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## Melting pot calls the kettle black

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With the nation in the midst of a raging debate concerning immigration, it is appropriate to consider the well-documented and problematic characteristics associated with one particular group of foreign arrivals.

Millions of them poured into the United States over a span of several years, most arriving with few resources and minimal skills. Many congregated into slums where they contributed to high rates of crime and engaged in substance abuse. Perhaps most concerning of all is their historic allegiance to foreign religious leaders and their association with – and even overt support of – terrorist activity.

The identity of the group in question should be obvious: It's the Irish.

Fleeing cultural subjugation, crushing poverty and famine, more than half of the population of Ireland – 4.5 million – came to America between 1820 and 1930. They were impoverished, worked menial jobs and had high rates of alcohol abuse. Some turned to organized crime while others supported the Irish Republican Army with arms and money. The Irish also practiced Catholicism – a religion that was once as disdained by the establishment as the prospect of sharia law is today.

In a historical irony, the Irish chose to leave the systemic oppression imposed upon them by English Protestants and move to a fledgling nation dominated by the progeny of those same English Protestants. Their reception was predictable.

Massachusetts Representative Harrison Gray Otis complained that the influx of “hordes of wild Irishmen” would precipitate the end of “liberty and property” in America. The mayor of New York proclaimed that the Irish “will always bring wretchedness and want” and the Boston Daily Bee reported on the “foul and disgusting habits of the Irish population.” An 1852 report on immigration found that Irish immigrants crowded native-born Americans “out of employment” and drove down the standard of living with their willingness to “work for lower wages.”

According to Harper’s Weekly, “seventy-five percent of the crimes of violence committed... are the work of Irishmen.” The Chicago Post suggested that putting the Irish “on a boat and sending

them home would end crime in this country.” British historian Charles Kingsley viewed the Irish as an inferior subspecies of humanity and described them as “white chimpanzees.”

Perhaps the greatest perceived threat of the Irish was their Catholic religion. In 1647, the Massachusetts Bay Colony banned Jesuit priests under penalty of death. Revolutionary Sam Adams argued that Catholicism was a greater threat to the colonies than the Stamp Act. John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, suggested building “a wall of brass around the country for the exclusion of Catholics.”

The Irish did not bear the brunt of nativist scorn alone. The venerable Benjamin Franklin worried that a certain group of immigrants could “never adopt our language or customs any more than they can adopt our complexion” and were “generally the most ignorant stupid sort of their own nation.” He was talking about Germans. For good measure, Franklin also noted that “Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes” are not actually “white.”

By the early 20th century, anti-immigrant politicians – many of them descendants of those who were baselessly marginalized just a generation before – implemented literacy tests for new arrivals and established quotas targeting “undesirable” groups of immigrants, including Italians, Jews and Slavs. Asian immigrants were excluded entirely and the implementation of quotas reduced Italian immigration by more than 95 percent.

In 1939, after the annual quota was met, the United States turned away a ship with 900 Jews seeking asylum from Nazi Germany. The ship returned to Europe and more than 250 of the passengers were killed in the Holocaust.

The historic perpetrators of nativist discrimination would be horrified to discover that Catholicism is the nation’s largest religious denomination and the population currently includes 46 million Germans, 33 million Irish, 17 million Italians and 10 million French. Somehow, the republic has managed to survive.

Though America is clearly a nation of immigrants, many of their descendants retain a persistent and self-interested desire to close the door behind them in an attempt to deny others exactly what their forefathers were able to achieve: a better life for themselves and their families. Over time, the performers change, but the song remains the same.

The hypocrisy starts at the top. President Trump, himself of German descent, wants to spend billions building a wall and has referred to immigrants as “animals” who will “infest” America. Trump’s paternal grandparents and mother were immigrants, as were two of his three wives.

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly recently noted that most illegal immigrants are “not people that would easily assimilate into... our modern society.” Seven of Kelly’s eight great-grandparents were immigrants; his great-grandmother was illiterate and lived in the United States for more than 30 years without ever learning to speak English.

As history has shown, opposition to immigration repeatedly focuses on the same, baseless issues:

- Immigration leads to crime – the percentage of immigrants within the general population is near an all-time high, but crime rates have been hovering near 40-year lows for several years. A recent study by the CATO Institute found that the number of illegal immigrants convicted of a crime in Texas was 56 percent lower than the number of convictions for native-born American citizens.

- Immigration hurts the economy – since 2000, the number of immigrants (documented and undocumented) has increased by 50 percent and the U.S. GDP has nearly doubled.
- Immigrants take our jobs – unemployment is historically low and employers are struggling to fill vacant positions.
- Immigrants increase the risk of terrorism – based on data from 1975-2015, the odds of being killed in a terrorist attack on American soil by an immigrant was one in 3.6 billion; you are 1.2 million times more likely to be killed by a lightning strike.
- Today’s immigrants are unlike those that came before them – the same was said about the Greeks, Italians, Poles, Russians, French, Germans and Irish, yet all the dire predictions associated with their arrivals never came to fruition.
- Undocumented immigrants are criminals – crossing the border is a misdemeanor and crossing the border to seek asylum is not a crime.

Like millions of immigrants, my Irish ancestors entered America legally, but that is only because there were no federal laws restricting immigration at the time of their arrival. For decades, if you arrived unannounced at an American port, the only qualification for entry was your ability to walk off the ship. Few would argue for a return to open borders in today’s world, but immigration policies and efforts to police the border should be based on actual risk rather than groundless xenophobia propagated for the purpose of creating a political diversion.

I am a United States citizen. Like most of us, I did absolutely nothing to earn this status; it was bestowed upon me at birth thanks to the heroic efforts of my ancestors. Our nation will continue to benefit from the hard work and ingenuity of those who choose to come to America in an effort to create better lives for themselves and their children.