

James Monroe and Mordecai Manuel Noah

How a Courageous American Jew Foiled the First Attempt at Official Anti-Semitism in the United States

By MILTON HARVEY

It is not necessary for a citizen of the United States to have his faith stamped on his forehead; the name of freeman is a sufficient passport.

—MORDECAI MANUEL NOAH.

THROUGHOUT the country there is now being shown a surpassingly beautiful movie entitled *Old Ironsides*, which is based upon a story by Laurence Stallings. With the humor, gusto, and epic swing we have come to associate with the name of the co-author of *What Price Glory* and the author of *The Big Parade*, the photoplay tells the stirring tale of how the young American Republic challenged and ultimately crushed the power of the piratical Barbary States, which were then preying on the world's sea-borne commerce, and to which all countries with important merchant marines were paying tribute in order to secure immunity for their ships.

It is a pity that Mr. Stallings did not include in his chronicle a man who played almost as great a part in the drama he unfolds as Commodore Stephen Decatur himself. I refer to Mordecai Manuel Noah, Decatur's schoolmate in Philadelphia, and at the time Mr. Stallings is writing of, our country's militant and swaggering consul at Tunis. From the very beginning of his consulship Noah opposed the policy of surrender which the United States and other countries were pursuing toward the Barbary pirates and advocated instead a policy of war, and eventually he brought about the dispatch of an American squadron under Decatur which put an end to the piracies of the Barbary States. And it was he who in this connection coined the stirring war-cry, "Millions for defense but not one cent for tribute!" which every American schoolboy is told to memorize, but which our school histories forget to give Noah credit for. Noah, moreover, was not only one of the most versatile men, but also one of the most fascinating, comical, and eccentric figures in the early days of the Republic—just the kind of character that Mr. Stallings is particularly happy in drawing.

Official Anti-Semitism

It is not, however, with Noah the delightfully absurd eccentric that the present article is concerned, but with Noah the American patriot and Jew who upheld the dignity and honor of his country abroad and even more so at home, and who by his courageous stand foiled the first attempt at official anti-Semitism in the United States.

In 1813 President Madison appointed Major Mordecai Manuel Noah, then editor of the *Charleston, S. C., City Gazette*, United States Consul in Tunis (with certain powers in respect to Algiers), a post which Noah had long wanted and asked for. Shortly afterwards Noah left the country aboard a vessel bound for France. The boat was captured by a British warship (the War of 1812 was still going on), and Noah was taken to England as a war prisoner. But those were days when warfare was still marked by a certain spirit of chivalry, and so he was treated with the utmost courtesy, being allowed to remain at liberty on his parole and even to visit any part of England he liked. After some months of nominal detention, he was released and permitted to proceed to his destination.

Arrived in Tunis, he displayed great courage and ability in successfully upholding the right of asylum attaching to the consulate. The following episode, related by his biographer Simon Wolf, gives an idea of Noah's intrepidity:

"On one occasion the Consul of Germany was set upon and attacked by a detachment of Janizaries, led by a son of the Bey. He fled for protection to the American Consul, who gave him effective asylum. The Janizaries threateningly demanded the surrender of the German Consul, but Major Noah raised the American flag and defied them. In resisting the attempt to force an entrance to the consular building, Major Noah drew his sword and cut down the son of the Bey. Reinforcements were sent, and the



James Monroe

Fifth president of the United States, who, as Secretary of State under James Madison brought about the recall of Mordecai Manuel Noah, consul to Tripoli and who gave as the principal reason for the dismissal, the fact that Noah was a Jew and as such unfit for any diplomatic undertaking. Noah later was vindicated by Congress and public opinion of the charges that had been brought against him.

delivery of the German Consul insolently demanded by force of arms. Seeing that resistance would be useless, he surrendered his sword and tore off his coat the gold stripes which indicated his diplomatic office, saying that if the German Consul were arrested, he would also be arrested with him and share his captivity. Accordingly, the two Consuls were led away by their captors, but after a few hours' detention were released. . . . Major Noah was cordially commended by his fellow-consuls for his courage and determination."

