

Do Immigrants Endanger America?¹

The decades preceding the Civil War were noteworthy for a large influx of American immigrants. Between 1840 and 1860, 4.2 million European immigrants—primarily from Germany and Ireland—entered the United States. Not all Americans welcomed their arrival. Nativism, a movement devoted to the idea that immigrants threatened the economic and political security of “native” Americans—white, Protestant established citizens—became entrenched in the American political scene of the time.

The fear and resentment many Americans felt toward immigrants had several causes. Anti-Catholic prejudice fueled much nativist sentiment. Some Americans, noting that most Irish and many Germans were Catholic, feared the Roman Catholic Church might gain unwanted influence in American life and politics. Some American workers worried about immigrants driving down wages and competing for jobs. Many nativists, viewing newly arrived immigrants as ignorant and unpatriotic, opposed granting immigrants the right to vote.

In 1844, a new nativist organization, the American Republican Party, managed to elect dozens of officials in the states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. Member of the organization held their first national convention the following year in Philadelphia, where they changed their party’s name to the Native American Party and adopted a platform delineating the threats they felt immigrants posed to America. The first viewpoint here is an excerpt from that platform.

In 1845, in New York, Thomas L. Nichols delivered a lecture, later published, on immigration and naturalization—controversial topics of that time when the number of immigrants arriving annually in the United States was approaching 300,000 (the total U.S. population was near 20 million at that time). Nichols, a doctor, a social historian, and journalist, was a supporter of immigration. In the second viewpoint here, taken from his lecture,

he criticizes the nativist movement to restrict immigration. He cites contributions immigrants have made to the United States, and responds to the arguments made by nativists.

Immigrants Endanger America (1845)

Native American Party²

We, the delegates elect to the first national convention of the Native American people of the United States, assembled at Philadelphia on the fourth day of July, 1845, for the purpose of devising a plan of concerted political action in defense of American institutions against the encroachments of foreign influence, open or concealed, hereby solemnly, and before Almighty God, make known to our fellow-citizens, our country, and the world, the following incontrovertible facts, and the course of conduct consequent thereon, to which, in duty to the cause of human rights and the claims of our beloved country, we mutually pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

The danger of foreign influence, threatening the gradual destruction of our national institutions, failed not to arrest the attention of the Father of his Country in the very dawn of American liberty. Not only its direct agency in rendering the American system liable to the poisonous influence of European policy—a policy at war with the fundamental principles of the American constitution—but also its still more fatal operation in aggravating the virulence of partisan warfare -- has awakened deep alarm in the mind of every intelligent patriot, from the days of Washington to the present time.

The Dangers of Allowing Immigrants to Vote

The influx of a foreign population, permitted, after little more than a nominal residence, to participate in the legislation of the country and the sacred right of suffrage, produced comparatively little evil during the earlier years of the republic; for that influx was then limited by the expenses of a trans-Atlantic voyage, by the

¹ From Leone, Bruno, William Dudley, and John C. Chalberg, eds. *Opposing Viewpoint in American History: Volume I: From Colonial Times to Reconstruction*. Greenhaven Press, Inc.: San Diego, CA, 1996.

² From *Address of the Delegates of the Native American National Convention, Assembled at Philadelphia, July 4, 1845, to the Citizens of the United States*.

existence of many wholesome restraints upon the acquisition of political prerogatives, by the constant exhaustion of the European population in long and bloody continental wars, and by the slender inducements offered for immigration to a young and sparsely-peopled country, contending for existence with a boundless wilderness, inhabited by savage men. Evils which are only prospective rarely attract the notice of the masses; and, until peculiar changes were effected in the political condition of Europe, the increased facilities for transportation, and the madness of partisan legislation, in removing all effective guards against the open prostitution of the right of citizenship, had converted the slender current of naturalization into a torrent, threatening to overwhelm the influence of the natives of the land; the far-seeing vision of the statesman only, being fixed upon the distant, but steadily-approaching cloud.

