

Lewis Charles Levin

Portrait of an American Demagogue

JOHN A. FORMAN

A BRILLIANT ADVENTURER

Lewis Charles Levin would have said that there was no real turning point in his life; he would have said that he followed a straight line, undeviatingly, from the dawn of his political consciousness to the moment of his death. He had, in fact, a single burning idea: the protection of America's national culture against "alien" influences. He called it his one great idea, and he was wont to remind his enemies that all great achievements originated from "one idea." The cult of national patriotism was his banner. "I go for everything American in contradistinction to everything foreign," he loved to say. His one great object was the attainment and preservation of America's "national character."¹

He approached the problem not as a revolutionary, but as a self-made, practical statesman; he was interested in tactics and in strategy. He fashioned hatred for the foreigner and the Catholic into a coherent philosophy, at least for himself, and in that sense he was a political theorist. But it is as a "crusader" for a mission that we know him best. That he was an agitator, he himself recognized:

I confess that I am an agitator. What storms are to the atmosphere — what tempests to the ocean — the agitator is to the political world. He puts its particles into motion, he produces an excitement which carries off the corruptions that have been accumulating for years. I am an agitator for good, but not for evil — to protect, but not to destroy.²

As a crusader, Levin lived two lives. In his first life, as the editor of two newspapers in Philadelphia during the early 1840's,

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¹ *Congressional Globe*, Twenty-ninth Congress, First Session, pp. 47-48.

² *Congressional Globe*, Thirty-first Congress, Second Session, p. 707.

the *Daily Sun* and the *Temperance Advocate*, he displayed superabundant physical energy and proved himself pugnaciously effective. He became in a relatively short time a buzzing, waspish journalistic nuisance. But he was singularly successful in gathering around him a devoted, if unreasoning, following. His distinctive, characteristic manner gained increasing attention. He proved to be a "brilliant adventurer" who knew how to make an open and coarse appeal to the passions of the populace.³ And then, in his second life, he got himself elected to Congress, where he served for six years, from 1845 to 1851. Here he became an even more redoubtable crusader, though in the end he proved himself singularly unsuccessful. A passionately serious dogmatist to whom all compromise and accommodation were alien and difficult, he managed to invoke in his colleagues little more than the bitterness of savage personal enmity.

In both lives he pursued with fervor his "one idea": protection of the national culture against the "danger of subversion by the influx of that horde of aliens, who combine to break down its barriers, that they may command in the citadel, or overrun the land." His one fundamental goal was the education of the "native" masses. The enemy was Roman Catholicism; its instrument the "alien" paupers and criminals of Europe. The masses, Levin felt, had to be educated and raised politically to the level of professional revolutionaries. The battle lines had become drawn; the "third" American Revolution was in the offing. According to Levin, Washington's struggle to gain national independence, self-government, a "free empire," and religious and civil freedom had not been fully won. America had still not freed herself from European domination; "alien" elements and influences still threatened Americans. The final battle had still to be fought.⁴

In a sense, Levin finally overextended himself; he had agitated too long, and in the end his agitations proved his undoing. Frustrated in the absolute ruthlessness of his crusading mission, he either had to give way or be broken. When he died in 1860, he was insane. Even his own mental processes had become alien to him.

³ Alexander K. McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1905), I, 89-90. McClure says that Levin was a brilliant but unscrupulous orator, of fine appearance and graceful action, but utterly reckless in assertion.

⁴ *Daily Sun*, May 7, 1844.

THE FLESH AND THE SPIRIT

About Levin's early life we know little, and the historian is tempted to say more than he can prove. But from the beginning Levin seems to have been an alien to the world in which he was born and raised.

Born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1808, Lewis Charles Levin was the son of Jewish parents. How much this fact affected his personal emotions we have no way of knowing, yet the mere fact that he was a Jew must have meant some kind of alienation for him. He seems to have tried to escape from his religious past. Though there is no evidence that he ever religiously affiliated himself with any of its sects, he became an advocate of Protestantism.

His Jewish birth, however, did not go unnoticed. Years later one author referred to him, erroneously, as "an English Jew."⁵ He certainly did not seem to be typical, compared with others of like origin. In 1855, for instance, Morris C. Mordecai, of Charleston, South Carolina, was running for the office of state senator. A political opponent had charged, in the course of the campaign, that Mordecai had the support of the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic "Know-Nothing" Party. Mordecai denied the allegation, and in a public letter, which might have seemed to rebuke Levin for his intolerant activities, said:

It will, I hope, surprise most of you, my fellow citizens, to know that one of my race and creed is gravely charged or chargeable, at this day in the history of the world, with religious intolerance or national proscription . . . I should have no safety for my own rights of conscience if I were to conspire to destroy them in others . . .⁶

Levin remained but sixteen years in his native state; in 1824, he graduated from the South Carolina College at Columbia. He then became a wanderer, a kind of peripatetic preacher and teacher. He lived, at one time or another, in Maryland, Louisiana, and Ken-

⁵ Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *A History of Irish Settlers in North America to the Census of 1850* (Boston, 1852), p. 142.

