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# Chapter 1

## The Contradictory Character of American Nationality: A Historical Perspective

GARY GERSTLE

**A**NY EXAMINATION of American nationality must contend with its contradictory character. On the one hand, this nationality harbors a civic creed promising all Americans equal rights regardless of race, religion, sex, or national origin. On the other hand, American nationality has also contained religious and racial ideologies that have defined the United States in exclusionary ways. Thus, although America proclaimed itself an open society, it also saw itself as a Protestant nation with a mission to save the world from Catholicism and other false faiths. In addition, although it proclaimed that all men are created equal, it aspired, for much of its history, to be a white republic. Writing a history of American nationality requires, then, that one identify its inclusionary and exclusionary characteristics, what the balance between inclusion and exclusion has been during different periods of American history, and how and why that balance has changed over time. That is what I try to do in this chapter, which explores the three nationalist traditions—the civic, the religious, the racial—that have shaped American life. Laws governing immigration and citizenship—rules determining who has been allowed to enter America and to become a full member of American society and who has not—play an important part in this analysis, for they reveal a great deal about the kind of society America has aspired to be. The essay begins with an examination of America's revolutionary founding in the second half of the eighteenth century and concludes with an analysis of the likely relevance—or irrelevance—of America's three nationalist traditions to our own time.

## Civic Nationalism

America's civic nationalist principles can be found in two famous eighteenth-century phrases: "all men are created equal" and "we the people." These phrases expressed beliefs in the fundamental equality of all human beings, in every individual's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and in a democratic government that derives its legitimacy from the people's consent. These beliefs make up a democratic universalism that can take root anywhere. But because they were enshrined in the American nation's two founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, they have marked something distinctive about the American people and their polity. In the 1940s, Gunnar Myrdal bundled these civic rights and principles together into a political faith that he called the American Creed. I prefer the more generic term *civic nationalism* that Michael Ignatieff and other students of the contemporary nation have used to denote these beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

American civic nationalism embodied the republican notion of popular sovereignty. The people would rule; they would determine the course taken by the governments, local, state, and federal, that had some role in their lives. America's civic nationalist tradition also promised a society free of discrimination—ethnic, religious, racial, or sexual. It portrayed America as a place where all individuals could pursue opportunity, economic and cultural, and secure their liberty and property. It called on America to open itself to foreigners willing to work hard, obey the law, and pledge allegiance to its democratic institutions. These potential immigrants were to be drawn not just from the ranks of the educated or privileged, but, in the words of Emma Lazarus, from the world's "huddled masses yearning to breathe free."<sup>2</sup> America's civic nationalist tradition promised to set these downtrodden free, to allow them to pursue their economic dreams, and to practice faith, pursue politics, and fashion identities of their own choosing.

Choice—choosing one's national identity rather than having it imposed by a ruler or by heredity—was crucial to this civic nationalism. Prior to the American Revolution, rules of membership in nations had been dominated by Westphalian and mercantilist doctrines. Under these doctrines, states claimed complete and permanent sovereignty over their subjects, reserving the right to control their movement within state territory and their freedom to move beyond it. Because the strength of a state or monarchy was measured in numbers—the more people a sovereign could claim as subjects, the mightier the realm—European rulers were reluctant to permit their subjects to emigrate, unless the latter were paupers, criminals, or some other class of undesirables. Subjects who did move to another state were still expected to give allegiance to their original state or monarch.

The British colonists in North America had begun to challenge this European state system in the mid-eighteenth century, in part for pragmatic reasons: the North American appetite for settlers from Europe had become insatiable. But the colonists made this materialist demand for labor into a political principle. Even before the 1770s, they had begun to develop rules for membership that were based on residence, consent, and voluntary loyalty rather than on birth, descent, and perpetual subjecthood. And when these colonists brought an independent United States into being, they committed themselves to two principles—freedom of movement into and out of the United States, and ease of membership in the American polity—that were radical for the eighteenth-century world. The second principle, embodied in the country's first naturalization law in 1790, gave every free European immigrant of "good character"—regardless of nationality, language, religion, or gender—the opportunity to become a citizen of the United States after residing in the United States only two years. This ease of affiliation made this naturalization statute the most inclusive measure of its kind in the eighteenth-century world—a judgment that holds even if we take into account, as we must, the racial restriction for which this law has recently become so well known (a matter I soon address). Even as subsequent Congresses made naturalization tougher to achieve, by mandating waiting periods stretching to five years and, at some points, longer, America continued to distinguish itself by the ease with which European immigrants could choose U.S. citizenship for themselves. Both the ease of joining the American polity and the ease of leaving it were part of the revolutionary settlement. So, too, was a willingness to accept into the polity religious groups who, in Europe, were excluded from membership. Thus the United States extended full citizenship to Catholics a half-century before Great Britain and to Jews before the French revolutionaries had done so. The freedom of movement guaranteed by the new nation in combination with the generous terms of civic membership made the United States a magnet for Europeans and established America's reputation early on for being a nation of immigrants.<sup>3</sup>

The Reconstruction Congresses that sat during and after the Civil War (1861–1869) further strengthened America's civic nationalist tradition not only by outlawing slavery but also by passing a broad antidiscrimination amendment. Section 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) declared that "no state shall deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of the law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." Over the next 150 years, these due process and equal protection clauses became the foremost weapons the federal government had to battle discrimination against African Americans and other racial minorities, women, religious groups, and gays. They worked to reinforce America's civic nationalist tradition.<sup>4</sup>

A lesser known part of this amendment's section 1 did similar work: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof," this sentence read, "are citizens of the United States." These deceptively ordinary words actually constituted a ringing endorsement of the principle of equality first articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Anyone born on U.S. soil automatically, at birth, became a citizen. That individual's race, ethnicity, religion, and sex were irrelevant; so, too, was the nationality of that person's parents. This clause was an attempt to offer African Americans an ironclad citizenship guarantee. It was meant to, and in fact did, deny future courts the ability to do what the Taney Court had done in *Dred Scott*: to strip native-born people of African descent of their citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

