

# Samuel F.B. Morse: Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States (1835)

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*The Irish were weighed down by many woes in the nineteenth century, prime among them British dominion and the famine wrought by the potato rot. The weight buried many at home and squeezed others out to find freedom and food abroad. These Irish immigrants, who by 1860 composed the largest foreign-born group in America, faced perhaps the greatest prejudice. John Francis Maguire, looking back on decades of Irish migration, tried to explain why to both Irish and American readers in his book, The Irish in America.*

*In another chapter of his book, John Maguire related the history of the Know-Nothing movement of the mid-1850s. He noted how adherents combined religious bigotry with nationalistic prejudice, all to the detriment of the Irish immigrant. He was quick to point out, however, that "there was nothing new in this Know-Nothingism. It was as old as the time of the Revolution, being Native Americanism under another name. Its animating spirit was hostility to the stranger—insane jealousy of the foreigner." While the elaborate organization and political power of the American (Know-Nothing) Party was a new development, Maguire had it right: this kind of intolerance was nothing new. Nativism grew as immigration increased. By the 1830s Americans fearful of possible immigrant power and cultural effects, including politicians and reformers, delivered impassioned arguments against unrestricted immigration. Prominent among them was Samuel F. B. Morse. Although he made a career of painting for over half of his life—an artist of some repute, he was chosen to paint a portrait of Lafayette for the city of New York in 1825—Morse achieved lasting renown for inventing the telegraph. He was not the only one working on the concept, but his invention was the first to show itself practicable. With congressional support, Morse was able to build a line from Washington to Baltimore, and on 24 May 1844 he sent a passage from the Bible, "What hath God wrought," over the wire. Raised in a deeply religious, Protestant, home, Morse developed a strong antagonism against Catholicism, which became marked during his European tour in the early 1830s—the same tour that gave him some of the foundational ideas for the telegraph. On his return to a changing America he went public with his concerns, and found a ready audience.*

From Samuel F. B. Morse, *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States through Foreign Immigration* (1835; New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1969) pp. 6-15.

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Our country, in the position it has given to foreigners who have made it their home, has pursued a course in relation to them, totally different from that of any other country in the world. This course, while it is liberal without example, subjects our institutions to peculiar dangers. In all other countries the foreigner, to whatever privileges he may be entitled by becoming a subject, can never be placed in a situation to be politically dangerous, for he has no share in the government of the country; . . .

. . . The writer believes, that since the time of the American Revolution, which gave the principles of Democratic liberty a home, those principles have never been in greater jeopardy than at the present moment. To his reasons for thus believing, he invites the unimpassioned investigation of every American citizen. If there is danger, let it arouse to defence. If it is a false alarm, let such explanations be given of most suspicious appearances as shall safely allay it. It is no party question, and the attempt to make it one, should be at once suspected. It concerns all of every party.

There is danger of reaction from Europe; and it is the part of common prudence to look for it, and to provide against it. The great political truth has recently been promulgated at the capital of one of the principal courts of Europe, at Vienna, and by one of the profoundest scholars of Germany, (Frederick

