

Racism, immigration emerge as key issues

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Race and immigration have emerged as potentially explosive issues on the 1992 presidential campaign trail.

Former Ku Klux Klansman David Duke's declaration as a presidential candidate served as the first indication that the election would be tinged by the politics of color. Further evidence was offered by Republican candidate Patrick Buchanan, who promised to build a fence on the U.S.-Mexico border if elected and argued that non-European immigrants threaten U.S. culture.

Buchanan, a Catholic, asked rhetorically: "I think God made all people good, but if we had to take a million immigrants in, say Zulus, next year, or Englishmen, and put them in Virginia, what group would be easier to assimilate and would cause less problems for the people of Virginia?"

All of the issues Duke emphasizes seem to have a racial or immigrant angle — from cracking down on Japanese trade practices to closing the U.S. border to new immigrants, from attacking affirmative action to blaming drugs, crime and unwed mothers on welfare families.

On the Democratic side, contender Bob Kerrey appears to join the growing chorus of "Japan-bashing" with a campaign ad in which he stands in an empty auditorium and says, "about every 10 hours, enough Americans to fill this auditorium lose their jobs because of unfair trade practices."

Experts said the ad claims — inaccurately — that forcing open the Japanese markets would save 3,000 U.S. jobs a day, or a million jobs a year.

Yet Alan Kraut, history professor at American University in Washington, remarked that the campaign rhetoric offers no surprises. Given the convergence of "a major wave of immigration" and an economic recession, "there is a tendency to look for

someone to blame," he told Catholic News Service Feb. 7.

"Tough times can bring out the best and the worst in people," said John L. Carr, U.S. bishops' secretary for social development and world peace. In his view, "our political leaders ought to be judged by whether they bring out the best or the worst in us."

Carr noted that immigrants have no lobbying groups. "By definition they can't vote. They're an easy target." Carr challenged voters to "see which candidates can resist the easy target" and focus on the real issues.

According to Kraut, today's immigrant bashing is the "updated version" of the "scapegoating" of Catholics, especially Irish Catholics fleeing the potato famine a century and a half ago.

Immigration was accelerating, the newcomers were blamed for crime, poverty, even cholera. It was argued they wouldn't make good U.S. citizens "as their first loyalty was to the pope of Rome," said Kraut.

At the time, some of those opposed to the newcomers formed secret "nativist" societies and swore to vote only for candidates who were Protestant, U.S.-born and who favored "Americans ruling America."

A number of the societies came together under a political party nicknamed the "Know-Nothings." The party experienced a measure of political success, electing governors in six states and dozens of members of Congress in the mid-1850s. But by 1860 the movement had faded.

Jesuit Father Joseph Fitzpatrick, a sociologist at Fordham University in the Bronx, explained the United States always has had a "contradictory attitude" toward immigrants.

Seventy years later, stemming from a belief that "Central and South Europeans were culturally unable to adapt" to the U.S. way of life, the omnibus immigration law of 1924 established quotas that strongly favored individuals of British or Irish descent, said Father Fitzpatrick.



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Violence in Ireland

AP/Wide World Photos

Above, relatives carry the coffin of Jack Duffy Feb. 7. Duffy and four others were killed in a Belfast betting shop Feb. 5. At left, relatives of Paddy Loughran comfort each other at his funeral in west Belfast Feb. 6. Loughran was killed along with two others in the Sinn Fein headquarters in Belfast by rogue Royal Ulster Constabulary, Allen Moore, who took his own life after the attack. British Prime Minister John Major Feb. 6 invited leaders of four political parties to discuss security in Northern Ireland, where 12 people died in political and sectarian violence last week.

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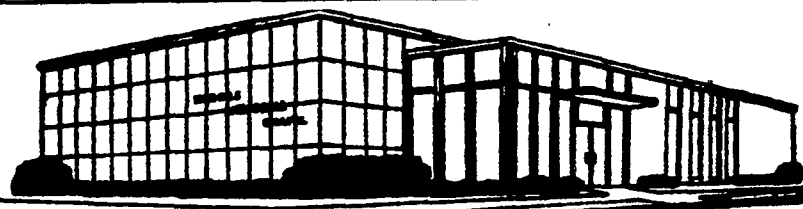
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