The supporters of the Fourteenth Amendment also made clear that this clause's protections were to be extended to groups other than African Americans whose color or culture had rendered them suspect populations in the United States. Chief among these groups in the 1860s were the Chinese, who, since the San Francisco Gold Rush, had begun coming to California in large numbers. Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, a Fourteenth Amendment architect, declared on the floor of Congress in 1866 that, under the proposed amendment's terms, "the child of an Asiatic is just as much a citizen as the child of a European." Trumbull gave the same answer when queried about the Gypsies of Pennsylvania. No one in Congress seemed to know whether Gypsies actually then resided in the Keystone state, or whether this group existed only in the imagination of Fourteenth Amendment opponents, conjured up as a category of perpetually footloose, strange, and dangerous foreigners that no known society had ever successfully incorporated into its polity. Certainly Gypsy children born on U.S. soil should never be admitted to American citizenship, declared a Fourteenth Amendment opponent, Senator Edgar Cowan of Pennsylvania. To which Trumbull briefly but powerfully replied, of course they should.<sup>6</sup>

Trumbull and his allies intended to construe birthright citizenship broadly. The words of section 1 accurately express their intent. Because of this intent, the Supreme Court, in the 1890s, affirmed the birthright citizenship of the American-born children of Chinese and other East and South Asian immigrants who, by law, had been barred from becoming U.S. citizens themselves.<sup>7</sup> As part of the Civil War settlement, the United States had given itself the strongest system of birthright citizenship then extant anywhere in the world. It needs to be seen for what it was: a profound affirmation of America's civic nationalist tradition.

## Religious Nationalism

At its origins, and for much of its history, the United States wanted to be a Protestant country. That meant not only that Protestants of all varieties would be able to worship free of interference from the state (or some

state-endorsed religious establishment). It meant as well that the country should do everything in its power to create a society in which Catholicism, and more specifically, papal influence, would have little or no purchase. This fear of Rome is difficult for twenty-first-century Americans to understand because it is no longer a motive force in their politics or immigration policy. But, for most of American history, the Catholic Church's theology, liturgy, and rituals, its life-and-death struggle with European Protestants, its international size and power, and the control it was thought to exercise over rank-and-file Catholics alarmed American Protestants. Catholicism was depicted not only as the enemy of God but as the enemy of republicanism. To Protestant Americans, the Catholic Church stood for monarchy, aristocracy, and other reactionary forces that America was seeking to escape. Where the pope ruled, Protestants charged, the people most certainly did not. And, thus, Catholic influence had to be resisted, contained, and even eradicated.<sup>8</sup>

The intensity of anti-Catholicism did not surface in the constitutional debates of 1787; to the contrary, the framers put the country on the path to religious toleration by refusing to denigrate any religion by name or establish any faith as the country's official religion. The debates over ratification yielded a remarkable First Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1791, that prohibited Congress from passing any "law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The naturalization law of 1790 had already signaled America's openness to religious diversity by putting no prohibition on the ability of immigrant Catholics, Jews, or members of another non-Protestant faith to become citizens of the United States. In law, America's civic nationalism was strong and its religious nationalism weak.<sup>9</sup>

But as evangelical Protestantism revived in early nineteenth-century America, anti-Catholicism recharged as well. Those who bore the brunt of American Protestant fury were the Irish, who, when they arrived in the 1830s and 1840s, constituted the first mass immigration of Catholics to America. Fleeing an Ireland devastated by colonial rule and famine, these Irish immigrants were largely destitute; they had few skills, little access to good jobs, and not much familiarity with urban living. Many native Protestants viewed them as an urban underclass, cut off from American values and traditions, their assimilation to their new land blocked by what these Protestants took to be an unholy devotion to the Catholic Church. America's first mass nativist movement, the Know-Nothings, arose in the 1840s and 1850s in reaction to the "Irish peril." The Know-Nothings stirred up anti-Irish sentiment and sparked vigilante attacks by Protestant gangs on Irish neighborhoods, Catholic schools, and even, in some cases, Catholic churches. In their more "respectable" moments, the Know-Nothings organized politically to end Irish immigration, to remove the children of Irish Catholic immigrants from parochial schools so that they could be educated

in proper Protestant environments, and to bar immigrants from holding public office and, in some cases, from voting.<sup>10</sup>

The politics of sectionalism and the outbreak of the Civil War sent Know-Nothing nativism into eclipse and provided opportunities for Irish immigrants to demonstrate their loyalty to the Union, to rise in the social order, and to gain more respectability for their Catholic ways. Still, religiously motivated discrimination against Irish Catholics persisted for another hundred years and expanded to other groups of Catholics—Italians, Poles, French Canadians, Mexicans, and others who were arriving in the United States. In 1928, the Republicans defeated the Democratic, Irish Catholic nominee for president, Al Smith, by arousing anxiety about the threat that a Catholic president would pose to the United States. Even in 1960, another Democratic hopeful and Irish Catholic, John F. Kennedy, had to appear before a group of Protestant ministers in Houston to prove to their satisfaction that his election would not make the Vatican the ruler of Washington.<sup>11</sup>

The durability and depths of anti-Catholic hostility help make sense of the comprehensive infrastructure that American Catholics built to take care of their needs. Parochial schools, universities, welfare agencies, fraternal organizations, and sports leagues were all part of this firmament. Catholics' dedication to building a separate world reflected both the fact of their exclusion from many established institutions and their fear that the mainstream institutions that did admit them (such as public schools) would bring unbearable pressure upon them to sacrifice their faith.<sup>12</sup>