Schlegel, a devoted Roman Catholic, and one of the Austrian Cabinet,) the great truth, clearly and unanswerably proved, that the political revolutions to which European governments have been so long subjected, from the popular desires for liberty, are the natural effects of the Protestant Reformation. That Protestantism favours Republicanism, while Popery as naturally supports Monarchical power. In these lectures, . . . there is a most important allusion to this country; and as it demonstrates one of the principal connecting points between European and American politics, and is the key to many of the mysterious doings that are in operation against American institutions under our own eyes, let Americans treasure it well in their memories. This is the passage:—"THE GREAT NURSERY of these destructive principles, (the principles of Democracy,) the GREAT REVOLUTIONARY SCHOOL for FRANCE and THE REST OF EUROPE, is NORTH AMERICA!" Yes, (I address Democratic Americans,) the influence of this Republican government, of your democratic system, is vitally felt by Austria. She confesses it. It is proscribed by the Austrian Cabinet. This country is designated directly to all her people, and to her allied despots, as the great plague spot of the world, the poisoned fountain whence flow all the deadly evils which threaten their own existence. . . . Is it wonderful after such an avowal in regard to America, that she should do something to rid herself and the world of such a tremendous evil? . . . But how shall she attack us? She cannot send her armies, they would be useless. She has told us by the mouth of her Counsellor of Legation, that Popery, while it is the natural antagonist to Protestantism, is opposed in its whole character to Republican liberty, and is the promoter and supporter of arbitrary power. How fitted then is Popery for her purpose! This she can send without alarming our fears, or, at least, only the fears of those "miserable," "intolerant fanatics," and "pious bigots," who affect to see danger to the liberties of the country in the mere introduction of a religious system opposed to their own, and whose cry of danger, be it ever so loud, will only be regarded as the result of "sectarian fear," and the plot ridiculed as a "quixotic dream." But is there any thing so irrational in such a scheme? Is it not the most natural and obvious act for Austria to do, with her views of the influence of Popery upon the form of government, its influence to pull down Republicanism, and build up monarchy; I say, is it not her most obvious act to send Popery to this country if it is not here, or give it a fresh and vigorous impulse if it is already here? At any rate she is doing it. She has set herself to work with all her activity to disseminate throughout the country the Popish religion. Immediately after the delivery of Schlegel's lectures, which was in the year 1828, a great society was formed in the Austrian capital, in Vienna, in 1829. The late Emperor, and Prince Metternich, and the Crown Prince, (now Emperor,) and all the civil and ecclesiastical officers of the empire, with the princes of Savoy and Piedmont, uniting in it, and calling it after the name of a canonized King, St. Leopold. This society is formed for a great and express purpose. . . . "of promoting the greater activity of Catholic missions in America;" these are the words of their own reports. Yes; these Foreign despots are suddenly stirred up to combine and promote the greater activity of Popery in this country; and this, too, just after they had been convinced of the truth, or, more properly speaking, had their memories quickened with it, that Popery is utterly opposed to Republican liberty. These are the facts in the case. Americans, explain them in your own way. If any choose to stretch their charity so far as to believe that these crowned gentlemen have combined in this Society solely for religious purposes; that they have organized a Society to collect moneys to be spent in this country, and have sent Jesuits as their almoners, and shiploads of Roman Catholic emigrants, and for the sole purpose of converting us to the religion of Popery, and without any political design, credat Judaeus Apella, non ego.

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Let us examine the operations of this Austrian Society, for it is hard at work all around us; yes, here in this country, from one end to the other, at our very doors, in this city. . . . Its emissaries are here. And who are these emissaries? They are JESUITS. This society of men, after exerting their tyranny for upwards of 200 years, at length became so formidable to the world, threatening the entire subversion of

all social order, that even the Pope, whose devoted subjects they are, and must be, by the vow of their society, was compelled to dissolve them. They had not been suppressed, however, for 50 years, before the waning influence of Popery and Despotism required their useful labours, to resist the spreading light of Democratic liberty, and the Pope, (Pius VII,) simultaneously with the formation of the Holy Alliance, revived the order of the Jesuits in all their power. . . . And do Americans need to be told what Jesuits are? If any are ignorant, let them inform themselves of their history without delay; no time is to be lost: their workings are before you in every day's events: they are a secret society, a sort of Masonic order, with superadded features of most revolting odiousness, and a thousand times more dangerous. They are not confined to one class in society; they are not merely priests, or priests of one religious creed, they are merchants, and lawyers, and editors, and men of any profession, and no profession, having no outward badge, (in this country,) by which to be recognised; they are about in all your society. They can assume any character, that of angels of light, or ministers of darkness, to accomplish their one great end, the service upon which they are sent, whatever that service may be. "They are all educated men, prepared, and sworn to start at any moment, in any direction, and for any service, commanded by the general of their order, bound to no family, community, or country, by the ordinary ties which bind men; and sold for life to the cause of the Roman Pontiff."

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Is there no danger to the Democracy of the country from such formidable foes arrayed against it? Is Metternich its friend? Is the Pope its friend? Are his official documents, now daily put forth, Democratic in their character?

O there is no danger to the Democracy; for those most devoted to the Pope, the Roman Catholics, especially the Irish Catholics, are all on the side of Democracy. Yes; to be sure they are on the side of Democracy. They are just where I should look for them. Judas Iscariot joined with the true disciples. Jesuits are not fools. They would not startle our slumbering fears, by bolting out their monarchical designs directly in our teeth, and by joining the opposing ranks, except so far as to cover their designs. This is a Democratic country, and the Democratic party is and ever must be the strongest party, unless ruined by traitors and Jesuits in the camp. Yes; it is in the ranks of Democracy I should expect to find them, and for no good purpose be assured. Every measure of Democratic policy in the least exciting will be pushed to ultraism, so soon as it is introduced for discussion. Let every real Democrat guard against this common Jesuitical artifice of tyrants, an artifice which there is much evidence to believe is practising against them at this moment, an artifice which if not heeded will surely be the ruin of Democracy: it is founded on the well-known principle that "extremes meet." The writer has seen it pass under his own eyes in Europe, in more than one instance. When in despotic governments popular discontent, arising from the intolerable oppressions of the tyrants of the people, has manifested itself by popular outbreakings, to such a degree as to endanger the throne, and the people seemed prepared to shove their masters from their horses, and are likely to mount, and seize the reins themselves; then, the popular movement, unmanageable any longer by resistance, is pushed to the extreme. The passions of the ignorant and vicious are excited to outrage by pretended friends of the people. Anarchy ensues; and then the mass of the people, who are always lovers of order and quiet, unite at once in support of the strong arm of force for protection; and despotism, perhaps, in another, but preconcerted shape, resumes its iron reign. Italy and Germany are furnishing examples every day. If an illustration is wanted on a larger scale, look at France in her late Republican revolution, and in her present relapse into despotism.