But, since the barriers against the improper extension of the right of suffrage were bodily broken down, for a partisan purpose, by the Congress of 1825, the rapidly-increasing numbers, and unblushing insolence of the foreign population of the worst classes, have caused the general agitation of the question: "How shall the institutions of the country be preserved from the blight of foreign influence, insanely legalized through the conflicts of domestic parties?" Associations under different names have been formed by our fellow-citizens, in many states of this confederation, from Louisiana to Maine, all designed to check this imminent danger before it becomes irremediable; and at length, a national convention of the great American people, born upon the soil of Washington, has assembled to digest, and announce a plan of operations, by which the grievances of an abused hospitality, and the consequent degradation of political morals, may be redressed, and the tottering columns of the temple of republican liberty secured upon the sure foundation of an enlightened nationality.

In calling for support upon every American who loves his country pre-eminently, and every adopted citizen of moral and intellectual worth, who would secure to his compatriots yet to come among us, the blessings of political protection, the safety of person and property, it is right that we should make known the grievances which we propose to redress, and the manner in which we shall endeavor to effect our object.

Imminent Peril

It is an incontrovertible truth, that the civil institutions of the United States of America have been seriously affected, and that they now stand in imminent peril from the rapid and enormous increase of the body of residents of foreign birth, imbued with foreign feelings, and of an ignorant and immoral character, who receive, under the present lax and unreasonable laws of naturalization, the elective franchise and the right of eligibility to political office.

The whole body of foreign citizens, invited to our shores under a constitutional provision adapted to other times and other political conditions of the world, and of our country especially, has been endowed by American hospitality with gratuitous privileges, unnecessary to the enjoyment of those inalienable rights of man—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—privileges wisely reserved to the natives of the soil by the governments of all other civilized nations. But, familiarized by habit with the exercise of these indulgences, and emboldened by increasing numbers, a vast majority of those who constitute this foreign body now claim as an original right that which has been so incautiously granted as a favor; thus attempting to render inevitable the prospective action of laws adopted upon a principle of mere expediency, made variable at the will of Congress by the express terms of the constitution, and heretofore repeatedly revised, to meet the exigencies of the times.

In former years this body was recruited chiefly from the victims of political oppression, of the active and intelligent mercantile adventurers of other lands; and it then constituted a slender representation of the best classes of the foreign population, well fitted to add strength to the state, and capable of being readily educated in the peculiarly American science of political self-government. Moreover, while welcoming the stranger of every condition, our laws then wisely demanded of every foreign aspirant for political rights, a certificate of practical good citizenship. Such classes of aliens were followed by no foreign demagogues—they were debauched by no emissaries of kings. A wall of fire separated them from such a baneful influence; and they were elected by their intelligence, their knowledge, their virtue, and love of

freedom. But, for the last twenty years, the road to civil preferment and participation in the legislative and executive government of the land has been laid broadly open, alike to the ignorant, the vicious, and the criminal; and a large proportion of the foreign body of citizens and voters now constitute a representation of the worst and most degraded of the European population—victims of social oppression or personal vices, utterly divested by ignorance or crime of the moral and intellectual requisites for political self-government.

A New Class of Immigrants

Thus tempted by the suicidal policy of these United States, and favored by the facilities resulting from the modern improvements of navigation, numerous societies and corporate bodies in foreign countries have found it economical to transport to our shores, at public and private expense, the feeble, the imbecile, the idle and intractable; thus relieving the burdens resulting from the vices of the European social systems, by availing themselves of the generous errors of our own.

The almshouses of Europe are emptied upon our coast, and this by our own invitation—not casually, or to a trivial extent, but systematically, and upon a constantly-increasing scale. The bedlams of the old world have contributed their share to the torrent of immigration; and the lives of our citizens have been attempted in the streets of our capital cities by madmen just liberated from European hospitals, upon the express condition that they should be transported to America. By the orders of European governments, the punishment of crimes has been commuted for banishment to the land of the free; and criminals in irons have crossed the ocean to be cast loose upon society on their arrival upon our shores. The United States are rapidly becoming the lazar-house and penal colony of Europe; nor can we reasonably censure such proceedings. They are legitimate consequences of our own unlimited benevolence; and it is of such material that we profess to manufacture free and enlightened citizens, by a process occupying five short years, at most, but practically, oftentimes embraced in a much shorter period of time.