⁶ Charles Reznikoff and Uriah Engelman, *The Jews of Charleston* (Philadelphia, 1950), pp. 107-8.

tucky, and he married Ann Hays in the last-named state. But he was unable, it would seem, to establish roots anywhere. Already alienated from his spiritual past, he seemed also unable to come to terms with his physical surroundings.

About his personal emotions in those early years we know little. Yet two things appear to have affected him deeply. In Woodville, Mississippi, while teaching school, he was severely wounded in a duel. The incident forever anguished his soul. He made the abolition of dueling his first crusade. In later years he referred to the practice of dueling as a "plague to mankind." Though aggressive enough in debate and in his writings, he never relished purely physical contact.⁷

He also spent time in prison. He tells us that he spent six months in jail for a debt which he could not pay. The incident must have rankled in him. He complained about it often, and never let his readers forget his "suffering."⁸ He must have made little money as a teacher, and even less as a lawyer, the profession for which he had early prepared himself. Poverty is a material out of which a revolutionary is often made.

Levin finally settled down in Philadelphia — why, we do not know. People were moving west, but Levin, born in the East and a traveler to the West, had reversed the usual process. We do know that Philadelphia was a leading Jewish center, and that religious "aliens" find it difficult really to escape from their past. Whatever the reason, Levin had finally found himself a home. He arrived about 1839 and was admitted to the local bar in 1840.⁹

As he had with everything else, Levin even ran away from his "calling" in life. He gave up the law to become a journalist. In 1842, he purchased a newspaper which he called the *Temperance Advocate*. Small in size and rarely numbering more than four pages in any one issue, the paper was a weekly, devoted to the cause of temperance.

If the abolition of dueling was a crusade with Levin, temperance reform was a passion; he never did anything, one might say, in a halfhearted way. He became a garrulous agitator against drink and

⁷ *Temperance Advocate*, November 9, 1842.

⁸ *Ibid.*, February 12, 1842; *Daily Sun*, January 4, 1845.

⁹ John Hill Martin, *Martin's Bench and Bar* (Philadelphia, 1883), p. 287.

"groggeries." This crusade made him successful in another way, too, as a temperance lecturer, and finally as president of the Pennsylvania Temperance Society in 1843.¹⁰

As a temperance agitator, Levin tried to argue that temperance reform would bring to America a state of social and economic equality. He deliberately made a demagogic appeal to the underprivileged. "We deplore the utility of low wages to the worker in order to aid in the accumulation of wealth by the capitalist." What drove people to drink, Levin said, was poverty: "Temperance requires justice, contentment, and abundance."¹¹

In humorless prose, Levin tied temperance reform directly to the need to correct what he called "the utility of immense wealth." He denied that immense wealth was socially useful to society. He called it a pernicious thing because it was gained at the expense of low wages, vice, starvation, depravity, prisons, almshouses, penitentiaries, and the general course of luxurious enjoyments, among which he included "licentious pleasures." The presence of immense wealth in society indicated the presence of immense avarice among the people. "The oppressions of avarice lead to intemperance as a refuge from avarice."¹²

Besides avarice, Levin found causes for intemperance in the calumny and prejudices of party politics. In Pennsylvania, he charged, those who opposed temperance reformers were the selfish men of the older parties who feared the possibility of a few sober men getting into the Legislature. Also, since lawmakers desired to obtain revenue from this vice, places that retailed alcohol were licensed by the law. "The law aids in human murder."¹³ We outlaw the duelist, said Levin; why not outlaw the man who kills with the bottle?¹⁴

But the bottle was not the only stimulus to agitation. Levin also

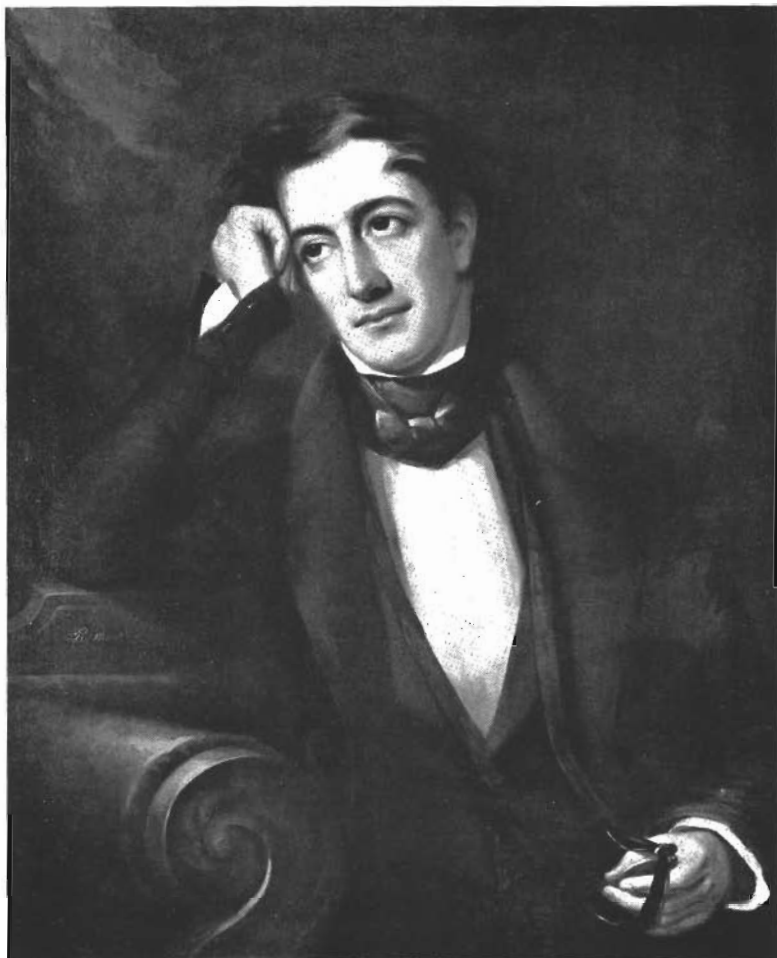
¹⁰ *Temperance Advocate*, September 18, 1843.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, February 26, 1842.

