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What the 1920 Wall Street bombing tells us about modern immigration scare tactics

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On Sept. 16, 1920, at 12:01 pm — just as workers were starting to head out to lunch — a bomb went off outside the JP Morgan Bank at 23 Wall St. in New York City (the facade of which is still pockmarked from the event). Thirty-eight people died and hundreds more were injured in what was at the time the largest terrorist attack in American history, not surpassed until the Oklahoma City bombing by white nationalist Timothy McVeigh claimed 168 lives over seven decades later.

In the aftermath of the event, a consensus formed: immigrants did it.

That same anti-immigrant hysteria, in which immigrants were scapegoated for acts of terrorist violence, appeared again this month when President Trump touted a Department of Justice study claiming that immigrants are disproportionately responsible for terrorist attacks (a study whose methodology was immediately called into question). As the Wall Street bombing and its aftermath expose, however, scapegoating immigrants is a dangerous mistake — one that we must avoid repeating today.

The 1920 bombing came at a highly sensitive time in American history. The early 20th century saw a massive influx of immigrants into the United States, primarily from Southern and Eastern Europe. Largely Jewish and Catholic, these immigrants were seen as alien to what was then a largely white Anglo-Saxon Protestant country. Many of them also subscribed to left-wing political ideologies that were seen as threats to the United States (especially after the Bolshevik Revolution brought communism to Russia in 1917). This combination produced the kindling for a massive backlash.

The result was a "Red Scare" targeting largely left-wing immigrant activists.

In 1919 the Department of Justice (yes, the same agency that authored the above-mentioned study) launched the Palmer Raids, rounding up thousands of leftist political activists and deporting as many as possible back to their home countries. Following the Wall Street bombing, the DOJ's Bureau of Investigation (the forerunner of today's FBI) charged a very young J. Edgar Hoover with investigating the attack, and the New York City Police Department formed a special unit to monitor "radical elements" in the city.

The extremity of this response led to the birth of the civil liberties movement — the ACLU was formed in 1920 largely to address this government crackdown on free speech and political activism.

Despite several investigations (the last one concluding in 1944), no culprit for the 1920 bombing was ever found. While suspicions lingered on immigrant activists, nothing definitively linked any specific individual or group to the bombing, which remains unsolved today.

That didn't stop the bombing from fueling anti-immigrant hysteria, however. Writing in Good Housekeeping in 1921, Vice President Calvin Coolidge decried the threat posed by leftist immigrants to the United States, saying, "There is no room for the alien who turns toward America with the avowed intention of opposing government. … His purpose is to tear down. There is no room for him here. He needs to be deported, not as a substitute for, but as a part of his punishment."

In 1924, Congress passed and President Coolidge signed the National Origins Act, which established a quota system that would be based on the 1890 census — before the mass arrival of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, who would as a result largely be unable to enter the United States.

The tie between the terrorist attack and the restrictive immigration laws that followed reflected the way hysteria crowded out nuanced and reasoned thinking when it came to immigration and terrorism. Even The Washington Post sounded alarmist notes. An editorial published Sept. 20, 1920, described the Wall Street bombing as exemplifying "the extent to which the alien scum from the cesspools and sewers of the Old World has polluted the clear spring of American democracy."

Some immigrants committed violent acts in the late 1910s and early 1920s, while some leftist immigrants undoubtedly wanted to see fundamental changes in the American political system. But the scale of these "terrorist" threats by a few bad actors never came close to justifying the wholesale exclusion of millions desperate for new lives.

As we confront these same questions today, we must ask ourselves how real the purported "terrorist threat" posed by immigrants to America is. Ignoring this question a century ago had tragic consequences.

As a direct result of the National Origins Act, America's doors were closed both to Jews seeking to escape the horrors of Nazi Germany and to the millions of refugees displaced by World War II and the descent of the Iron Curtain that followed. It took a special executive order in 1945 by President Truman to give priority access to those displaced by the war. Although the new law benefited some (such as the Epsteins, a family of Holocaust survivors whose story is told in Under One Roof, a new exhibit at the Tenement Museum — where I serve as president) it did not go far enough. The executive order and the subsequent Displaced Persons and Refugee Act of 1948 only allowed the admission of 423,000 people — a fraction of the tens of millions displaced by the war — some of whom were forced to live in camps until the 1960s.

But today, we can learn from this history.

According to research by the libertarian Cato Institute, the annual chance of being murdered by somebody other than a foreign-born terrorist was 252.9 times greater than the chance of dying in a terrorist attack committed by a foreign-born terrorist. Of the 3,252,493 refugees admitted from 1975 to the end of 2015, only 20 committed terrorist acts. In recent years (2008 to 2016), there were nearly twice as many incidents of native right-wing terrorism than terrorism caused by

Islamic extremism. And of the 10 most deadly mass shootings in American history, nine were perpetrated by American born and raised shooters, seven of whom were white men.

Despite these facts, we hear no calls to ban white men from immigrating to the United States. Instead people demand to limit the number of Muslims and folks from "shithole countries" who enter the United States. When things "go wrong" in our society, we tend to scapegoat those who seem most foreign — those who worship differently than the majority of Americans do, those who come from new lands underrepresented among our current population, those who adhere to different political traditions. It seems to be easier to blame our problems on a foreign "other" rather than accept responsibility for our own role in creating them.

After all, there have already been 11 school shootings in the United States in 2018 — none perpetrated by immigrants — yet we hear no outcry about the "threat" posed by native-born Americans killing our children. Apparently we'd prefer to take on an imaginary, foreign threat than a real, domestic one.

But before we rush to shut our doors to people fleeing the horror that is Syria or send people back to conflict-ridden El Salvador, let's make sure we are dealing with real facts, not imaginary foreign boogeymen, and let's consider the possible consequences of so doing.