true history is blood-drenched, putrid, genocidal, anti-democratic and un-Christ-like in the extreme, and it contradicts the wide-spread and deeply-indoctrinated (albeit false) “Christian” belief that America has always been “a shining city on a hill” that is blessed by God.

One has to be a historically-illiterate know-nothing to believe that.

The most gruesome parts of American history have been censored out of America's school books ever since history books began being published. Lying about the past has been true of all pseudo-patriotic nations since the beginning of time. The textbooks from my history classes never mentioned the mass slaughter of America's First Nation's peoples, nor was there anything taught about the horrific history of slavery or about the lynchings of black African-Americans at the hand of white supremacists after they had been emancipated. It was the rare history teacher who ever taught about the war crimes committed by American soldiers during the Vietnam War. Usually the class never got to that part of the book before the semester ended.

Indeed, the real history of our nation has been profusely sugar-coated. Most of us grew up believing the false history that now desperately needs to be re-learned in this era when America is so profoundly hated for the wartime atrocities and injustices that we naïve ones are being sheltered from understanding. Ever since the homicidal white supremacist Christopher Columbus (and his greedy, sex-starved crew) began raping and pillaging the aboriginal inhabitants and their resources in 1492, the patriotic story/lie has been told over and over again until we sheeple believed that it was true.

The Political Platform of the Know Nothing Party

Following is the platform of the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s: It might sound familiar. Only the type of religion might be different now.

- Severe limits on immigration, especially from predominantly Catholic countries.
- Restricting political office to native-born Americans.
- Extending the residency requirements for citizenship from five to twenty-one years.
- Limiting public office to native-born individuals.
- Restricting public school teachers to (white) Protestants.
- Mandating daily Bible readings in public schools (to be read from the Protestant version of the Bible).

- Restricting the sale of liquor.

Article III of the Know-Nothing Party's founding document declared that "a member must be a native-born citizen, a Protestant either born of Protestant parents or reared under Protestant influence, and not united in marriage with a Roman Catholic....no member who has a Roman Catholic wife shall be eligible to office in this order".

When a Know-Nothing Party member was admitted into the secret organization, he was required to take the following oath:

"In the presence of Almighty God and these witnesses, you do solemnly promise and swear that you will never betray any of the secrets of this society....that you never will permit any of the secrets of this society to be written....that you will not vote.... for any man for any office.... unless he be an American-born citizen, in favor of Americans ruling America....that you will not, under any circumstances, expose the name of any member of this order nor reveal the existence of such an association; that you will....obey the command of the....president or his deputy."

The candidate that the Know-Nothings ran for president in 1856 was Whig Party POTUS Millard Fillmore (who served under President General Zachary Taylor as Vice President from 1849 - 1850). Fillmore served as POTUS from 1850 - 1853 when President Taylor died in office.

Fillmore had quit the disintegrating Whig Party after 1853 and accepted the nomination of the Know-Nothings in 1855, but, even though he wasn't as xenophobic as the rest of the party, his "America First" campaign slogan was "I know nothing but my Country, my whole Country, and nothing but my Country." He lost in a landslide because voters had finally seen the criminal excesses of the xenophobic party's agenda and repudiated it at the polls.

Fillmore won only one state in the Electoral College balloting that year and the once national party soon slipped into obscurity.

The Know-Nothings had conveniently forgotten that their ancestors had been complicit with Democratic President Andrew Jackson and his "Trail of Tears" atrocities (which would have easily met the 20th century's definition of crimes against humanity). And of course the POW death camps of both the Confederate and Union Armies in the soon-to-erupt War Between the States would have met the definition of international war crimes.

The sorry state of some voters' intelligence, Christian ethics, their knowledge of basic science and the ease with which they have been led to believe obviously false campaign rhetoric has been breath-taking.

And their apparent studied ignorance on such issues as global climate change, the threat of rising sea levels, the obvious environmental degradation, the mass pollution of the planet's air, water and soil (thanks to the many sociopathic multinational corporations who care not about anything but next quarter's earnings), the stubborn racism, and the obvious lack of knowledge of history, science, foreign affairs, drug policy, privatized prisons, gun violence, income and wealth inequality, access to medical care, etc, etc has been appalling and lends further credence to making the comparisons with the Know-Nothings.

Sad.

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