One can find similar kinds of anti-Catholic sentiments fueling America's territorial expansion in the nineteenth century. Americans conceived of their Manifest Destiny as a providential mission to spread their Protestant-republican nation to the farthest reaches of the North American continent. In the process, America would not only eliminate or corral pagan Indians but would also weaken Catholic presence and power in North America. These sorts of Protestant convictions provided an important justification for the war against Mexico in the 1840s (and for seizing half of Mexico's land) and later for the war against Spain in Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898. Protestant Americans depicted Catholicism as a sinister force. On the one hand, it spread papal autocracy and crushed democracy. On the other, it rendered those who lived in Catholic lands weak and indolent, incapable either of distinguishing themselves in war, by demonstrating courage or valor, or in peace, through the habits of hard work, frugality, and inventiveness that Protestants had mobilized to turn the United States into an industrial juggernaut.<sup>13</sup>

Hard work, freedom, and republicanism were depicted as part of America's core Protestant character; these characteristics had made the United States exceptional. America's continued welfare demanded that these qualities be cultivated and that Protestants maintain their position

as the nation's core group. As the number of Catholic, Christian Orthodox, and Jewish immigrants swelled in the late nineteenth century, more and more Protestants banded together under the banner of religious nationalism, demanding that Anglo-Saxon ascendancy—in the presidency, Congress, judiciary, military, foreign service, universities, corporations, and in the immigration stream itself—be preserved.<sup>14</sup>

## Racial Nationalism

Racial nationalism arose to justify the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century enslavement of African Americans. This racial nationalism conceived of the United States as a home for white people, which, in the eighteenth century, meant those of European origin and descent. Many of those who fashioned America's universalist and democratic political creed were also the architects of its racial nationalism—a paradox that has been one of the most unsettling in U.S. history.<sup>15</sup> Slaveowners played key roles in the 1776 revolution against Britain and in drafting the 1789 Constitution, which both endorsed slavery and apportioned congressional delegates to ensure that slaveowners would exercise disproportionate power in national affairs. The 1790 naturalization law described earlier as affirming American civic nationalism also created a racial test for citizenship—an immigrant had to be free and white to qualify for inclusion in the American nation—that would remain in force until 1952, more than 160 years. For three-quarters of its history, in other words, the United States, by law, aspired to be a white republic.<sup>16</sup>

The North's victory over the slaveholding South in the Civil War (1861–1865) offered the United States an opportunity to uproot its racial nationalist tradition and to reorganize the republic solely around its civic creed. Indeed, the abolition of slavery, the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, and the wide-ranging efforts to empower freedmen and freedwomen in the years between 1863 and 1877 constituted what some have called a second American revolution, one committed, without racial qualification, to America's civic nationalist creed. But this revolution only partially succeeded. Many groups in American society, North and South, were still committed to racial nationalism and were determined to revive it, even during the headiest days of Radical Reconstruction. Senator Garrett Davis of Kentucky gave expression to racial nationalist beliefs in Congress's 1866 debate over birthright citizenship: "The fundamental, original, and universal principle upon which our system of government rests," declared Davis, "is that it was founded by and for white men; and that to preserve and administer it now and forever is the right and mission of the white man. When a negro or Chinaman is attempted to be obtruded into it, the sufficient cause to repel him is that he is a negro or Chinaman." Davis's ally, Senator Edgar Cowan of Pennsylvania, added,



"It is necessary, as part of the story of the nature of things, that society will be more or less exclusive. It is utterly and totally impossible to mingle all the various families of men, from the lowest Hottentot to the highest Caucasian, within the same society."<sup>17</sup>

Davis, Cowan, and their supporters in Congress did not succeed in blunting the drive for the Fourteenth Amendment, or for its birthright citizenship clause, but they would find other ways to resuscitate racial nationalism. Thus, after 1877, propertied southern whites fashioned a system of peonage that held rural blacks in economic semiservitude and an ideology of Jim Crow that ensured African American segregation and subordination in politics and culture. White southerners stripped blacks of basic citizenship rights—to vote, hold elective offices, and sit on juries—and denied them access to any space, public or private, defined as white: schools, parks, restaurants, stores, theaters, churches, railroad cars, and bathrooms. Through this system of apartheid, white southerners revived America's tradition of racial nationalism for a new century and mocked black claims to be equal or full participants in the American nation.<sup>18</sup>

After 1877, racial nationalism also increasingly shaped American immigration law. Before the 1880s, America's immigration policy was one of the fullest expressions of its civic nationalist creed. During this period, America welcomed virtually anyone, regardless of national origin, who wished to make the United States his or her home. In the forty years from the 1880s to the 1920s, however, Congress and the executive branch replaced America's open-borders policy with a closed border, one grounded largely in racial exclusions. Congress banned the immigration of Chinese laborers in 1882, and President Theodore Roosevelt prohibited, as part of the Gentlemen's Agreement, the immigration of Japanese laborers in 1907. Although both actions were responses to regional anxieties, notably white westerners' worries that "yellow hordes" were taking over the Pacific Coast, they became national policies, endorsed and sustained by the federal government. Frankly racist justifications underlay such discriminatory practices: Chinese and Japanese were so different from Americans of European origin and were so primitive, restrictionists argued, they could never be civilized or acculturated. Their biological constitution was such, their opponents alleged, that they needed no rest and little food. They thus would outperform American workers on a sliver of an American workingman's wages and would drive the latter to ruin. These Asians were also alleged to care little about democracy and citizenship, and to be oblivious to the value of family life or moral probity. They were thought to be sexual predators and the carriers of debilitating drug habits. They would contribute nothing to the American nation and had already harmed it by their presence. Fortunately, in the eyes of America's Asian immigrant opponents, no immigrant from East

(and South) Asia could become a citizen, thanks to the 1790 law limiting naturalization to those who were free and white. The American nation had no place for these groups.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1920s, Congress extended its ban on immigration from East Asia to most of the world. And, for the first time, it struck at Europe and, in particular, at groups from southern and eastern Europe who were also thought to be racially inferior and thus damaging to America's Anglo-Saxon or Nordic stock. Congress had temporarily limited the immigration of "undesirable" Europeans in 1921. In 1924, it made those limitations permanent. Here is how legislators in the House of Representatives described eastern and southern Europeans in 1924: "There is little or no similarity," declared Congressman Fred S. Purnell of Indiana, "between the clear-thinking, self-governing stocks that sired the American people and this stream of irresponsible and broken wreckage that is pouring into the lifeblood of America the social and political diseases of the Old World." Purnell quoted approvingly the words of a Dr. Ward, who claimed that Americans had deceived themselves into believing that "we could change inferior beings into superior ones." Americans could not escape the laws of heredity, Ward argued. "We cannot make a heavy horse into a trotter by keeping him in a racing stable. We cannot make a well-bred dog out of a mongrel by teaching him tricks." The acts that Ward dismissed as tricks included the learning by immigrants of the Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence.<sup>20</sup>