The mass of immigrants, formerly lost among the natives of the soil, has increased from the ratio of 1 in 40 to that of 1 in 7! A

like advance in fifteen years will leave the natives of the soil a minority in their own land! Thirty years ago these strangers came by units and tens -- now they swarm by thousands. (It is estimated that 300,000 will arrive within the present year.) Formerly, most of them sought only for an honest livelihood and a provision for their families, and rarely meddled with those institutions of which it was impossible they could comprehend the nature; now, each newcomer seeks political preferment, and struggles to fasten on the public purse with an avidity in strict proportion to his ignorance and unworthiness of public trust—having been sent, as is clearly shown, for the purpose of obtaining political ascendancy in the government of the nation—having been sent to exalt their allies to power; having been sent to work a revolution from republican freedom to the assumed divine rights of monarchs.

From these unhappy circumstances, has arisen an Imperium in Imperio—a body uninformed and vicious—foreign in feeling, prejudice and manner, yet armed with a vast and often a controlling influence over the policy of a nation, whose benevolence it abuses, and whose kindness it habitually insults—a body as dangerous to the rights of the intelligent foreigner, as to the prospect of its own immediate progeny, as it is threatening to the liberties of the country, and the hopes of rational freedom throughout the world—a body ever ready to complicate our foreign relations by embroiling us with the hereditary hates and feuds of other lands, and to disturb our domestic peace by its crude ideas, mistaking license for liberty, and the overthrow of individual rights for republican political equality; a body ever the ready tool of foreign and domestic demagogues, and steadily endeavoring by misrule to establish popular tyranny under a cloak of false democracy. Americans, false to their country, and led on to moral crime by the desire of dishonest gain, have scattered their agents over Europe, inducing the malcontent and the unthrifty to exchange a life of compulsory labor in foreign lands, for relative comfort, to be maintained by the tax-paying industry of our overburdened and deeply indebted community. Not content with the usual and less objectionable licenses of trade, these fraudulent dealers habitually deceive a worthier class of victims, by false promises of employment, and assist in thronging the already crowded avenues of simple labor with a host of competitors, whose

first acquaintance with American faith springs from gross imposture, and whose first feeling on discovering the cheat, is reasonable mistrust, if not implacable revenge. The importation of the physical necessities of life is burdened with imposts which many deem extravagant; but the importation of vice and idleness — of seditious citizens and factious rulers — is not only unrestricted by anything beyond a nominal tax, but is actually encouraged by a system which transforms the great patrimony of the nation, purchased by the blood of our fathers, into a source of bounty for the promotion of immigration.

Whenever an attempt is made to restrain this fatal evil, the native and adopted demagogues protest against an effort which threatens to deprive them of their most important tools, and such is the existing organization of our established political parties, that should either of them essay the reform of an abuse which both acknowledge to be fraught with ruin, that party sinks upon the instant into a minority, divested of control, and incapable of result.

From such causes has been derived a body, armed with political power, in a country of whose system it is ignorant, and for whose institutions it feels little interest, except for the purpose of personal advancement....

A Future of Foreign Control

The body of adopted citizens with foreign interests and prejudices is annually advancing, with rapid strides, in geometrical progression. Already it has acquired a control of our elections which cannot be entirely corrected even by the wisest legislation, until the present generation shall be numbered with the past. Already it has notoriously swayed the course of national legislation, and invaded the purity of local justice. In a few years its unchecked progress would cause it to outnumber the native defenders of our rights, and would then inevitably dispossess our offspring, and its own, of the inheritance for which our fathers bled, or plunge this land of happiness and peace into the horrors of a civil war.