Now, one of the missions intrusted to him by the United States Government was to obtain the release of twelve American sailors who formed the crew of a vessel from Salem, Mass., which had been captured by Algiers. Noah was instructed by Secretary of State (later President) James Monroe to do this in such a manner as to give the impression that it was the relatives and friends of the prisoners, and not the American Government, who were interested in their release. This he accomplished in a creditable manner, but in doing so he was compelled to expend more money than the amount allotted for this purpose by our Government. His political enemies at home made capital of it and brought about his recall, which took place in 1815.

The Reason for the Dismissal

The terrible position in which Noah found himself as a result of this unexpected and unjustified dismissal, and how he extricated himself by sheer nerve and presence of mind, would make an interesting story by itself, but lack of space prevents me from telling it now. One sinister phase of Noah's recall, however, must be dwelt upon here. In his official letter of discharge Secretary of State Monroe gave as the principal reason for Noah's dismissal, not that he had exceeded his authority, but that he was a Jew and as such unsuited for the diplomatic post he was holding. This was as dishonest as it was

unfair and un-American. In the first place, Noah's Jewishness was no secret at the time of his appointment to the consulship at Tunis; in the second place, Tunis never protested against his appointment on that or any other ground; in the third place, if the young American Republic stood for anything, it was that a man's religion was his own affair and nobody else's; and in the fourth place, the treaty adopted between the United States and Tripoli in 1796, and signed by President George Washington, states explicitly that "the Government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion." (Put that in your pipe, Mr. Klansman, and smoke it!)

Needless to say, Noah, who was nothing if not a fighter, did not let Monroe get away with it. Immediately upon his return to the United States he went to Washington and called upon Secretary Monroe. The latter received him coldly and instead of restoring Noah to an office of equal rank, accused him of exceeding his authority and expending the public money unnecessarily, but made no reference to Noah's Jewishness. It took Noah a year to get his accounts adjusted; his action in ransoming the American captives in Algiers formed the subject of several exciting discussions in Congress and was approved by public opinion. In the end he was fully vindicated and the United States Government assumed responsibility for the amount he had expended in securing the release of the aforesaid sailors. Armed with a letter to this effect from the adjusting officer of the State Department, Noah called upon Secretary Monroe; but the latter refused to see him.

The One Explanation

It is hard to understand such pettiness and poor sportsmanship on the part of an American statesman and President, and one, too, who by Noah's own testimony, was essentially an honest man. The most plausible explanation of Monroe's shabby behavior in this affair is given by Noah himself in his famous *Travels in Europe and Africa*, wherein the reader will find a full account of the matter, as well as Noah's eloquent comments thereon. I quote in part:

"It is not necessary for me to say that Mr. Monroe is emphatically an honest man. I measure men by the aggregate of their virtues and vices—all are liable to error—many pertinaciously adhere to their measures, though they may be manifestly erroneous; and such is the imperfection of our natures, that when a wrong is done, intentionally or accidentally, a second wrong is frequently added in confirmation of the first, if complaint is made or clamor heard. . . .

"Mr. Monroe regretted the steps which he had pursued toward me—there was an idea floating on his mind that I had not been well treated, but he only regretted it as it affected him; he had no consideration for my feelings, for my rights or character; he would have been pleased to have arranged the affair in a manner mutually agreeable, but I had not presented myself with that submissive tone, with that 'bondsmen key and bated breath' that he probably expected; he said I threatened to appeal to Congress; he should have been proud to have seen a citizen thus anxious to support his rights and character, and he should have aided, not opposed me, nor bent the power of government to crush an individual."

How much more magnanimous and truly American was James Madison, who, as we know, was likewise involved in the matter, and who, after Noah's vindication, wrote to him in part:

"As your mission took place whilst I was in the administration, it cannot but be agreeable to me to learn that your accounts have been closed in a manner favorable to you. . . . It was certain that your religious profession was well known at the time you received your commission, and that, in itself, could not be a motive in your recall."

This makes the case against James Monroe all the more damning.