Congressman J. Will Taylor of Tennessee, meanwhile, approvingly read to his colleagues a *Boston Herald* editorial warning that America was entering the same period of eugenical decline that had doomed Rome: "Rome had [a mistaken] faith in the melting pot, as we have. It scorned the iron uncertainties of heredity, as we do. It lost its instinct for race preservation, as we have lost ours. It forgot that men must be selected and bred as sacredly as cows and pigs and sheep, as we have not learned." The editorial concluded, "Rome rapidly senilized and died," and so would America unless Congress took note of eugenical principles and passed the 1924 restriction legislation. The law passed both houses of Congress by overwhelming margins, drawing votes from congressman and senators from every region of the country, East and West, North and South, urban and rural. It remained on the books until 1965, giving a decidedly racial cast to the American nation.<sup>21</sup>

State and local laws complemented federal laws in promoting racial nationalism. Anti-miscegenation statutes reached a climax in the 1920s, more than twenty states having such laws. Several western states, in the 1910s and 1920s, passed alien land laws prohibiting any immigrant ineligible for citizenship from owning real estate. These land measures were directed mostly at Japanese immigrant farmers, who had become successful at growing fresh fruits and vegetables and supplying them to

Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and other urban markets. But they also struck at Chinese, Indian, and other East and South Asians (including Filipinos after 1934) who, by terms of the 1790 naturalization law, were also ineligible for citizenship. Finally, groups of white homeowners invented restrictive covenants to racialize space and property. Covenants typically identified racial and sometimes religious groups who were prohibited from purchasing homes in designated white areas.<sup>22</sup>

A racially structured system of immigration restriction, alien land laws, Jim Crow, anti-miscegenation statutes, and racially restrictive covenants—these measures reveal how deeply racial nationalism shaped society during the 1920s, a moment of American history usually celebrated for its urbanity and modernism. The enveloping power of this ideology was such that even those who were American citizens could not escape its harmful effects. Thus Mexican American citizens would be among those deported in the repatriation campaigns of the 1930s; and two-thirds of the 120,000 Japanese who would be interned in World War II were Nisei, the American-born children of Japanese immigrants. Fourteenth Amendment guarantees of due process counted for little in these roundups; America's civic nationalism bowed to the imperatives of racial nationalism.<sup>23</sup>

I do not want to suggest that no one resisted racial nationalism at this time. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, sizeable and varied groups of Americans drawn from the ranks of liberal reformers, radicals, and ethnic and racial minorities labored to invigorate the civic basis of American nationhood and to insist that equality and inclusion ought to remain the governing principles of their polity. Many Americans were drawn to Israel Zangwill's vision of America as a melting pot in which the races of many lands would be forged into a single people. A much smaller group, but including individuals whose writings and politics would gain influence in subsequent decades—the philosophers Horace Kallen and Alain Locke, the literary critic Randolph Bourne, the anthropologist Franz Boas, the educator Rachel Davis-DuBois, and the Indian reformer John Collier—pushed their thinking beyond inclusive programs of assimilation and began to argue that pluralism would strengthen the egalitarian and democratic foundation of the American nation.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, as nativist attacks on non-Protestant immigrants intensified, so did the resistance of the targeted groups, manifest, for example, in the rapidly growing number of eastern and southern Europeans who became citizens and who then mobilized politically, hoping to put into office politicians more sympathetic to their concerns. At stake was not just the ability to control public policy but also the ideological power to define the values for which America stood. A careful observer of the 1928 election would have noticed that a broad counter-mobilization against Protestant ascendancy and racial exclusivity was already in the works:

voting returns revealed that Al Smith, although losing the election to Herbert Hoover, had carried the twelve largest cities.<sup>25</sup> But if the future belonged to the offspring of those immigrants who had mobilized in the 1920s, and to a revived civic nationalist tradition, the period from the 1880s to the 1920s was one in which racial and religious exclusion had triumphed. The racial and religious boundaries had narrowed in the early twentieth century. The country's urbanization and modernization, at this time, went hand in hand with the deepening of America's racial and religious nationalism.<sup>26</sup>

### **Exclusion and Inclusion, 1870s–1990s**

The forces working to narrow the American nation from the 1870s to the 1920s were global in scope. Strengthening nationhood had become politically imperative throughout the world. Strong nations were thought to require robust industrial economies and populations that were vigorous, productive, and disciplined. They were expected to project their power onto the world stage by assembling strong armies and navies, and to flex their muscles through commerce, territorial expansion, and, if necessary, war. Even under the best of circumstances, nation-building was not easy work. Many nations, in the 1880s and 1890s, also seemed beset by deteriorating conditions: economic turmoil and depression, unemployment, class conflict, and regional and cultural resistance to projects of national consolidation. In these circumstances, and amid the developing conviction that nation-building was a zero-sum game—one nation's advance requiring another nation's retreat—nationalists everywhere sought assurance that their nations were destined to succeed. Many found this assurance in racialized discourses that spoke with conviction about the special qualities that inhered in their people. These discourses variously celebrated the superiority of Anglo-Saxons, English-speaking peoples, Aryans, Nordics, Caucasians, whites, and the West. Many scholars lent their sanction to these discussions, making racial classification into a complex pseudo-science, and urging politicians in various nations to pursue policies that would maximize their nation's stock of racial superiors and either minimize, segregate, or expel populations of racial inferiors. Immigration and naturalization restrictions, natalist programs for the so-called racially advantaged, sterilization for the so-called racially disadvantaged, bans on racial intermarriage, and segregation were all part of this policy brew, giving multiple expressions to this racial nationalist moment in world affairs. The prestige of racial science was such that its practitioners were able to take differences rooted in religion—the conflict between Protestants and Catholics and between Christians and Jews in America, for example—and render them racial. Thus, in 1924, congressmen stigmatized eastern and southern European Catholics, Jews, and Christian