The correction of these evils can never be effected by any combination governed by the tactics of other existing parties. If either of the old parties, as such, were to attempt an extension of the term of naturalization, it would be impossible for them to carry

out the measure, because they would immediately be abandoned by the foreign voters. This great measure can be carried out only by an organization like our own, made up of those who have given tip their former political preferences.

For these reasons, we recommend the immediate organization of the truly patriotic native citizens throughout the United States, for the purpose of resisting the progress of foreign influence in the conduct of American affairs, and the correction of such political abuses as have resulted from unguarded or partisan legislation on the subject of naturalization, so far as these abuses admit of remedy without encroachment upon the vested rights of foreigners who have been already legally adopted into the bosom of the nation.

Immigrants Do Not Endanger America (1845)

Thomas L. Nichols (1815-1901)³

The questions connected with emigration from Europe to America are interesting to both the old world and the new—are of importance to the present and future generations. They have more consequence than a charter or a state election; they involve the destinies of millions; they are connected with the progress of civilization, the rights of man, and providence of God!

I have examined this subject the more carefully, and speak upon it the more earnestly, because I have been to some extent, in former years; a partaker of the prejudices I have since learned to pity. A native of New England and a descendant of the puritans, I early imbibed, and to some extent promulgated, opinions of which reflection and experience have made me ashamed....

But while I would speak of the motives of men with charity, I claim the right to combat their opinions with earnestness. Believing that the principles and practices of Native Americanism are wrong in themselves, and are doing wrong to those who are the objects of their persecution, justice and humanity require that

³ From *Lecture on Immigration and Right of Naturalization* by Thomas L. Nichols (New York, 1845).

their fallacy should be exposed, and their iniquity condemned. It may be unfortunate that the cause of the oppressed and persecuted, in opinion if not in action, has not fallen into other hands; yet, let me trust that the truth, even in mine, will prove mighty, prevailing from its own inherent power!

The Right to Emigrate

The right of man to emigrate from one country to another is one which belongs to him by his own constitution and by every principle of justice. It is one which no law can alter, and no authority destroy. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are set down, in our Declaration of Independence, as among the self-evident, unalienable rights of man. If I have a right to live, I have also a right to what will support existence—food, clothing, and shelter. If then the country in which I reside, from a super-abundant population, or any other cause, does not afford me these, my right to go from it to some other is self-evident and unquestionable. The right to live, then, supposes the right of emigration....

I proceed, therefore, to show that the emigration of foreigners to this country is not only defensible on grounds of abstract justice—what we have no possible right to prevent, but that it has been in various ways highly beneficial to this country.

Emigration first peopled this hemisphere with civilized men. The first settlers of this continent had the same right to come here that belongs to the emigrant of yesterday—no better and no other. They came to improve their condition, to escape from oppression, to enjoy freedom—for the same, or similar, reasons as now prevail. And so far as they violated no private rights, so long as they obtained their lands by fair purchase, or took possession of those which were unclaimed and uncultivated, the highly respectable natives whom the first settlers found here had no right to make any objections. The peopling of this continent with civilized men, the cultivation of the earth, the various processes of productive labor, for the happiness of man, all tend to "the greatest good of the greatest number," and carry out the evident design of Nature or Providence in the formation of the earth and its inhabitants.

Emigration from various countries in Europe to America, producing a mixture of races, has had, and is still having, the most

important influence upon the destinies of the human race. It is a principle, laid down by every physiologist, and proved by abundant observation, that man, like other animals, is improved and brought to its highest perfection by an intermingling of the blood and qualities of various races. That nations and families deteriorate from an opposite course has been observed in all ages. The great physiological reason why Americans are superior to other nations in freedom, intelligence, and enterprise, is because that they are the offspring of the greatest intermingling of races. The mingled blood of England has given her predominance over several nations of Europe in these very qualities, and a newer infusion, with favorable circumstances of climate, position, and institutions, has rendered Americans still superior. The Yankees of New England would never have shown those qualities for which they have been distinguished in war and peace throughout the world had there not been mingled with the puritan English, the calculating Scotch, the warm hearted Irish, the gay and chivalric French, the steady persevering Dutch, and the transcendental Germans, for all these nations contributed to make up the New England character, before the Revolution, and ever since to influence that of the whole American people.

