

Gary Jason, guest column: Rallying neo-nationalists

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The current national debate over immigration has become emotional. No surprise there. Immigration has profound economic, national security and cultural implications.

Many who oppose immigration do so because they believe it has negative economic consequences. And many do so because they feel it endangers our security in this age of terrorism. Although that argument is more applicable to illegal, as opposed to legal, immigration.

But many who oppose immigration do so because they fear that immigrants — specifically Hispanic immigrants — will somehow harm American culture.

This feeling of threatened culture I call **neo-nativism**, because it is just a new outburst of the nativism that has been part of America's history since its inception.

Nativism appeared as early as the 1750s, when the British settlers, especially in Pennsylvania, worried that the large minority of Germans didn't speak English.

Then, in the 1790s, an influx of French and Irish political refugees caused nativism to flare, resulting in punitive laws being passed (the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798).

Nativism reignited in the in the mid-1800s, as a wave of immigration from Ireland angered people, mainly because the Irish were predominantly Catholic.

The mainly Protestant public feared America would be controlled by the Pope, leading to nativist riots in Philadelphia and the creation of a secret society of anti-Catholic bigots ("The Order of the Star-Spangled Banner," known as the Know Nothings).

Nativists even formed a political party in the 1850s, and pushed to restrict immigration.

The late 1800s saw the immigration of many Chinese, and the Irish kept arriving, which again triggered nativist anger.

The nativists succeeded in restricting the Chinese in 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act and other similar laws.

The turn of the 20th century through the 1920s saw the arrival of large numbers of Italians and other Southern Europeans, as well as many Poles and other Central Europeans, including many Jews.

This time, nativism reached fever pitch, with the rise of the KKK (anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and, of course, anti-Semitic) and the passage of yet more restrictive legislation.

The result was a choking off of immigration in 1925. This didn't help the economy, of course, which crashed a few years later. And thousands or even millions of Jews and others who could have found refuge in America were killed by the Nazis.

The influx of Vietnamese and Cuban refugees also aroused nativism.

The more recent arrival of a large number of Latinos has triggered nativists to again pressure Congress to halt immigration.

With every new wave of immigrants, the "native" citizens chant the same litany of complaints: the immigrants don't speak our language, they won't assimilate, they form criminal gangs, they don't share "our" religion, "our" values or our "race," and they threaten "our" jobs.

But the Germans assimilated and became productive citizens, as did the French, Irish, Chinese, Italians, Central Europeans, Russians, Greeks, Jews, Vietnamese and Cubans.

Our culture, economy and national strength not only survived but also were eventually improved by each new wave of immigration. You would think that people would have learned this by now.

But many people still haven't learned the lesson. I'm amazed at the surprising strength of **neo-nativism** among those whom one would think would know better, namely, descendents of immigrants. I know a daughter of Central European Catholics who is deeply afraid that Latinos are swamping America. I know a grandson of Jewish immigrants who is angry about the threat to our jobs from Mexicans.

I shake my head in disbelief. I silently wonder how many of his relatives would be alive today had the nativists — whose line he espouses — not stopped Jews from immigrating in the 20s.

I hear prominent talk-show hosts daily whip their audiences into a frenzy about the foreign hordes.

But, ironically, one prominent host is of Irish descent, another is of Polish descent and another is Jewish. These people, neo-nativists who have forgotten their own history, are neo-nats with amnesia. A strange thing, indeed.

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