Orthodox not for their religious heterodoxy but for their racial inferiority. Racial science had alchemized religious divides into racial chasms.<sup>27</sup>

This era of racial nationalism reached its peak with the rise of Hitler and with the aggressive (and nearly successful) campaign to spread German power throughout Europe and, in the process, to rid the continent of its “racial inferiors,” most notably Jews. Hitler’s actions drew the world into a terrible world war. The unlikely alliance that massed against Germany ultimately dealt Hitler and his plans for an Aryan racial order a devastating defeat. Shock spread as the scale of Hitler’s destruction of European Jewry became known. That this barbarism had occurred in Germany, whose culture was thought to sit at the pinnacle of Western civilization, provoked a frank reckoning with the racial science that had enabled Hitler’s rise. Meanwhile, Japan’s dramatic strikes in 1941 and 1942 against every European and American imperial outpost in East and Southeast Asia punctured the myth of Western superiority. The colonial system that Europe had built across hundreds of years and legitimated with a variety of racial ideologies would never again be the same. In both Europe and Asia, World War II had dealt a serious blow to those who wanted to order the globe according to principles of racial superiority and inferiority.<sup>28</sup>

These were the circumstances in which civic nationalism in the United States regained its stature, its core beliefs conscripted with increasing force to fuel campaigns to topple both Protestant ascendancy and white supremacy. Gunnar Myrdal articulated his version of American civic nationalism, the American Creed, in 1944 when he published his landmark *An American Dilemma*. That same year, Thurgood Marshall, then an attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, articulated his understanding of the need to revive American civic nationalism in a world torn apart by racism. “Distinctions based on color and ancestry are utterly inconsistent with our traditions and ideals,” Marshall declared. “They are at variance with the principles for which we are now waging war. We cannot close our eyes to the fact that for centuries the Old World has been torn by racial and religious conflicts and has suffered the worst kind of anguish because of inequality of treatment for different groups.”<sup>29</sup>

The revival of civic nationalism in America had actually begun in the 1920s and 1930s among southern and eastern Europeans and their descendants, who were resisting the hardening of racial nationalism. Their movement widened in the 1930s in response to capitalist crisis. The labor movement that arose in those years was full of immigrants and their descendants—Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, Polish, Greek, Arab, French Canadian, Mexican, and others—united by their poverty and marginality and by their conviction that, as Americans, they deserved better. Marching under the banner of Americanism, working-class ethnics infused

the first principles of the American republic—freedom, democracy, and opportunity—with insurgent and working-class meaning. Freedom now meant the right of a worker to speak his or her mind at work or to cast a ballot for a Democrat at the polling station without fear of reprisal from management. Democracy meant ending the regime of autocracy at the workplace and replacing it with one in which workers had a voice in the conditions of their labor. Opportunity only had meaning, trade unionists argued, if poor workers and their families had access to government-guaranteed forms of assistance, such as Social Security and unemployment insurance, that would cushion the effects of job loss, illness and death in the family, and old age.<sup>30</sup>

Ethnic workers made themselves heard not just in unions but also in politics. Continuing the mobilization that had begun with the Al Smith campaign in the 1920s, immigrant Americans and their offspring cast their votes for another Democrat, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. They helped carry him to victory in four elections. They also provided critical support for Roosevelt's comprehensive reform program, the New Deal, that aimed to resuscitate the economy, establish a welfare state, and narrow the gap in opportunities and wealth that separated the rich and poor. In so doing, ethnic workers, and the communities in which they lived, helped shift the balance of power in the United States from conservatism to liberalism, and from a politics that glorified the free market to one that celebrated the role of government in regulating a capitalist system that seemed unable to right itself. Rhetorically, this shift was couched in civic nationalist terms. As ethnic workers glimpsed an opportunity to refashion America, they began to believe that America, finally, was opening itself to them. Their attachment to America deepened as a consequence.

America's opening to its ethnics manifested itself, too, in the growing celebration of the United States as a land of multiple peoples and cultures. New Dealers for the most part did not self-consciously promote religious pluralism or multiculturalism, nor did they describe their supporters as a "rainbow coalition" of ethnic and racial groups. Indeed, in important ways, the New Deal reinvigorated older cultural and racial prejudices. The groups pouring into the Democratic Party were a diverse lot, however, and their very presence began to disrupt accepted ways of defining and representing the American nation.<sup>31</sup>

This became abundantly clear in World War II, when the dominant and most honored image of the nation became that of the multiethnic platoon, with its Protestant, Irish, Polish, Italian, and Jewish soldiers fighting side by side to preserve American democracy and freedom.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the phrase *Judeo-Christian* began to displace *Anglo-Saxon* and *Protestant* as a way to describe American civilization. No one did more to popularize this phrase than a Presbyterian minister, Everett R. Clinchy,

who began to use it as a weapon against the totalitarian challenge that he believed America confronted. "Political party machines, led by Nazi Hitler, Communist Stalin, and Fascist Mussolini alike," Clinchy declared in 1938, "deny the sovereignty of God above all else, pour contempt on the spiritual values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and refuse to recognize those natural rights of freedom of conscience, freedom of church, press, of pulpit, and of religious organization work. . . . Never before in history have Protestants, Catholics and Jews been as aware of each other's suffering and as willing to mobilize spiritual forces as American citizens." The Judeo-Christian tradition, he concluded, was the foundation of the "American Way of life."<sup>33</sup>

