

NEWS

# Before undocumented Latinos, Americans directed hate at other immigrants, minorities

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First they came for the Germans.

In the 1750s, before the United States was a country, Benjamin Franklin warned about “swarthy” and “stupid” German immigrants overrunning the colonies.

Then they came for the Catholics.

The nativist Know-Nothing movement stoked fear in the 1850s that Catholic immigrants were colluding with the Pope to overthrow American democracy.

Then they came for the Chinese.

In 1882, the federal government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, banning labor immigrants from China to appease American laborers fearful for their jobs.

American history is rife with spasms of bigotry and discrimination against immigrants and minority groups, experts say. The recent focus on Latino undocumented immigrants, who have increasingly become targets of name-calling, intimidation and hate crimes, is just the latest wave of American intolerance.

**History:** How bomb blasts a century ago launched the Red Scare and a raid against Paterson anarchists

**Trump:** Attack on 'the Squad' part of long-term strategy, experts say

**Immigration:** New Jersey immigrant communities remain on alert on day when ICE raids are slated to begin

“It’s part of who we are as Americans,” said Jack McDevitt, director of Northeastern University’s Institute on Race and Justice. “We broke away from the British and started to fear who could be trusted.”

Ali Chaudhary, an assistant professor of sociology at Rutgers University, traces American xenophobia to the settlement of the country, when Native Americans were slaughtered, persecuted and portrayed as “savages” to justify expansion into the West.

“Unfortunately, it’s something that keeps repeating itself in American history,” Chaudhary said. “There’s a human kind of innate thing for grouping people and excluding those that are deemed inferior or a threat.”

In 1942, shortly after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, public opinion turned against Japanese Americans. As concerns grew over their loyalty to the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing military commanders to forcibly relocate an estimated 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry to incarceration camps.

Sixty-two percent of the internees were American citizens. Many lost their homes and possessions.

The postwar era brought fears of a Communist influence on American institutions and espionage by Soviets. The Red Scare led to government investigations and prosecutions of people believed to be associated with the Communist party and fueled the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy, who baselessly smeared employees of the federal government, universities and the film industry.

Chaudhary said the fear-mongering and rhetoric of the period was also closely tied to anti-Semitism.

“The idea really was that all Jews that have come here are Communists, they’re all socialists,” he said. “Marx was a Jew, Lenin was of Jewish descent. They’re all Jews and so many Jews are in America and now they’re taking over our universities, they’re going to be creating socialism and communism throughout American society.”

Anti-Semitism has been part of the country’s fabric since the beginning, said McDevitt. Hostility toward the African American community has also been a stubborn mainstay, he said.

After 9/11, America’s crosshairs turned to the Muslim community. The subsequent surge of crime directed at people who were perceived to be Muslim or Middle Eastern was the largest

documented increase in hate crimes in the country's history, McDevitt said. As Islamophobia surged, Americans called for the construction of mosques to be restricted, for a national Muslim database to be established and for new bans on immigration.

Nativism and hysteria around certain ethnic or religious groups are typically sparked by an incident like 9/11 or rhetoric by politicians and other leaders that blames various groups for society's ills, McDevitt said.

"Politicians have used fear of groups as a motivating factor to bring people to their cause for years and years," he said. "It's been a longstanding political trait to demonize certain groups."

Demagogues like Father Charles Coughlin have helped fan the flames. Coughlin used his popular radio broadcasts in the 1930s to attack Jews and promote a fascist agenda before being pulled off the air.

Mae Ngai, a history and Asian American studies professor at Columbia University, said nationalism tends to spike in periods of economic change and distress. Wealth inequality and the loss of American manufacturing jobs to automation and outsourcing have provided ample recent opportunity to turn on Latinos, she said.

"Cultural or religious or racial difference is weaponized to explain the economic displacement of certain sectors of the workforce. It becomes a way to distract people from the real causes of problems in this country," Ngai said. "What you see happening now is a relatively small percentage of the population that's been goaded and encouraged by the administration to a kind of racial hysteria."

Opposition to "undocumented" immigrants, which is used as code for Latinos only, Ngai said, is rooted in racism.

"They don't get hysterical about undocumented people from Poland, Ireland or Russia, of which there are significant numbers, so the use of 'undocumented' as a trope is effective because it doesn't sound racist," she said. "It's about people who break laws, it's not about brown people but they only talk about brown people."

Fear of "the other" is universal and part of human nature, McDevitt said.

"When you bring different groups together, there is naturally some fears that grow with the group that has power," he said. "The best of us as Americans is when we take those fears and try to understand better who's coming and what are they bringing. The worst of it is when we take the fears and stoke them into anti-immigrant or anti-any group sort of biases."

Most episodes of intolerance and mass hysteria dissipate. In the spring of 1692, panic swept through colonial Massachusetts after several girls claimed they were possessed by the devil. By September, after 200 people were accused of witchcraft and 19 were hanged, public opinion turned against the Salem witch trials.

Public sentiment also eventually put an end to the first Red Scare, when the threat of a Bolshevik revolution in the U.S. heightened efforts by the federal government to round up and deport anarchists. Raids led by J. Edgar Hoover, including a Valentine's Day raid that nearly eviscerated Paterson's anarchist community, faced swift backlash.

Research has shown that combating hate requires increasing interactions between groups of people who may not be familiar with one another, Chaudhary said. Last year, New Jersey houses of worship began hosting "supper clubs" that brought together Latino immigrants and citizens in hopes that they find common ground.

It appears to be working.

"At a grassroots level, that seems to be where change is happening," Chaudhary said. "It's where people can get past the patterns of hate."

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