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That Jesuits are at work upon the passions of the American community, managing in various ways to gain control, must be evident to all. They who have learned from history the general mode of proceeding of this crafty set of men, could easily infer that they were here, even were it not otherwise

confirmed by unquestionable evidence in their correspondence with their foreign masters in Austria. There are some, perhaps, who are under the impression that the order of Jesuits is a purely religious Society for the dissemination of the Roman Catholic religion; and therefore comes within the protection of our laws, and must be tolerated. There cannot be a greater mistake. It was from the beginning a political organization, an absolute Monarchy masked by religion. It has been aptly styled "tyranny by religion." . . .

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. . . It becomes important to inquire, then, what are the principal materials in our society with which Jesuits can accomplish the political designs of the Foreign Despots embodied in the Leopold Foundation. And here let me make the passing remark, that there has been a great deal of mawkish sensitiveness on the subject of introducing any thing concerning religion into political discussions. This sensitiveness, as it is not merely foolish, arising from ignorance of the true line which separates political and theological matters, but also exposes the political interests of the country to manifest danger, I am glad to see is giving way to a proper feeling on the subject. Church and State must be for ever separated, but it is the height of folly to suppose, that in political discussions, Religion especially, the political character of any and every religious creed may not be publicly discussed. The absurdity of such a position is too manifest to dwell a moment upon it. And in considering the materials in our society adapted to the purposes of hostile attack upon our Institutions, we must of necessity notice the Roman Catholic religion. It is this form of religion that is most implicated in the conspiracy against our liberties. It is in this sect that the Jesuits are organized. It is this sect that is proclaimed by one of its own most brilliant and profound literary men to be hostile in its very nature to republican liberty; and it is the active extension of this sect that Austria is endeavouring to promote throughout this Republic. And Americans will not be cowed into silence by the cries of persecution, intolerance, bigotry, fanaticism, and such puerile catchwords, perpetually uttered against those who speak or write ever so calmly against the dangers of Popery. I can say, once for all, that no such outcry weighs a feather with me, nor does it weigh a feather with the mass of the American people. They have good sense enough to discriminate, especially in a subject of such vital importance to their safety, between words and things. I am not tenacious of words, except for convenience sake, the better to be understood, but if detestation of Jesuitism and tyranny, whether in a civil or ecclesiastical shape, is in future to be called intolerance, be it so; only let it be generally understood, and I will then glory in intolerance. When that which is now esteemed virtue, is to be known by general consent only by the name vice, why I will not be singular, but glory in vice, since the word is used to embody the essential qualities of virtue. I will just add, that those who are so fond of employing these epithets, forget that by so constantly, loosely, and indiscriminately using them, they cease to convey any meaning, or to excite any emotions but those of disgust towards those who use them.

To return to the subject; it is in the Roman Catholic ranks that we are principally to look for the materials to be employed by the Jesuits, and in what condition do we find this sect at present in our country? We find it spreading itself into every nook and corner of the land; churches, chapels, colleges, nunneries and convents, are springing up as if by magic every where; an activity hitherto unknown among the Roman Catholics pervades all their ranks, and yet whence the means for all these efforts? Except here and there funds or favours collected from an inconsistent Protestant, (so called probably because born in a Protestant country, who is flattered or wheedled by some Jesuit artifice to give his aid to their cause,) the greatest part of the pecuniary means for all these works are from abroad. They are the contributions of his Majesty the Emperor of Austria, of Prince Metternich, of the late Charles X., and the other Despots combined in the Leopold Society. And who are the members of the Roman Catholic communion? What proportion are natives of this land, nurtured under our own institutions, and well versed in the nature of American liberty? Is it not notorious that the greater part are Foreigners from the