Following Clinchy's lead, an ecumenical group of clergymen distributed in 1942 a "Declaration of Fundamental Religious Beliefs Held in Common by Catholics, Protestants, and Jews." That same year, the National Conference of Christians and Jews successfully made Brotherhood Week, timed to coincide with Washington's birthday, into a nationwide event. Roosevelt himself chaired the event in 1943, declaring that Brotherhood Week "reminds us of the basic religious faith from which democracy has grown—that all men are children of one Father and brothers in the human family. . . . It is good to pledge renewed devotion to the fundamentals on which this country has been built." In 1944, Major General Frederick E. Uhl announced that "the way was open for Judaism, Protestantism and Catholicism to stand shoulder to shoulder before our swiftly expanding armed forces." By the end of the war, invocations to religious brotherhood and to the Judeo-Christian tradition as the American way had become ubiquitous. Religious nationalism, in the form of the Protestant ascendancy, had been knocked from its perch.<sup>34</sup>

The growing popularity of the term *Judeo-Christian civilization* cannot be understood simply in terms of a Protestant elite magnanimously deciding to relinquish its privileged place.<sup>35</sup> Rather, it must be understood also in terms of the struggles of Catholic and Jewish immigrants and their children to declare civic nationalism, a creed that drew no distinctions on the basis of Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, to be the most honored of America's traditions. In this case, civic nationalism allowed Americanizing immigrants to become advocates for building a different America, all the while claiming that they were being true to America's promise. Civic nationalism generated among immigrants and their children both insistent demands for change and powerful cultural and political affiliations to their new home. It gave them reason to believe in the idea of America and to engage deeply in its democracy. Over time, it would accelerate their political and cultural integration.

The events of the 1930s and 1940s also challenged the color line and the legitimacy of America's racial nationalist tradition. Indeed, the challenges to that tradition, beginning in the late 1940s and continuing through the late

1960s, would be among the most serious and lasting challenges to white supremacy in American history. In 1948, President Harry Truman desegregated the armed forces. In 1952, Congress repealed the 1790 naturalization law limiting citizenship to “free, white persons.” In 1954, the Supreme Court reversed its “separate but equal” 1896 decision, now declaring that segregation was unconstitutional by the terms of the Fourteenth Amendment. In 1963, in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King Jr. made clear the civic nationalist stakes of the unfolding challenge to white supremacy. “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence,” King observed, “they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” That America had defaulted on this note was obvious for all to see, King argued. But, he hastened to add, “we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check—a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”<sup>36</sup>

In 1964 and 1965, Congress, in response to the mass protest movement that King and others had unleashed, passed the most sweeping civil rights and voting rights legislation since Reconstruction. That same Congress also passed the Immigration Act of 1965, ending the racially based system of immigration restriction in place since the 1920s. After 1965, it became almost impossible for the U.S. government to deny foreigners entry into America and access to citizenship on the basis of race. The result, over the next forty years, was an immigration wave unprecedented in its global origins and racial diversity. Finally, in 1967, the Supreme Court declared that a Virginia law forbidding marriage between a black and a white was unconstitutional, bringing the entire edifice of state anti-miscegenation statutes crashing to the ground. In America, individuals in every state of the union would now be free to marry across the color line.<sup>37</sup>

The civil rights upheaval also challenged prevailing notions of cultural integration and incorporation. Through the Black Is Beautiful movement, African Americans signaled that their political incorporation would not cost them their cultural pride or distinctiveness. Immigrant groups, both old and new, quickly adopted a similar stance in regard to their own ethnic cultures, thereby broadening and intensifying the effort to locate America’s vitality in its ethnic and racial diversity. The breadth and strength of this movement, which took the name *multiculturalism*, would have been unimaginable to immigrant and native Americans a hundred years earlier. And the diversity now upheld as an American ideal went beyond that embodied in the phrase *Judeo-Christian*, which, in the context of the 1940s, referred principally to white Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.<sup>38</sup>



The rise of multiculturalism unleashed conflict about its legitimacy. Many on the Left embraced it only on the condition that it serve as a substitute to American nationalism; minorities were encouraged to find authenticity, community, and goodness in their particular cultures, grounded in race, gender, and sexuality, and to reject mainstream American culture, including the civic nationalist tradition, as compromised by racism, imperialism, and sexism. Those on the Right attacked multiculturalism for what they perceived to be its anti-Americanism and cultural relativism, both of which, they alleged, threatened to destroy the core ideals of the country's eighteenth-century political and cultural inheritance. Yet, by the 1990s, after two decades of culture wars, multiculturalism was no longer the property of the Left or the Right, but of a broad middle, which saw in multiculturalism a superior creed for defining the meaning of America for the twenty-first century. In the eyes of this middle and its tribunes, including Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, America ought to celebrate its cultural diversity while calling on its various groups to embrace the principles of civic nationalism as their own. Multiculturalism, from this point of view, offered a formula for making a celebration of diversity central to a program of national belonging.<sup>39</sup>

American nationalism had moved a great distance across the second half of the twentieth century. That the country elected its first African American president in 2008, and that this president presided over a Supreme Court that did not even include a token Protestant in its ranks, reveals how much the traditions of racial and religious nationalism had weakened. But it would be a mistake to conclude that they are gone. The racial nationalist tradition, in particular, has roots so deep that the possibility of regeneration always remains. Additionally, in the anti-Muslim sentiment that has become so pronounced in recent years, one can discern too the possibility of a religious nationalist revival.

## **America in the Twenty-First Century**

Nativism has shaped America's early twenty-first century, as is evident in the increasing attacks on the immigrant presence in American society. Especially since 2005, many Americans have claimed that they (the immigrants) are not like us, the native-born keepers of American traditions. They stand accused of subverting what we have built.<sup>40</sup> This anxiety has taken two forms in particular. First is that America is in the process of becoming a majority-minority nation, leaving the white majority permanently displaced. Second is that America cannot survive the presence of Muslim immigrants in its midst because the latter are the carriers of a religion of terror, domination, and oppression. Widespread denunciations of sharia are a good example of this anti-Islam orientation. These two manifestations of national fear found a common focus

in the person of Barack Obama, the first minority president and the first alleged to have a close affinity with Islam (Barack Hussein Obama). Indeed, through much of his first term, many Republicans believed that Obama was secretly a Muslim and had been indoctrinated into the faith during the years he spent as a boy in Indonesia. Obama is also only the third second-generation immigrant since 1900 to become president of the United States, and the first in American history to have an African father. The convergence of popular anxieties about race and religion on Obama helps explain why his legitimacy as president was challenged in the first two years of his presidency more than almost any other previous resident of the Oval Office.

