

---

# The New Americanism

by James O Neal

Published in *The Class Struggle* [New York], vol. 2, no. 3 (May-June 1918), pp. 289-295.

Reprinted in *The Call Magazine* [New York], May 19, 1918, pp. 4, 10.

The intense propaganda now being waged by reactionary elements to “Americanize” the United States brings to mind some curious facts which these crusaders will hardly consider, facts which include a similar crusade in the '50s of the last century. Though this native American agitation is mainly directed against Germans who display some sympathy with the imperial assassins of Prussia, there is an unmistakable warning against anything “foreign” in our opinions on various matters. The Americanization program is directed with as much regard to reclaiming the internationalist Jew and Russian as it is in winning or suppressing the nationalist German. The schools, the press, and politicians work with fever heat to accelerate the normal process of assimilating the foreigner. To do this, our superpatriots indulge in a glorification of American history and American institutions, themselves possessed with an exaggerated idea of the place of the United States in the history of nations.

Once before we had this native American craze, which was also used in the interests of reaction. The immigration to the United States following the Napoleonic Wars reached 20,000 a year, and, small though this number is in comparison with later immigration, caused considerable apprehension for the safety of American institutions. This, with the rise of the Holy Alliance and its hostility to republics and the revival of the order of Jesuits, caused fear of foreign control of politics and education. Mobs occasionally burned Catholic churches and clashed with foreigners in general. The excitement subsided temporarily until immigration increased from 30,000 in 1830 to over 60,000 in 1836, when the agitation revived. It was intensified when the Irish famine drove Irish proletarians and peasants in droves to our shores, and

the revolutions of 1848 sent more than a million from 1840 to 1850.

• • • • •

Out of this ferment came one of those political freaks that have so often testified to the shallow character of bourgeois political parties in the United States. This freak was known as the “American Party,” or the “Know-Nothings.” It proclaimed itself distinctly American and opposed to the influence of foreigners in politics and education. Its textbook, *The Sons of the Sires*, published in 1855, is a prediction of what fearful things were in store for us from the menace of immigration and contact with foreigners. It opposed all foreigners and foreign influences, and especially singled out “German skepticism, French infidelity, Socialism, and Jesuitism” as the chief dangers. The reader will be impressed with the mental caliber of the politicians who could lump all the foregoing together and see in them a common enemy. Many of the statements in this textbook of “Know-Nothingism” read curiously like the hysterical cries of our native Americans today. Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Wise Wood, James M. Beck, Samuel Gompers & Company have not improved on the propaganda that raged before the overthrow of slavery in the middle of the last century.

This party of “pure Americanism” carried a number of states and elected a number of Congressmen in 1854. In Massachusetts, where it won practical control one year, its representatives inaugurated such a reign of graft that it was turned out of office the following year. During this period the anti-slavery agitation had acquired such proportions that the Whig and Democratic Parties were seething with dissensions over this

question. In many sections they split into rival factions. To distract attention from this fundamental issue that was later to culminate in a bloody contest between North and South, the Whigs of the South flocked to the American Party. The Southern Whigs had represented the most exclusive of the more wealthy slave owners of the black belt and looked down upon the lesser breed of slave drivers.

• • • • •

Besides the motive of obscuring the emancipation issue, these Whigs had other reasons for their alliance with the new party. Slave labor in the South prevented that region from getting a good share of immigration. What it received was in the main the lowest type of white labor from Europe, which was diverted from Northern ports to Southern ports by skillful management in the North. These defectives were thrown on Southern charity and were a source of expense to the taxpayers. A few German revolutionists settled in Southern cities, but also proved “undesirable,” as they quietly agitated against slavery.

It will thus be seen that the slave owners had a number of good economic reasons for embracing the “patriotic” American Party. In the closing years before the Civil War this party in the South became the representative of the higher aristocracy of slave owners, the shrewdest and best educated of the black exploiters who were the first to see the value of the “Americanization” issue for reaction. It is significant, therefore, that the native American issue in politics — until its recent revival — made its final stand as the instrument of a ruling class that lived on slave labor long after slavery had been abolished by other nations. The issue was synonymous with the reaction and used to aid a dying system of human servitude.

What are the facts regarding the “Know-Nothingism” of today? They establish an interesting relation with this same reactionary South. It should be remembered that the South still remains the one section least affected by immigration. The purity of its blood is undefiled by the foreigner. As slave labor discouraged immigration to the South, so its peonage, low wages for whites, and brutal exploitation of blacks have constituted a barrier against the coming of the foreigner.

• • • • •

If one will take a map of the United States and the figures on immigration as applied to the states and will paint those states white that have little foreign blood, he will find all of the South a white shade except Texas and Maryland. The old South has the lightest shade of all, while all of the North and West — precisely those sections that have made great progress in all fields of human activity — stand out in marked contrast with the South. North Carolina has less than 1 percent of foreigners, and by this term is meant the foreign-born and children of foreign-born father or mother. Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina have from 1 to 5 percent. Louisiana, Florida, and Kentucky come next to these in purity of their American stock, having from 5 to 10 percent. From these figures it will be seen that the Southern tier of states still retain an overwhelming majority of people whose blood is untainted by contact with foreigners.

Contrast this with the most progressive states of the North. New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Montana, and Utah have 50 percent or more who are foreign-born. Next in the order of progressive states, those having from 35 to 50 percent, are Arizona, California, Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, Washington, Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and New Hampshire, while the remaining states of the North follow close behind. Anyone acquainted with the United States knows that the states with a large mixture of the foreign-born in their populations are the progressive states. They do not stand still. In invention, agriculture, education, industry, transportation, literature, and in the number of Socialist votes polled they lead the South. The pure American states of the South are known as the most backward in all these fields and there are those who claim that the old American stock is so degenerating that the Negro becomes more vigorous and the prospect of his probable future control of Southern capitalism enrages the ruling whites and fosters the lynching spirit.