¹² *Ibid.*, September 10, 1842.

¹³ *Ibid.*, September 17, 1842.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, September 23, 1842.



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Portrait by Rembrandt Peale

PORTRAIT OF A DEMAGOGUE: LEWIS CHARLES LEVIN

denounced the stage, which, like intemperance, had assumed the fixed character of national immorality. Drink was served in the theatres — that was bad enough! But also in the audience were the “pickpockets, the gamblers, bad opinions, vice, vile language.” Like liquor, the stage was having a pernicious influence upon the youth of large cities. Theatres, remonstrated Levin, pandered to corrupt fancies and vitiated appetites of youth. And, like liquor, the stage inflamed the passions.

What agitated Levin so much about drinking and the stage was that both were tending in the direction of producing a less puritanical society. Levin believed in a Sunday-school concept of morality; he had a basic distrust of man’s natural impulses. He did not want people to give free rein to their emotions; he wanted a society where discipline and self-control were still considered great goods. Without self-restraint there would be no mastery, no worthy achievement. He wanted self-control as the end of life, and maintained resistance to the temptations of the flesh as the supreme good of life.¹⁵

Levin’s insistence on the eternal necessity of discipline and self-control was nowhere better illustrated than in a biographical essay which he published in 1845. This sketch was an address that Levin had delivered at Lafayette College, in Easton, Pennsylvania, on September 18, 1844, and concerned the life of the Reverend Charles Caleb Colton, minister and poet, author of the once-famous *Lacon*, a collection of edifying poems.¹⁶

Colton, according to Levin, had originally studied for the ministry, but gave up that career for the better life of a poet and gambler. “Colton seems to have been a man of great talent, though unfitted by character, and, it would seem, by his real opinions, for a clerical career.”¹⁷ Levin called him a poet of such great genius that he tried to surpass the limits of human achievement and became insensible to the notion that genius could possibly err or fall. Colton believed that genius could overcome almost anything — oppression,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, February 26, 1842; *Daily Sun*, September 5, 1844.

¹⁶ Lewis Charles Levin, *Intemperance the Prelude to Gambling and Suicide in the Life of the Rev. C. C. Colton, Author of “Lacon”* (Philadelphia, 1845).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

force, violence, revenge — but, as Levin saw it, he erred in thinking that genius could resist temptation. As a matter of fact, Colton became a gambler and a drunkard and finally undertook the “ruinous career of a libertine.”¹⁸

Why was it that Colton’s great intellectual power could not avert its moral downfall? Levin said that Colton’s genius lacked self-discipline and control. Though a minister, he was not imbued with “vital religion.” To be a clergyman was not at all times to be a Christian. In the absence of vital religion, Colton’s mind could not resist the temptations that resulted in his dissipation. If he had been a true Christian, he would have negated his natural impulses.¹⁹

Levin’s essay on Colton is an expression of his belief that the moral life is incompatible with the life of generous impulses and that the temptations of the flesh, like the instinct of the moth, may lead man straight into the flame.

HIS HOLINESS, THE POPE

In February, 1843, Levin sold the *Temperance Advocate* and purchased the *Daily Sun*.²⁰ Undoubtedly, he was seeking a larger vehicle for his opinions. The *Daily Sun* was to give expression to a new agitation: Nativism.

Different times produce different vocabularies. In the 1840’s, Nativism was a manifestation of the difficult process of adjustment between groups of differing cultures. One group in particular aroused hostility among older Americans — the Irish Catholics, whose ranks were characterized by cohesion and clannishness. But the Irish Catholic was only a symbol for Levin. Clearly, he showed that he was against the policy of assimilation in general. And he had a world view, a way of interpreting things, which seemed plausible enough to him.

According to Levin, the United States had struck the first blow for national freedom. The American Revolution had been only a

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁰ *Daily Sun*, February 16, 1843.

prelude of what was to come. The French Revolution followed, and the era of the French Revolution was one of universal liberty throughout Europe; even Ireland and Germany caught the infection of freedom. But Napoleon had come to power and put an end to liberty. The result was not unexpected and, in fact, was beneficial: freedom-loving refugees came to America's shores. They came to till her fields and to advance her sciences. They were immigrants of noble virtues. Because of this, America prospered and grew.

But the condition of Europe soon changed: Napoleon was overthrown and chained to a rock, republicanism was everywhere exterminated, and the people of Europe soon abandoned the theory as well as the practice of liberty. Once more the European nations fell captive to monarchists and to their handmaiden, the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic Europe became a daily victim to the vices, idleness, and crimes that flowed so copiously from these two evils which held absolute power over an ignorant and enslaved people.