various Catholic countries of Europe. Emigration has of late years been specially promoted among this class of Foreigners, and they have been in the proportion of three to one of all other emigrants arriving on our shores; they are from Ireland, Germany, Poland, and Belgium. From about the period of the formation of the Leopold Society, Catholic emigration increased in an amazing degree. Colonies of Emigrants, selected, perhaps, with a view to occupy particular places, (for, be it remembered, every portion of this country is as perfectly known at Vienna and Rome as in any part of our own country,) have been constantly arriving. The principal emigrants are from Ireland and Germany. We have lately been told by the captain of a lately arrived Austrian vessel, which, by the by, brought 70 emigrants from Antwerp! that a desire is suddenly manifested among the poorer class of the Belgian population, to emigrate to America. They are mostly, if not all, Roman Catholics, be it remarked, for Belgium is a Catholic country, and Austrian vessels are bringing them here. Whatever the cause of all this movement abroad to send to this country their poorer classes, the fact is certain, the class of emigrants is known, and the instrument, Austria, is seen in it—the same power that directs the Leopold Foundation.

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I have shown what are the Foreign materials imported into the country, with which the Jesuits can work to accomplish their designs. Let us examine this point a little more minutely. These materials are the varieties of Foreigners of the same Creed, the Roman Catholic, over all of whom the Bishops or Vicars General hold, as a matter of course, ecclesiastical rule; and we well know what is the nature of Roman Catholic ecclesiastical rule,—it is the double refined spirit of despotism, which, after arrogating to itself the prerogatives of Deity, and so claiming to bind or loose the soul eternally, makes it, in the comparison, but a mere trifle to exercise absolute sway in all that relates to the body. The notorious ignorance in which the great mass of these emigrants have been all their lives sunk, until their minds are dead, makes them but senseless machines; they obey orders mechanically, for it is the habit of their education, in the despotic countries of their birth. And can it be for a moment supposed by any one that by the act of coming to this country, and being naturalized, their darkened intellects can suddenly be illuminated to discern the nice boundary where their ecclesiastical obedience to their priests ends, and their civil independence of them begins? The very supposition is absurd. They obey their priests as demigods, from the habit of their whole lives; they have been taught from infancy that their priests are infallible in the greatest matters, and can they, by mere importation to this country, be suddenly imbued with the knowledge that in civil matters their priests may err, and that they are not in these also their infallible guides? Who will teach them this? Will their priests? Let common sense answer this question. Must not the priests, as a matter almost of certainty, control the opinions of their ignorant flock in civil as well as religious matters? and do they not do it?

Mr. Jefferson, with that deep sagacity and foresight which distinguished him as a politician, foresaw, predicted, and issued his warning, on the great danger to the country of this introduction of foreigners. He doubted its policy, even when the advantages seemed to be greatest. He says, "The present desire of America, (in 1781,) is to produce rapid population by as great importations of foreigners as possible. But is this founded in policy?"

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"Are there no inconveniences to be thrown into the scale against the advantage expected from a multiplication of numbers by the importation of foreigners? It is for the happiness of those united in society to harmonize as much as possible in matters which they must of necessity transact together."

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What was dimly seen by the prophetic eye of Jefferson, is actually passing under our own eyes. Already have foreigners increased in the country to such a degree, that they justly give us alarm. They feel themselves so strong, as to organize themselves even as foreigners into foreign bands, and this for the purpose of influencing our elections. . . . That they are men who having professed to become

Americans, by accepting our terms of naturalization, do yet, in direct contradiction to their professions, clan together as a separate interest, and retain their foreign appellation; that it is with such a separate foreign interest, organizing in the midst of us, that Jesuits in the pay of foreign powers are tampering; that it is this foreign corps of religionists that Americans of both parties have been for years in the habit of basely and traitorously encouraging to erect into an umpire of our political divisions, thus virtually surrendering the government into the hands of Despotic powers. In view of these facts, which every day's experience proves to be facts, is it not time, high time, that a true American spirit were roused to resist this alarming inroad of foreign influence upon our institutions, to avert dangers to which we have hitherto shut our eyes, and which if not remedied, and that immediately, will inevitably change the whole character of our government. I repeat what I first said, this is no party question, it concerns native Americans of all parties.

### Review Questions

1. Why did Morse believe that the massive immigration from Europe was part of a vast conspiracy against the United States?
2. Did he see this conspiracy as primarily religious or political in its means and its ends?
3. Was his conspiracy theory logical and his evidence supportable? In other words, did he prove his case?
4. Did he acknowledge and argue against his opponents or did he simply disparage them as he believed they disparaged nativists?
5. Was he against all immigrants?