

POLITICS Trade, immigration issues revive last century's 'Know Nothings'

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Body

Back in the 1850s, several secret, anti-immigrant organizations sprang up whose members, if asked about their activities, were supposed to reply, "I know nothing." That's how the short-lived American Party, to which many of them also belonged, came to be called "the Know Nothings."

Victims of a funny name, the Know Nothings are little remembered or understood today. Even in their time their enemies considered them bigoted and backward, although it was a Know Nothing legislature in Massachusetts that passed the first school desegregation and compulsory vaccination laws.

By 1860 the fledgling Republican Party had pretty much absorbed the Know Nothings, adopting their prohibitionist, anti-Catholic rhetoric where necessary. But the spirit behind the Know Nothings never really died. It has returned with surprising vehemence in the debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement and the call for tougher immigration restrictions.

The passions stirred by these issues have cut across normal party lines, catching both Democrats and Republicans off guard, just as mainstream politicians in the last century were baffled by the sudden rise of the Know Nothings.

Getting tough on Mexicans?

In California, Gov. Pete Wilson has begun to edge upward in the polls after proposing that illegal immigrants be denied welfare, education and medical benefits. He drew some Democratic criticism, but Sen. Diane Feinstein is talking tough on immigration also. Wilson's potential 1994 opponent, State Treasurer Kathleen Brown, wants to peg approval of NAFTA to Mexican approval of her plan to ship illegal immigrants convicted of crimes back to Mexican prisons.

The impact of the old Know Nothing issues can also be seen closer to home. Despite House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich's enthusiastic support for NAFTA, Georgia's four Republican congressmen are evenly split on the issue. Rep. John Linder has joined Gingrich in favor of it, while Rep. Mac Collins is solidly against it and Rep. Jack Kingston is leaning against. Georgia's House Democrats haven't all made up their minds, but most are likely to join Majority Whip David Bonior's rebellion against Bill Clinton and oppose it.

Perot adds spice to brew

What gives the re-emergence of these issues a special zing is the presence of Ross Perot, a character the 19th-century Know Nothings would have loved.

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Descriptions of the **Know Nothings** - middle Americans, often from the West, skilled artisans and clerks concerned about job competition and control of their local schools - bear a striking resemblance to the demographics of Perot's core support in the **last** election.

Although NAFTA itself seems in deep trouble, Perot's anti-NAFTA campaign lacks the spark of **last** year's grass-roots campaign. But Perot may yet catch the spark of another controversy.

Brown case potentially explosive

In Miami this week, a federal grand jury is probing allegations that Commerce Secretary Ron Brown was given \$ 700,000 by Vietnamese officials for his help in opening up **trade** with that nation. Brown denies the charge, but an investigation appears to be moving forward.

This case has attracted much less attention than the travails of the White House travel office, but it is far more explosive. If it goes much further, Perot has a clear opening to bring up the **issue** of foreign lobbyists, which he hammered on **last** year, not to mention the POWs/MIAs. On a deeper level, it might also cause more voters to connect with sentiments, more than a **century** old, that have never really died.

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