Therefore, concluded Levin, only two classes of refugees now flocked to American shores: paupers, to people the almshouses, and felons, to fill the prisons. Sons of liberty came no more.

Since monarchy had entrenched itself in Europe, Levin saw the monarchs of the continent as plotting to overthrow the United States, the last bastion of freedom. They were not seeking to overthrow America by force. They were plotting to acquire a controlling influence in her elections, by means of the spiritual influence of the Roman Catholic Church whose plan it was, Levin convinced himself,

to people the country with Catholic immigrants, in order to provide for the contingency so patriotically prayed for . . . of our government changing to a monarchy — when his holiness (the Pope) will have a King ready, sprinkled with holy water, to mount the throne in the name of Catholic liberty!²¹

The best expression of Levin's theory of a Catholic conspiracy was outlined by him in *A Lecture on Irish Repeal*, published in 1844.²²

²¹ *Daily Sun*, January 4, 5, and 6, 1844.

²² Lewis Charles Levin, *A Lecture on Irish Repeal, in Elucidation of the Fallacy of Its*

The book was an outraged and incendiary attack, boldly conceived by Levin, against Daniel O'Connell, the protagonist and symbol, personification, voice, and brain of the "Repealers," the organization founded by O'Connell to fight for the repeal of Ireland's union with her two sister kingdoms, England and Scotland.

The book began with a defense of Manifest Destiny: the political, moral, and intellectual destiny of the United States was that of God's most sublime creation. The free American, Levin insisted, has had no equal in past history. He was his own master, his own king. He bent the knee to God alone.²³

O'Connell, Levin argued, was the antithesis of the free American. He was not God's creation; he was the Pope's. O'Connell, "the leader of the Irish people, avows his unalterable loyalty to the Pope." His knees were glued to the altar; his hands outstretched in adoration of the Pope. What independence was this? Levin asked. It was not the independence of freedom. On the contrary, O'Connell's deference to the Pope constituted a regression into the gloom of the Dark Ages; it planted oppression, bigotry, and persecution at the door of the free American, who represented virtue and industry.²⁴

What were the vital elements of liberty, as personified in the free American? Levin listed five elements: education, science, virtue, industry, temperance. These constituted moral power. This moral power — not the mouth of a demagogue like O'Connell — was what elevated Americans to freedom and independence.²⁵

Levin found none of the five elements in Irish Repeal. Nor did he find moral power. Instead, he saw in O'Connell an Irish demagogue, who never meant to consummate Repeal, even if he could. The Irish leader made use of Repeal only as a screen for ulterior objects, among which was the advancement of the Papal

Principles and in Proof of Its Pernicious Tendency in the Moral, Religious, and Political Aspects (Philadelphia, 1844).

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 12-13.

power of Rome on the wheels of Irish enthusiasm for political liberty.²⁶

The ulterior object of Irish Repeal, Levin proclaimed, was the extension of Papal authority and power over the United States. By setting up Repeal clubs in America, O'Connell was furthering a nefarious plot to debauch and contaminate the institutions of the United States and to set up a monarchy here. His first step was to extend his influence, by means of Irish slaves, over the ballot boxes. As Levin saw it:

The American Ballot Box is to be the battleground of European Monarchy and Papal Superstition, to vanquish our Republican Institutions, and organize a party in political power, in favor of the intentions of the Pope!

And the means, claimed Levin, were readily at hand:

The Irish Catholic vote is to be organized to overthrow American liberty. The extensive ramifications of Repeal Clubs have suddenly become affiliated societies, to carry out the intentions of His Holiness, the Pope!²⁷

THE MASTER SPIRITS OF THE GROGGERY

On May 3, 1844, there was a gathering of the Native American Party in Kensington, not far from the city of Philadelphia. This group made insulting boasts which roused the spirit of Catholics and of others who were listening. Non-Catholics, as well as Catholics, forced the dissolution of the meeting without violence. The angered Nativists then threatened to burn St. Michael's Church. On Monday, May 6, 1844, they held another meeting in a public square in Kensington. Many carried weapons with the design of avenging the dissolution of the previous meeting. Inclement weather forced them to retire to a store. There a quarrel began between an Irishman and a Nativist, and a weapon was drawn by one of the Nativists. Search was made for arms by the Irish, and a fight ensued in which a Native American was killed and one Irishman wounded.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-15.

Such was the beginning of the terrible riots that plagued Philadelphia and its environs that year.* Fright and dread paralyzed the city, particularly the Catholic community; no one felt secure. Two churches were burned that month, a third was threatened, and every one feared that fire and destruction were destined for his own home. There was a genuine fear of such deliberate and savage malignity because the Nativists boasted that they would burn every Catholic church in the city.²⁸ Small wonder, then, that precious little of the contemporary material on the riots was written from a Catholic viewpoint — for the convincing reason, offered by Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick of Philadelphia, that “hardly anyone dares to say anything in the papers for fear that the printing houses may be destroyed.”²⁹

It is not the purpose of the writer to give here a full and detailed account of the riots. At least two writers have done that admirably well.³⁰ But what is important here is the background for the scenes of violence which ensued during May, and, later, July, 1844, and the part that Lewis Charles Levin played as a leader of the Native American Party.

