The deep American roots of anti-Muslim sentiment

By [Eric A. Weed](#)
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The recent attacks in Paris and San Bernardino have led to an increase in anti-Islamic rhetoric in the U.S. There have been calls to limit the immigration of Muslims. Some have focused as well on the threat from within, arguing for the registration of all Muslims—or even their internment, as with the camps where Japanese Americans were sent during World War II.

From the inception of the United States, our government has put in place measures to determine who belongs to this great experiment and who does not. The Naturalization Act of 1790 establishes the foundations for our fear of immigrant classes. "Any alien," it states, "being a free white person…may be admitted to become a citizen." This law has been amended over the years. But from the very outset, the U.S. has included only certain types of people in the class of *citizen*.

From time to time, this framework has been used to limit citizenship to people of certain religious beliefs. While many would think the 1790 law was created with slavery in mind, it became the focal point for denying citizenship to Roman Catholics, Hindus, and Muslims, among many other people. Fear of Catholicism led to the establishment of the [Know Nothing Party](#) in the mid-19th century and the rise of [the second iteration of the Ku Klux Klan](#) in the 1920s. To reduce the influence of Catholicism the U.S. Congress went as far as commissioning a committee to restrict immigration from predominately Catholic countries.

Bhagat Singh Thind, a Hindu man, had his citizenship [revoked by the U.S. Supreme Court](#) in 1923. The court decided that Thind and his descendants could not be U.S. citizens because they could not attain the racial status of *white*. The ruling made a clear connection between the idea of whiteness and a particular religious tradition.

When contemporary politicians depict Islam as a menace to American society, they continue this legacy of anti-immigrant sentiment against people of faith. A recent Rasmussen poll—conducted after the Paris attacks but before the shooting in San Bernardino—demonstrates the renewed distrust of Islam in the U.S. According to the

poll, 35 percent of Americans believe that Islamic extremists represent Islamic beliefs. This is why so many Americans believe it is sensible to deny Muslims immigration into the U.S. or, even more disturbing, to intern Muslims who are already here.

The nation's founders envisioned a society guided by particular values, among them the freeom of religious expression. But these values have at times been forgotten. With the Naturalization Act of 1790, the U.S. redefined the principle of freedom and citizenship to include a certain few. That history makes it unsurprising that some now find it sensible, in spite of the First Amendment, to restrict the status of *citizen* based on religious belief.

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