• • • • •

This degeneracy of the “true Americans” is more pronounced than many surmise. If one will follow the line of the Appalachian Mountains from West Virginia to northern Alabama, he will trace a region inhabited by a people who have been almost entirely isolated from contact with the foreigner, and yet it is the most backward of the backward sections of the South. East of this line live the poor whites of the lowland who are also practically immune from the “foreign contagion.” The latter live in rags and squalor, are mostly illiterate, and are so thoroughly “American” that many of them cling to the belief that the North is a “foreign country” and that the “Yankee” is a foreigner.

The inhabitants of the mountain region have been so shielded from foreign contagion that the overwhelming masses in all their lives never saw a Jew, an Italian, a Russian, or a German, and never heard a foreign language spoken. What mixture of other blood is found in their veins is due to contact with the Indian and the Negro. Here the primitive colonial society of 200 years ago finds its only survival in America. Here the old clan ethic of savage times, that an injury done to one member of the tribe is an injury to all of its members, still survives in the family feuds of the mountains. The spinning wheel and household manufacture still prevail. “Homespun” is still worn by the natives, and “city clothes” are rarely seen. Hunting and fishing by the males would identify these communities with the nomadic tribes of a few thousand years ago, were it not for the household industry of the women. The old Elizabethan ballad that were sung by our forefathers 200 years ago are still sung by these Americans and are handed down from grandmother to child.

Many of these natives never saw a railroad or an electric car, while a Pittsburgh steel plant would strike one of them speechless. The movie is a foreign mystery, Charlie Chaplin is unknown, and it is not exaggeration to assert that many of these Americans do not know that a world war has been raging for nearly 4 years.

This is your “pure American.” Oh, super-patriot! No foreign influences have contaminated him or led him astray. The Socialist movement has not touched him or been able to make any great impress on his brothers in the lowlands or in the thickly settled communities. He is a special, finished product of unadulterated “Americanism,” and as such should be a source of pride to the National Security League. He wants

little, knows little, and gets little. Behold him, the pure American type, the one distinctive contribution based on the proposition that things foreign corrupt the mind, the thought and life of “Americanism.”

• • • • •

Many other illuminating facts might be cited regarding this distinctly Americanized region. We have space for only a few. The ruling classes of the South, descendants of the old regime of Americans, have not shown the intelligence or enterprise of the bourgeoisie of the North and of other countries. The South has all the resources that would make a paradise of capitalist exploitation, yet its ruling exploiters have been so backward in industrial progress that not until the capitalists of the “foreign” North invested their capital in the South has the latter made much progress since Reconstruction days. Just in proportion as Northern capitalist have fertilized Southern establishments has this backward region begun to awaken and take on new life.

The Americanized South is the leader of every phase of modern reaction and a consistent opponent of progress. It leads in illiteracy and is the last in education. The percentage of illiteracy in the South is as follows: South Atlantic states, 16 %; East South-central, 17.4%; West South-central, 13.2%. In the North: New England, 5.3%; Middle Atlantic, 5.7%; East North Atlantic, 3.4%; West North-central, 2.9%; Mountain, 6.9%; Pacific, 3%. In the South the per capita of expenditure for schools is \$2.79; in the North, \$7.37. The cost per capita of average attendance in the South is \$18.98; in the North, \$52.09.

The political backwardness of this Americanized section is also apparent. The Negro is almost completely eliminated as a voter, as well as many thousands of poor whites. The land of boasted “chivalry,” it is the one section of the country where no concessions have been made to woman suffrage, with the exception of Arkansas, which merely permits women to vote in Presidential primaries and grants a restricted municipal suffrage.

• • • • •

The case is complete against the “New Know-

Nothingism.” The genuine American stock, that is, the descendants of our colonial ancestors, who have relied on their own initiative, and have maintained a prejudice against other peoples and have had little contact with them, give us the one example of arrested development in the United States. Just as the higher aristocracy of slave owners embraced “Know-Nothingism” in the declining days of their rule, so the reactionary elements who today seek to reduce political and economic views to a standardized pattern seek refuge in a revival of this barren crusade of antebellum days.

If the educational program of the average school board today is carried out for the next 10 years, the next generation of Americanized citizens will be a shallow-brained collection of vain boasters of everything American, oblivious of the capitalist oligarchy that is fast acquiring complete control over the things they venerate. The program is one patterned after the Prussian model which our super-Americans affect to despise. It implies unquestioned obedience and submission to economic wrongs and political tyranny, a discouragement of independent inquiry, and a blind worship of the status quo.

• • • • •

A strutting egomaniac Kaiser, with his Junker assassins, have profited by this standardized education, and have even dragged the once great Socialist movement of Germany by the heels in their war of conquest and annexations. The only counter-force to pan-Germanism and exaggerated “Americanism” is the pan-humanism of Socialist internationalism, a conception that recognizes our own defects as well as the merits of others. A proletarian internationalism that opposes the chauvinism of each nation, that opposes the cultivated hatreds of the ruling classes, that seeks to cultivate an era of good feeling and solidarity among the unhappy workers of the world is more needed than ever in this period.

Socialists owe much to the future of this ideal by doing all they can in countering the hatreds and chauvinism that are now being impressed upon our youth. Otherwise the type of “pure Americanism” now having its habitat in the south will find a home in the North and reaction will secure a firm place in the struggles of the future.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

*Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2011. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.*