Levin had arrived in Philadelphia in the late 1830's. It is significant, as Ellis Oberholtzer noted, that up to the 1840's Philadelphia was relatively free from the huckstering type of politician.³¹ But certain crucial changes in the city's political life provided a clever trader like Levin with an opportunity to arouse the enthusiasm of the politically disaffected.

Although an Act of Assembly of July 21, 1839, made the mayor,

²⁸ *Public Ledger*, May 7, 1844. The *Public Ledger* was close to being neutral on the riots.

²⁹ *The Truth Unveiled; or a Calm and Impartial Exposition of the Terrible Riots in Philadelphia, on May 6th, 7th, & 8th, 1844, by a Protestant and Native Philadelphian* (Philadelphia, 1844), p. 23.

³⁰ Ray A. Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (New York, 1938), pp. 221-33; John Gilmary Shea, *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (New York, 1886-1892), III, 46-54.

³¹ Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia: A History of the City and Its People* (Philadelphia, 1912), I, 312.

[* *Editor's note*: Rebecca Gratz, of Philadelphia, deplored the violence. Her indignant comment on the rioting is reprinted in *American Jewish Archives*, V (June, 1953), 114.]

hitherto selected by the City Council, elective by the people, other political offices such as judgeships and inspectorships became virtual sinecures for men who could obtain party support for their cause. Time and time again in the pages of the *Daily Sun*, Levin was able to inveigh against the political practices of his day. "Old political wireworkers, logrollers, and pipe-layers, both Whig and Democratic," said Levin, "have been in the habit of nominating the candidates to fill the offices in the city." The people, he would complain, were never consulted; nor had they a hand in the matter. The whole work was done in secret, and very few were permitted to take part. A nomination for office was made in the upper story of a "groggery, after a bottle of brandy and a bunch of segars had been procured." Not only was the nomination made in secret, but the half-dozen or so individuals who rendered the important decision were chosen by their party for the task — lamented Levin — "only because of their aptness at political chicanery, trickery, and rascality." Thus the original nomination was made, but only after certain favors were traded by the participants and the bottle had been several times replenished.³²

The next move was to get this nomination sanctioned and approved by the clubs of the different wards. These apparently assembled, as did the first caucus, without much public notice. "The wards are not difficult to manage by the master spirits of the groggery," claimed Levin, "because sometimes their meetings comprise no more than three, four, or half a dozen of the most worthless residents of the wards." In some districts, however, primary elections were held; "farces," Levin called them. Where such primaries were held, the *modus operandi* was very simple:

It was quite an easy matter to surround the primary polling places with rowdies and shoulder-hitters, Irishmen with blue sticks and hard fists, or such other characters as would keep all respectable citizens away.

Whether by ward approval or primary election, the result was the same, opined Levin — "the nomination of the ticket chosen by the original secret caucus."

³² *Daily Sun*, May 15 and 16, 1843.

The only choice left for the people . . . at the general election, was, whether they would vote for a Whig or a Democrat; for between the candidates themselves there was little or none, and generally, they were the very last persons in the community whom the general public would have ever thought of selecting for the responsible stations to which they aspired!³³

A clever politician, Levin coupled his hue and cry against these political schemes and operations with certain arguments designed to appeal to the person looking for a "scapegoat." Levin tried to show that the machinery of the old parties worked for foreigners, but not for native Americans. He blamed both Whigs and Democrats for making the naturalization laws a dead letter, for he realized only too well, as did other politicians looking for "issues," that many people were disturbed, not only by the rapid influx of foreigners into the country in this period, but especially by the facility with which their votes could be secured by eager office seekers. The whole situation had become, at least along the Eastern seaboard, a subject of most serious consideration, and of no little alarm.³⁴

Levin knew full well the explosive import of this situation. He denounced the "political wire-pullers" who brought the foreigner to the polls, though "these men had not been sufficiently long in the country to have lost the odor of the steerage of the ships that brought them across the Atlantic." He heaped scorn on the party leaders who, he said, encouraged and applauded the noisy and riotous activity of foreigners at the polling places — "activity which actually drives away in disgust many native citizens." By such outrages, he pointed out, party leaders proved that they "care not by what means they obtain office and power." He even accused Whigs and Democrats of currying the Irishman's favor by holding out to him the promise of a minor office. But eventually the servant would aspire to be master. Hence Levin was suggesting that the immigrant, given an inch, would take a yard. He would not be satisfied with petty positions; he would begin to feel his own importance, and to make demands. Foreign influence would control the

³³ *Ibid.*, May 16, 1843; June 5, 1843.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, June 5, 1843; January 2, 1845.

conduct of American affairs. Here was danger to the welfare of the country! And the principal actors in this sordid game, cried Levin, were the Whigs and Democrats, who tried to keep the foreigner in leading strings in order to obtain office and power.³⁵

PLAYING UP THE TIMES

In addition to the political issues mentioned above, there were other causes for dissatisfaction among the populace. These may be briefly summarized as follows:

Because of the Panic of 1837 and other factors, Philadelphia had lost most of her prosperity; hard times now seemed the rule. Culturally, too, Philadelphia had suffered. The "Age of Enlightenment" was over, and progressive Quakers no longer predominated in city life. Commercially, Philadelphia had lost position to New York. The city's decline from prosperity was almost simultaneous with the fall of her most prominent citizen, Nicholas Biddle, President Andrew Jackson's relentless opponent on the national bank issue. Biddle's failure to secure a recharter for the United States Bank in 1836 was Philadelphia's loss.

