

Blast From the Past: Nativism

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As the anti-immigrant law in Arizona gets ready to take effect, it is good to remember how so many aspects of the immigration story, and the anti-immigrant story, are perennials in American life. This excerpt comes from Jay Dolan's *The Irish Americans* and shows how fear of other's culture can breed anti-immigrant evil.

The extraordinary growth of the Catholic population in the early decades of the nineteenth century frightened many Americans. The United States had always been a Protestant nation, but now Catholics, most of whom were foreigners, seemed to be overrunning the country. At the same time that this was taking place, the United States was undergoing a religious revival, led by Protestant evangelists. Labeled by historians the Great Awakening, this revival endured throughout the 1820s and '30s. Centered in cities, it unleashed a tide of religious enthusiasm that changed forever the face of American Protestantism. The impetus behind this revival was not only the need for individual conversion, but also the conversion of a nation. It was a crusade to build a Christian America. But in the minds of most Protestants, Catholics were not Christians. As the inventor, and passionate nativist, Samuel F.B. Morse put it, "Popery is opposed in its very nature to Democratic republicanism; and it is, therefore, as a political system, as well as religious, opposed to civil and religious liberty, and consequently to our form of government."

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