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## Why Virgil Goode is So Wholly Wrong

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As Cenk Uygur [has explained](#), Virgil Goode's slur is a naked attempt to link terrorism, immigration, and Islam in a way that panders to the ugliest kind of nativism. It's worth stepping back too to look at why Goode is so wholly wrong.

For Goode is far wide of the mark when he suggests that Muslims in the States are all immigrants. Indeed, the history of Islam in America, as documented [most recently by Genieve Abdo](#) shows how Muslims, have been part of the American story from the very beginning, albeit sometime at the margins.

Muslims have been embroiled in the task of becoming Americans from the very beginning of the nation. I'm certain that Goode is not alone in forgetting that many Muslims were living in the United States before there even was a United States--as slaves. Islam was common in the West Africa (many Muslims were merchants in the region) when that part of the world was a hunting ground for slaves. Records from the Revolutionary era list slave names and reveal many Muslims among those who made the Middle Passage. And Islam was not snuffed out by the horrors of slavery. As late as 1837, a slave narrative by one Charles Ball documents slaves engaged in the five daily prayers that Muslims do.

A second wave of Muslim immigrants came as part of the effort to conquer the American West at the end of the nineteenth century. The first mosque in the United States was built, according to Abdo, in Ross, North Dakota. A commemorative plaque in Quartzsite, Arizona celebrates a Syrian immigrant known as "Hi Jolly" (in fact, Hajji Ali), as "a faithful aid to the U.S. government."

Today, Hajji Ali finds his latter-day counterpart in the FBI agent Ali Soufan: As Lawrence Wright has movingly recounted, Soufan came within inches of unraveling the 9/11 plot, failing largely due to [the CIA's failure to share its data hoard](#). When Goode attacks Muslims as incapable of being Americans, he splits not only on the grave of men such as Hajji Ali who have (quite literally) built America, he also tars the dignity and loyalty of proud government servants such as Soufan.

To say that Muslims or Islam is somehow "alien" to America is thus at least ironic--and at worst the evidence of an ugly and stupid prejudice.

Today, an accurate count of Muslims in the U.S. is hard to find. Estimates ranging from 1.1 million to 7 million. About a third of American Muslims were born in the United States, and many others are non-citizens. Large Muslim communities now live in New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Dallas/Fort Worth-Houston. They include Sunni and Shia; they encompass the covert, the pious and the lapsed. There are no easy stereotypes about the manifold ways of being a Muslim American in 2007.

Indeed, Islamic doctrines more broadly are also far more complex than first appears. As Cenk explained, there is no doubt that there are some pathological ideologies that claim to be Islamic--and these must be marginalized and wiped out. But it should not need repeating that the overwhelming majority of Muslims have no interest in or appetite for political violence. The sheer number of Muslims in Europe and the United States, set against the single-digit infrequency of ideological violence, ought to give the lie to any such claim.

One hundred and fifty years ago, Virgil Goode might have made the same speech - except where he used "Muslim" today, he

would have been using "Catholic" one hundred and fifty years ago. The now-defunct "Know Nothing" party panders to fears about Irish and Italian immigration. It invoked the specter of Northeastern port cities being overrun by the papist lower classes. Know Nothing politicians accused Catholics of "ultramontanism," that is owed a first and foremost allegiance to the Vatican, and thus being incapable of being a loyal American.

Just as the Know-Nothings were proved wrong--and have largely been left in history's dustbin--so too will Virgil Goode's smear one day remain only as evidence that America can overcome its darker impulses. Muslims, like any other community of faith that is rooted here, and that has links overseas, have been and can be a part of the diverse and shifting fabric that is today and will be tomorrow America.

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