Disenchantment had led to a desire for political changes in Philadelphia. The loss of status suffered by Philadelphia was particularly felt by a group of young and politically ambitious men who blamed the city's plight on the conservative, aristocratic, and property-holding Whigs, among whom were the city's most eminent citizens and arbiters of political affairs.³⁶ These young men were looking around for ways to get ahead politically. Unable to make headway within Whig or Democratic party ranks, they thought in terms of a new political party alignment.

The wave of anti-Catholicism that swept over the country in the 1830's and 1840's contributed in no small way to the beginnings of a third party movement in Philadelphia. The immigrant was seen as a threat to the American way of life. Poor and downtrodden, he was to blame for the loss of prosperity that ensued after 1837. Unskilled

³⁵ *Ibid.*, June 16, 1843.

³⁶ Oberholtzer, I, 312.

as he was, he naturally underbid the native common laborer and was willing to work any hours under the most intolerable conditions. Finding jobs scarce and suffering frustration in their attempts to procure lawful amelioration from the old parties, the native laborers turned their hatred from their unscrupulous employers to their competitors in the labor market (who happened, for the most part, to be Irish Catholics) and to their party leaders. Ambitious men anxious for political office did not have to "invent" political or economic issues; they merely had to "play up the times." The issues took care of themselves.³⁷

The ambitious young men seeking to develop a new political alignment were, for the most part, journalists. They included Levin, Samuel Kramer, "General" Peter Sken Smith, James Wallace, and John Gitron, who soon became leaders of a new party — the American Republicans. An attempt to form a third party had proved abortive in 1837, when a Native American movement in Germantown, Philadelphia county, collapsed. In December, 1843, however, led by Levin and encouraged by his writings in the *Daily Sun*, a new movement was initiated.³⁸ In the district of Spring Garden, a society calling itself "The American Republican Association of Second Ward, Spring Garden" was formed. Similar groups were soon established, until in a very few months an American Republican Association had sprung into existence in almost every ward throughout the city and county. As one friend of the new movement later observed:

As though the hand of Providence were in the work, directing and controlling it, the . . . new party met with the general approbation of all who were not governed by opposing political party principles, or blinded by the misrepresentations of those whose interests depended upon arresting the progress of the principles of the new associations.³⁹

³⁷ John Hancock Lee, *The Origin and Progress of the American Party in Politics, Embracing a Complete History of the Philadelphia Riots in May and July, 1844* (Philadelphia, 1855), pp. 20-25. Lee's book is a good starting point for a study of Nativism as a social and economic movement.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18. The beginnings of this movement may be traced in the *Daily Sun*, espe-

THE FOUNTAINHEAD OF MORALITY

The simultaneous existence of hard times, the labor problem created by the immigrant, political unrest, and a fanatical anti-Catholic press and pulpit all contributed to the growth of the new Nativist party. But, more than any other single issue, it was the question of the Bible in the public schools that promoted a tremendous upsurge in the new party's fortunes.

We should do well to be clear about what was involved in this sensitive issue. "The Bible in the Public Schools" became a battle cry for all who disliked Catholics and at the same time a rallying point for the rising Native American Party. In their declarations of principles, most of the local Nativist units in and around Philadelphia adopted the following as one of their tenets:

We maintain that the Bible, without note or comment, is not sectarian — that it is the fountain head of morality and all good government and should be used in our public schools as a reading book.⁴⁰

Nativists claimed that Catholics wanted to exclude the Protestant Bible from the schools. But John Gilmary Shea remarked that

thousands were induced to believe that Catholics wished to prevent the Protestant children from reading their own Bible, when in fact, Catholics merely asked that the Protestant Bible should not be forced upon Catholic children.⁴¹

What Catholics wanted was the Catholic Bible for Catholic children, no more. Bishop Kenrick attempted to clarify this point when he stated: "I do not object to the use of the Bible provided Catholic children be allowed to use their own version."⁴²

Despite the widespread notice and publicity given to the official position of the Church through the press, the complaint that Cath-

cially in the advertisements, in the months of December, 1843, and January, 1844, and in the *Native American* during the same period,

⁴⁰ Lee, p. 122.

⁴¹ Shea, IV, 48.

⁴² Quoted in the *Catholic Herald*, March 14, 1844.

olics wanted to remove the Bible as a reader from the schools continued to be a cause for protest meetings.

No one protested more vehemently than Lewis Charles Levin. But perhaps Levin's views were somewhat unconventional — even for a Nativist agitator — for he wanted the public schools predicated on the concept of what he called “Bible Education.”