In the anxiety about America's becoming a majority-minority nation, one can discern a hoary racial nationalist principle at work: namely, that America was meant to be a white or European nation. As America's non-European demographic future continues, ineluctably, to unfold, declarations that the European or white character of America must be preserved are likely to multiply. Alternatively, the racial nationalist tradition might reinvent itself by declaring that the critical division in America is not between whites and nonwhites but between blacks and nonblacks. In this second scenario, Asians and Latinos would be welcomed into a new American majority that construes its racial privilege in terms of being not black. America's color line underwent something of a similar shift when the descendants of eastern and southern European immigrants transitioned, in the 1930s and 1940s, from being racially suspect to being racially fit and, in the process, walled themselves off from other racially suspect groups they had left behind.<sup>41</sup> America may yet find a new way of defining and legitimating racial privilege for the twenty-first century. Events in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, New York City, and elsewhere revealed how quick municipal police departments have been in recent years to use indiscriminate force against black men but far more circumspect in their response to the alleged misdeeds of nonblacks. The disproportionately large numbers of young black men locked up in the nation's jails similarly reveal racial discrimination within the judicial system. Racial nationalism lurks in these patterns, still capable of legitimating programs that consign African Americans to a subordinate place within the American nation.<sup>42</sup>

Efforts to revive religious nationalism as a defining feature of America can be glimpsed, meanwhile, in popular anxiety about Islam. This new religious nationalism no longer defines itself as Protestant (though some would like to restore a Protestant ascendancy) but as Western, and it claims to stand for the core principles of European humanism and American civic nationalism: freedom, individual rights, the dignity of every human being, and the toleration of dissent. Islam, by contrast, is alleged to be a faith that denies its adherents freedom while celebrating war on nonbelievers. In this version of religious nationalism, Protestants, Catholics, and Jews are

called on to stand together to defend America and its Judeo-Christian tradition from Muslim assault.

The American fear of Islam today is reminiscent of America's fear of Catholicism 150 years ago. That America overcame its fear of what it referred to as the Catholic menace—though it took more than a hundred years—offers hope that it can do so with regard to Islam as well. It is therefore possible that by 2050 we will be talking about America as an Abrahamic-Christian civilization, that phrase joining Muslims with Jews and Christians as joint stakeholders in the American nation. America, at present, is a long way from that formulation of American national identity, but no further than it once was from the Judeo-Christian one.

Future configurations of American national identity will be shaped not just by cultural struggles but by economic circumstances as well. Economic distress, and the crashing of the American dream of economic opportunity across the twenty-first century's first decade, have darkened the country's mood toward immigrants. Richard Alba has made his hopeful scenario for blurring America's color lines—and, we might add, for dealing America's tradition of racial nationalism a final defeat—contingent on an economy robust enough to generate ample economic opportunity for nonwhites and whites alike.<sup>43</sup> He is right to do so. America's tradition of civic nationalism has always promised that good things would come to those willing to work hard and inventively. That promise must be honored if civic nationalism is to regain its vigor and advance its integrative work.

Civic nationalism faces an even more difficult problem in regard to the eleven million undocumented immigrants living in the United States, a large majority of them Mexican. As a discourse centered on the rights of citizens, civic nationalism can deliver its promise only to those who are already citizens or who can reasonably hope to acquire that status. Across the twentieth century, immigrant rights' advocates succeeded at times in extending constitutional rights and protections to aliens who were legally resident in the United States. Extending the same rights and protections to those who were here illegally has faced far stiffer opposition.<sup>44</sup> As a result, being illegal in America has exposed the holders of this status to extreme forms of legal, economic, and social vulnerability.

The problem of the undocumented in America is not new. On the contrary, it has been present for more than half of American history, since Congress passed Chinese Exclusion in 1882. The Chinese experience with illegality is, on the one hand, a sobering lesson in the social costs that this status imposes on individuals and the communities in which they live. On the other hand, it offers an example of the United States gradually forging a pathway toward inclusion and integration.<sup>45</sup>

The scale of the Mexican undocumented problem is vast, of course, relative to the Chinese case. That, in itself, poses a stiff challenge. Then,

this question looms: even if the number of Mexican illegals is reduced substantially, will that reduction simply trigger a replacement stream of undocumented migration originating, perhaps, in Central America or the Caribbean? The numbers of undocumented immigrants, including many unaccompanied minors, streaming into the United States from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador rose significantly in 2014 and 2015.<sup>46</sup> Have developed nations in this global age come to depend on the undocumented as a source of cheap and hyper-exploitable labor?<sup>47</sup> Has globalization thrown some underdeveloped countries into such chaos that portions of their populations are increasingly willing to risk everything for a chance of a decent life somewhere else? It is not hard to imagine conditions in the world today overwhelming even those nations with the greatest openness to foreigners and with the strongest traditions of inclusion.

Yet it is also possible to imagine a combination of policies and events that might lessen the intractability of the undocumented problem in the United States in connection to that group—Mexicans—that has given America its most severe test. The continued growth in Latino political power in the United States has increased the pressure on the government to legalize at least a portion of the undocumented population. Polls in recent years have shown that a majority of Americans, Latinos and not, believe that substantial portions of the undocumented population should be put on the road to citizenship. Underlying these sentiments is the conviction that America's civic nationalist tradition—and its commitment to inclusion and opportunity—is strong enough to handle this massive task of integration. Conservative Republicans, who constitute a minority of the country but a majority in the House of Representatives, have blocked every piece of legislation meant to put any kind of path to citizenship in place. President Obama, frustrated by Congress's repeated failure in this regard, issued executive orders in 2012 and in 2014 offering temporary legal status to as many as five million undocumented immigrants—those who were brought here as young children and those who are parents to children born on American soil (and thus who are citizens of the United States). Although these executive orders have been controversial, they may one day be regarded as having been the first difficult steps toward integrating a vast undocumented population into American life.