America's Destiny

It is not too much to assert that in the order of Providence this vast and fertile continent was reserved for this great destiny; to be the scene of this mingling of the finest European races, and consequently of the highest condition of human intelligence, freedom, and happiness; for I look upon this mixture of the blood and qualities of various nations, and its continual infusion, as absolutely requisite to the perfection of humanity.... Continual emigration, and a constant mixing of the blood of different races, is highly conducive to physical and mental superiority.

This country has been continually benefited by the immense amount of capital brought hither by emigrants. There are very few who arrive upon our shores without some little store of wealth, the hoard of years of industry. Small as these means may be in each case, they amount to millions in the aggregate, and every dollar is so much added to the wealth of the country, to be reckoned at compound interest from the time of its arrival, nor are these sums

like our European loans, which we must pay back, both principal and interest. Within a few years, especially, and more or less at all periods, men of great wealth have been among the emigrants driven from Europe, by religious oppression or political revolutions. Vast sums have also fallen to emigrants and their descendants by inheritance, for every few days we read in the papers of some poor foreigner, or descendant of foreigners, as are we all, becoming the heir of a princely fortune, which in most cases, is added to the wealth of his adopted country. Besides this, capital naturally follows labor, and it flows upon this country in a constant current, by the laws of trade.

But it is not money alone that adds to the wealth of a country, but every day's productive labor is to be added to its accumulating capital. Every house built, every canal dug, every railroad graded, has added so much to the actual wealth of society; and who have built more houses, dug more canals, or graded more railroads, than the hardy Irishmen? I hardly know how our great national works could have been carried on without them—then, while every pair of sturdy arms has added to our national wealth, every hungry mouth has been a home market for our agriculture, and every broad shoulder has been clothed with our manufactures.

Europe's Most Valuable Members

From the very nature of the case, America gets from Europe the most valuable of her population. Generally, those who come here are the very ones whom a sensible man would select. Those who are attached to monarchical and aristocratic institutions stay at home where they can enjoy them. Those who lack energy and enterprise can never make up their minds to leave their native land. It is the strong minded, the brave hearted, the free and self-respecting, the enterprising and the intelligent, who break away from all the ties of country and of home, and brave the dangers of the ocean, in search of liberty and independence, for themselves and for their children, on a distant continent; and it is from this, among other causes, that the great mass of the people of this country are distinguished for the very qualities we should look for in emigrants. The same spirit which sent our fathers across the oceans impels us over the Alleghenies, to the valley of the Mississippi, and thence over the Rocky Mountains into Oregon.

For what are we not indebted to foreign emigration, since we are all Europeans or their descendants? We cannot travel on one of our steamboats without remembering that Robert Fulton was the son of an Irishman.... Who of the thousands who every summer pass up and down our great thoroughfare, the North River, fails to catch at least a passing glimpse of the column erected to the memory of [Polish immigrant and American Revolutionary War officer Thaddeus] Kosciusko? I cannot forget that only last night a portion of our citizens celebrated with joyous festivities the birthday of the son of Irish emigrants, I mean the Hero of New Orleans [Andrew Jackson]!

Who speaks contemptuously of Alexander Hamilton as a foreigner, because he was born in one of the West India Islands? Who at this day will question the worth or patriotism of Albert Gallatin, because he first opened his eyes among the Alps of Switzerland—though, in fact, this was brought up and urged against him, when he was appointed special minister to Russia by James Madison. What New Yorker applies the epithet of “degraded foreigner” to the German immigrant, John Jacob Astor, a man who has spread his canvas on every sea, drawn to his adopted land the wealth of every clime, and given us, it may be, our best claim to vast territories!