Levin believed that one of the most vexing problems facing mankind was the lack of moral responsibility. Especially was it important that youth learn what moral discipline meant. Only the Bible, said Levin, taught complete moral subordination to superior principles. Precisely what these “superior principles” were Levin never undertook to spell out, but he was certain that from “Bible education” youth would learn about the “power of the will, the only power which can suppress the passions.”⁴³

Our experiment in government, as a free people, Levin contended, depended on our virtues, which could be learned only from the Bible. No boy should have been allowed to apprentice himself to a master unable to recite (by rote) from the Bible all the principles of moral subordination which it inculcated. The teaching of the Bible should, moreover, have taken place not only in the schools, but also in the home and in the press. “Bible education must fill the void created in America by the absence of social rank.” Were Bible education faithfully pursued, said Levin, youth would be saved from the twin evils that now corrupted it: intoxication, and its natural ally, idleness.⁴⁴

The Bible question afforded Levin an opportunity to capitalize on the deep American fear and hatred of foreigners and Catholics. In the first place, he very adroitly linked together the need for moral discipline and for suppressing the passions through the power of the will with resistance to Catholicism. According to Levin, the favorite maxim of the Inquisition in the time of Pope Leo X, a maxim chanted by the Pope's servants — the monks in Italy — was, “Fate is stronger than will, and the power of the Pope is

⁴³ *Daily Sun*, January 31, 1844.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, February 2, 1844.

stronger than either.” At that very moment, claimed Levin, the advance missionary of the Pope in America, the Jesuit priest, was chanting this maxim through the untrodden wilderness of America. Only by emphasizing Bible education could the individual American hope to resist the Pope’s influence.⁴⁵

In the second place, insisting that the Protestant Bible was a nonsectarian book, Levin implied that Catholics — who had expressed objection to having Catholic children compelled to read the Protestant Bible in the public schools and had asked for the right to have them read the Catholic Bible — were thereby undermining the separation of Church and State.⁴⁶

It was only a matter of time before the trouble over the Bible question was to bear its bitter fruit. On Monday evening, May 6, 1844, at the corner of Master and Second Streets, fighting between Irish Catholics and Native Americans began. Just before the fighting broke out, Levin had been addressing a crowd of Native American sympathizers on the public school issue as well as on the

deleterious effects of Popish interference in the elective franchise, and their consequences upon American liberty, through the minions of the poor degraded slaves of the Church.⁴⁷

The anti-Catholic, anti-alien sentiments whipped up by Levin’s words became almost uncontrollable when the physical conflict began a short while later. Before the smoke of battle had cleared, three days later, seven persons had died and about fifty had been wounded; two Catholic churches, a female seminary, and about thirty dwellings had been burned to the ground by the Nativist mob, and some two hundred families had been rendered homeless.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, October 3, 1844.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, January 31, 1844. But another observer noted: “A large majority of the Protestants who fought out the question of reading the Bible in the public schools . . . would not have known the difference between the Protestant and the Catholic Bible if it had been placed in their hands.” Alexander K. McClure, *Old Time Notes in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1905), I, 203.

⁴⁷ *Native American*, May 7, 1844.

A GENERAL SENTIMENT OF DISGUST

Levin stood alone, even within the Native American group, in his attempt to justify the violence and church-burnings of the preceding days. His appeal was characteristically emotional rather than rational. Peaceful native citizens had been assaulted, he charged, by "an armed body of ferocious foreigners" who had been "petted into these usurpations by the nefarious treachery of public officers."⁴⁸ The "barbarous" murder of *twenty* — such was Levin's claim — innocent native Americans, he continued, was so fiendish a crime that the mob had lost all reason and resorted to "self-defense," which had ended in the burning of churches. After all, argued Levin, this mob had acted as any mob would have when it found itself the object of a "murderous and assailing" party.⁴⁹

Although Levin blamed the actual rioting on an "ignorant and deluded rabble," a force intent on strangling the rights of a free, native people, he asserted that physical violence would not have occurred, had it not been for the "tory" press which supplied the rabble with the "sinews of war" and the counsel to mature and direct their plans. The "tory" press had incited the mob to violence; its weapons were, according to Levin, "sophistry, equivocation, duplicity, and mental reservation." Singling out the *Public Ledger* for special condemnation, he denounced that paper as the special organ of the "Papist" mob — an incendiary journal which countenanced "lynch law." This was the paper, Levin went on, which during the Panic of 1837 had urged the populace not only to riot against the banks, but also to intimidate the property holder and check the "aristocracy of wealth." Clearly it was Levin's belief that the primary cause of the rioting had its origins in the inflammatory language of so-called "tory" organs like the *Public Ledger*, newspapers which made their appeal to the "most detestable passions of the vilest herd that ever disgraced humanity."⁵⁰

Levin may have tried to defend the Native American cause in

⁴⁸ *Daily Sun*, May 8, 1844.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, May 13, 1844.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

his *Daily Sun*, but almost unanimously the rest of the Philadelphia press, horrified at the outbreak of violence that had occurred, denounced Levin for stirring up racial and religious rivalries.