Obama's plan may be helped by a development invisible to most Americans: a radical decrease in the fertility of women in Mexico, from nearly seven children per woman in the 1970 to a fraction more than two today.<sup>48</sup> As far fewer children grow to maturity in Mexico, the pressure on them to emigrate in search of work will likely be less than it was on every Mexican generation of the twentieth century. Mexican women, in other words, have taken actions that may be as consequential for Mexican communities in the United States as the geopolitical imperatives arising from

World War II and the Cold War once were for Chinese settlements in the United States. Moreover, if Mexico continues on its current path of economic development, which has worked to narrow the wealth gap between it and the United States, the pressure to migrate will be further reduced.

In short, the combination of radically decreased migration pressures in Mexico and temporary legalization measures in the United States may shrink the undocumented population significantly. Should Americans perceive that the magnitude of the problem has decreased, their confidence that their government can address the part of the problem that remains is likely to grow. Demographic change already under way within the undocumented population may also strengthen popular confidence in the efficacy of a politics of integration. With each year, more and more of the undocumented become anchored to America through children—already numbering about four million—born on U.S. soil and who have only known life north of the Rio Grande. Historically, Americanization has usually accelerated once members of the second generation are old and numerous enough to wrest influence in immigrant communities away from their parents. There are reasons to think that this transition is already under way within significant stretches of the Mexican undocumented population in the United States.

One can imagine, of course, multiple reasons why the hopeful scenario I have set forth here may not unfold; but suppose it does? Then, America's civic nationalist tradition will have found a way to regain its relevance for a new century.

## Notes

1. Myrdal 1972, 1, 3–6; Ignatieff 1993, 5–6; Gerstle 2001, 3–43; Smith 1997.
2. Lazarus 2005, 58–59.
3. Naturalization Act of 1790, 1 Stat. 103 (1790); Zolberg 2006; Kettner 1978; Schuck and Smith 1985, chapters 1 and 2.
4. U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 1.
5. *Ibid.*; Foner 1988; Foner 1998; Neuman 1996.
6. U.S. Congress 1866, 498; Epps 2010. Only some groups of Indians were to be excluded from birthright citizenship, and for reasons of jurisdiction rather than race or culture. The U.S. government had, through treaties, granted these groups rights of self-government, which meant that they were not fully subject to the jurisdiction of American laws.
7. *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* 169 U.S. 649 (1898).
8. Higham 1955, 4–7; Bennett 1988.
9. U.S. Const. amend. I; Naturalization Act of 1790. Various states, such as Massachusetts and South Carolina, did have laws establishing Protestantism as the official religion and barring non-Protestants from holding state office (Neem 2008).

10. Handlin 1941; Bennett 1988; Anbinder 1992; Roediger 1991; Zolberg 2006, 125–65.
11. Bennett 1988, 233–37, 319–21; Handlin 1958.
12. Gerber 1989; McGreevy 1996; McGreevy 2003; Kauffman 2001; Kane 1994.
13. Horsman 1981; Linderman 1974, 114–73.
14. Strong 1963.
15. Morgan 1975.
16. Naturalization Act of 1790; Kettner 1978; Jacobson 1998.
17. U.S. Congress 1866, 575, 2861.
18. Foner 1988; Hahn 2003; Berlin et al. 1992; Woodward 1971; Ayers 1992; Blight 2001.
19. Gyory 1998; Sayler 1995; Lee 2003; Ichioka 1988; Daniels 1997; Kramer 2011.
20. U.S. Congress 1924, 4389.
21. *Ibid.*, 5872; Gerstle 2001, 14–43; Ngai 2004, 21–55; Jacobson 1998, 223–45; Higham 1955, 300–30; King 2000.
22. Kurashige 2008; Pascoe 2009; Freund 2007; Ichioka 1988.
23. Ngai 2004.
24. Zangwill 1909; Kallen 1915; Bourne 1916; Gerstle 1994; Stewart 1983; Stocking 1968; Kelly 1983; Davis-Dubois 1940; Donaldson 2014.
25. Andersen 1979.
26. King 2000.
27. Lake and Reynolds 2008; Gerstle 2006; Hobsbawm 1990; Hansen and King 2013.
28. Lake and Reynolds 2008; Horne 2004, 105–58; Montagu 1942.
29. Myrdal 1972; quoted in Schultz 2011, 52.
30. Gerstle 1989; Cohen 1990; Sanchez 1993; Bell 1976; Denning 1998; Barrett 1992.
31. Jacobson 1998; Denning 1998; Svonkin 1997; Schultz 2007; Cohen 1990.
32. Gerstle 2001; Denning 1998.
33. Quoted in Schultz 2011, 58; Kaufmann 2004.
34. Schultz 2011, 66; Kaufmann 2004; Alba 2009.
35. Hollinger 2011.
36. King Jr. 1992, 102–6.
37. Ngai 2004; Pascoe 2009; Gerstle 2009; Reimers 1985; Graham 2002.
38. Herberg 1960.
39. Donaldson 2014; Gerstle 2010.
40. Huntington 2004; Buchanan 2006.
41. Jacobson 1998; Roediger 2005; Gerstle 2001.
42. Alexander 2010.
43. Alba 2009.
44. Schuck 1984.
45. Lee 2003; Wu 2013; Ngai 2004.
46. U.S. Customs and Border Protection estimates that as many as fifty thousand unaccompanied and undocumented minors from Honduras, El Salvador,

and Guatemala entered the United States in 2014 and that those numbers may reach one hundred fifty thousand in 2015 (Oleaga 2014).

47. Gutiérrez 2010.

48. Myers 2012.

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