Who would have banished Frenchman, Stephen Girard, who, after accumulating vast wealth from foreign commerce, endowed with it magnificent institutions for education in his adopted land? So might I go on for hours, citing individual examples of benefits by this country from foreign immigration....

I have enumerated some of the advantages which such emigration has given to America. Let us now very carefully inquire, whether there is danger of any injury arising from these causes, at all proportionable to the palpable good.

"Our country is in danger," is the cry of Nativism. During my brief existence I have seen this country on the very verge of ruin a considerable number of times. It is always in the most imminent peril every four years; but, hitherto, the efforts of one party or the other have proved sufficient to rescue it, just in the latest gasp of its expiring agonies, and we have breathed more freely, when we have been assured that "the country's safe." Let us look steadily in the face of this new danger.

Are foreigners coming here to overturn our government? Those who came before the Revolution appear to have been generally favorable to republican institutions. Those who have come here since have left friends, home, country, all that man naturally holds dearest, that they might live under a free government—they and their children. Is there common sense in the supposition that men would voluntarily set about destroying the very liberties they came so far to enjoy?

"But they lack intelligence," it is said. Are the immigrants of today less intelligent than those of fifty or a hundred years ago? Has Europe and the human race stood still all this time?... The facts of men preferring this country to any other, of their desire to live under its institutions, of their migration hither, indicate to my mind anything but a lack of proper intelligence and enterprise. It has been charged against foreigners, by a portion of the Whig press, that they generally vote with the Democratic party. Allowing this to be so, I think that those who reflect upon the policy of the two parties, from the time of John Adams down to that of Mayor [James] Harper, will scarcely bring this up as the proof of a lack of intelligence!

The truth is, a foreigner who emigrates to this country comes here saying, "Where Liberty dwells, there is my country." He sees our free institutions in the strong light of contrast. The sun seems brighter, because he has come out of darkness. What we know by hearsay only of the superiority of our institutions, he knows by actual observation and experience. Hence it is that America has had no truer patriots—freedom no more enthusiastic admirers—the cause of liberty no more heroic defenders, than have been found among our adopted citizens.....

But if naturalized citizens of foreign birth had the disposition, they have not the power, to endanger our liberties, on account of their comparatively small and decreasing numbers. There appears to be a most extraordinary misapprehension upon this subject. To read one of our "Native" papers one might suppose that our country was becoming overrun by foreigners, and that there was real danger of their having a majority of votes

There is a point beyond which immigration cannot be carried. It must be limited by the capacity of the vessels employed in bringing passengers, while our entire population goes on

increasing in geometrical progression, so that in one century from now, we shall have a population of one hundred and sixty millions, but a few hundred thousands of whom at the utmost can be citizens of foreign birth. Thus it may be seen that foreign immigration is of very little account, beyond a certain period, in the population of a country, and at all times is an insignificant item. ...

In the infancy of this country the firstborn native found himself among a whole colony of foreigners. Now, the foreigner finds himself surrounded by as great a disproportion of natives, and the native babe and newly landed foreigner have about the same amount, of either power or disposition, to endanger the country in which they have arrived, one, because he chose to come—the other because he could not help it.

I said the power or the disposition, for I have yet to learn that foreigners, whether German or Irish, English or French, are at all disposed to do an injury to the asylum which wisdom has prepared and valor won for the oppressed of all nations and religions. I appeal to the observation of every man in this community, whether the Germans and the Irish here, and throughout the country, are not as orderly as, industrious, as quiet, and in the habit of performing as well the common duties of citizens as the great mass of natives among us.

The worst thing that can be brought against any portion of our foreign population is that in many cases they are poor, and when they sink under labor and privation, they have no resources but the almshouse. Alas! shall the rich, for whom they have labored, the owners of the houses they have helped to build, refuse to treat them as kindly as they would their horses when incapable of further toil? Can they grudge them shelter from the storm, and a place where they may die in peace?