

RECOGNIZING THE PAST IN TODAY'S POLITICS

Change in a democracy begins with people acquiring knowledge.

David Cay Johnson

Gore Vidal wrote, "happily, for the busy lunatics who rule over us, we are permanently the United States of Amnesia. We learn nothing because we remember nothing."¹ I would like to share a piece of American history with you to see if you recognize the parallel with contemporary politics in the U.S.

In the 1880's a political movement spear-headed by the Know-Nothing Party began to rail against immigration and Catholic influence in the political sphere. The Know-Nothing Party was the brain-child of the nativist fraternal organization the Order of the Star Spangled Banner. Nativists were American born Europeans who seen all immigrants, especially Irish Catholics, as inferior, violent, ungovernable "Paddys". They were known as the Know-Nothing Party because its members would feign ignorance about the organizations existence.

The Know-Nothings believed that Protestantism defined American culture. They had a deep rooted hatred for Catholics and immigrants. Know-Nothings believed Catholics were not compatible with "American values". They complained Catholics had too much political power and wanted to prevent their influence

on political parties. They advocated to limit the sale of liquor, prohibit the political influence of immigrants by extending the naturalization waiting period to five-years, and raise the voting age to 21 years old. They advocated for citizens only vote for native-born candidates. One of their mottos was: "Americans must rule America."²

By 1854 the Know-Nothings had elected thousands of local officials, mayors, and more than one hundred congressmen. Once in power they began to pass laws aimed specifically at Catholics in Massachusetts. These laws included disbanding Irish militias (confiscating their weapons), requiring the mandatory reading of the King James Bible in public schools, firing Irish workers, voted to deprive Catholics of holding public office, and deported hundreds of Irish who they believed were a drain on the public treasury.

The Know-Nothings bigotry became so septic that Abraham Lincoln, who was then a rising Illinois politician, wrote a friend:

Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation we began by declaring that "all men are created equal". We now practically read it "all men created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal except

negroes, and foreigners
and Catholics.³

The Know-Nothing Party eventually declined when the party split over the issue of slavery. At their 1855 convention the party supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed slavery to be extended in the western territories. The Northern Know-Nothings split from their Southern brethren and left the party. The issue of slavery eventually sending the nation into a savage civil war.

As I listen to U.S. politicians today I can't help but see the parallels with the past. We have the Republican Party, which can be seen as the contemporary "Order of Star Spangled Banner", who gave birth to the so-called Tea Party and their "Freedom Caucus" who represent our contemporary Know-Nothing Party. These groups rail against immigrants, Muslims, same sex marriage, environmentalism and anything else they see as a threat to Evangelical Christianity, which they strangely believe defines American culture.

A nation is supposed to progress forward, not repeat the mistakes of the past. Right now, however, the political discourse in our nation is anything but progressive. The Know-Nothing Party of our day is trying to take us backwards to a time of fear mongering and thinly disguised prejudices.

Interestingly, the Republicans and their

Know-Nothing progeny, who claim our nation is founded solely on Evangelical christianism values, seem to be suffering from their own ideological amnesia.

I recently finished reading Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders, by Denise A. Spellberg¹, which I highly recommend to you all. This book illuminates the little-known and crucial part of American religious freedom. Spellberg recounts how Thomas Jefferson and a handful of other "Founding Fathers" drew upon Enlightenment ideas about the toleration of Muslims to fashion practical foundation for governance in America. I'm sure the Know-Nothing's heads would be set spinning to consider our nation's founders considered the religious freedom of other cultures other than their own in founding this nation.

It would be well for all of you to draw upon the lessons of our past when you go to the polls this coming presidential election season and reject our Know-Nothing Party.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Vidal, Gore. Imperial America. New York: Nation Books (2004). Print. p. 5

(2) Anbinder, Tyler. Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850's. New York: Oxford University Press (1992). Print. pp. 103-126

(3) Anbinder, Id p. 226

(4) Spellberg, Denise A. Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders. Knopf. Print.