It is true that at least two papers undertook to defend Levin. Both the *North American* and the *Daily Chronicle* denied that Levin had incited the mob to further acts of violence during the riots.⁵¹ The *Native American*, however, a penny daily dedicated to the Native American cause, put the blame squarely on Levin; this journal even went so far as to denounce Native Americans for the church-burnings and to urge Native American party faithfuls to desist from such "disgraceful" acts.⁵²

The *Catholic Herald*, the "official" Catholic newspaper, in an editorial on June 6th, excoriated the *Daily Sun* which, it said, continued to publish "inflammatory articles inciting passions of lawless men." The *Herald* then went on to say that the *Daily Sun* used the Bible as a "spell" to conjure up the hellish passions of hatred and revenge. In support of this contention, it quoted a song which, it said, was being circulated by Levin's friends:

But we shall read the Bible, and recommend it unto all,
And preach it till our Saviour shall make His final call;
The light and love that leads us is beaming in the *Sun*,
To spread thro' all America the work that's now begun!⁵³

The *Spirit of the Times*, avowedly Democratic in its political sympathies, was unalterably opposed to Nativism in general and to Levin in particular. Terming the rioting a religious feud, this paper said that, although it was a Protestant organ, it had no wish to coerce people, as Native Americans did, "in the perusal of the Protestant Bible." It declared itself against the political as well as the religious views of Native Americans.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *North American*, May 10, 1844; *Daily Chronicle*, May 10, 1844.

⁵² *Native American*, May 9, 1844. John Hancock Lee, whose book supports Levin, calls the *Native American* a rather "vacillating and temporizing" paper whose columns lacked the vigor and force exhibited by the *Daily Sun*. Lee, p. 103.

⁵³ *Catholic Herald*, June 6, 1844.

⁵⁴ *Spirit of the Times*, May 9, 1844.

Of Levin, the *Spirit of the Times* said that his ideas were “deplorable, inimical to Liberty . . . repulsive to tranquil Government and ever associated but with Anarchy, Discord, Murder, and Civil War.”⁵⁵ Levin was denounced, in particular, for mixing religion with politics, for introducing the Bible question on every public occasion, and for responsibility in inciting people to acts of violence. The *Spirit of the Times* accused Levin, furthermore, of wanting to fan the embers of the burned churches into flame — “apparently with the sole view of political aggrandizement and newspaper notoriety”⁵⁶

The *Public Ledger* was among the newspapers which were content with simply reporting the disturbances; when it did editorialize on the rioting, it blamed both Irish Catholics and Native Americans for causing the hostilities. But almost from the beginning the paper saw Levin as the real provocation of it all. “A general sentiment of disgust for the man, and detestation for his principles, fills every decent mind”⁵⁷ The *Daily Sun* was the only journal — said the *Public Ledger* — which had dared to speak in defense of pillage, robbery, and church-burning, and the only one which had urged and excited the “most incendiary moblike spirit.”⁵⁸ The paper accused Levin of a blind, fanatical spirit and called him an “insidious” enemy to civil and religious rights who cared nothing for the mild and tolerant principles of Christianity. It went on to suggest that the Grand Jury take measures to check the efforts of the *Daily Sun* to disturb the peace of the city and that it indict Levin for inflaming the bad passions of the lawless.⁵⁹

ANOTHER ROUND OF VIOLENCE

The almost unanimous condemnation of Levin and of his party failed to halt the growing tide of Nativism in the Philadelphia area.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, May 8, 1844.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, May 16, 1844.

⁵⁷ *Public Ledger*, May 7, 1844.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, May 14, 1844.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, May 10, 1844.

Indeed, Levin's florid eloquence, coupled with a renaissance of public prejudice, excited the mob to another round of violence. Early in July, the Southwark district where Levin resided witnessed a riot more serious than the one that had broken out in Kensington the previous May. On this occasion the fighting was chiefly between Nativist rioters and the military forces of Governor David Rittenhouse Porter of Pennsylvania, and now Levin openly represented the riots as anti-Catholic. "It will be seen," wrote Levin, "that such a contest [the July riot] involved an issue purely *Roman Catholic* on one side and *American* on the other There is no other question before the public."⁶⁰

During the July riots in Southwark the Catholics publicly appealed to Governor Porter for preventive measures against the destructively pugnacious inclinations of the Nativists.⁶¹ The *Public Ledger* agreed; "Philadelphia," it declared, "is ruled by the mob; and it is farcical to pretend that local law protects in the least the property or persons of our citizens." Armed with cannon, the mob had proven more than a match for even an enlarged local militia in the pitched battles that had ensued after the commencement of the Southwark riots. On Monday, July 8th, Governor Porter issued a proclamation dispatching state troops to the scene of the riots; before the end of the week he had five thousand troops concentrated in Philadelphia.⁶²

Levin greeted Porter's proclamation so venomously that men of good will could only be convinced that it was his desire to let the waves of fanatical hatred spread and engulf the city. He called Governor Porter's proclamation "warlike." The man — cried Levin — was a "Bonapartean" and a mischief-maker, who desired to establish in Philadelphia a "standing army" in order that he might interfere with the rights of free men. He also charged that the Governor dealt in falsehoods because he was empowered to call out

⁶⁰ *Daily Sun*, July 11, 1844.

⁶¹ *Catholic Herald*, July 6, 1844.

⁶² *Public Ledger*, July 8, 1844; July 10, 1844.

the state militia only in case of insurrection, rebellion, or civil war, and none of these conditions existed at the time.⁶³

Before the July riots were over, Levin himself had become a participant. Although he declared later, in Congress, that he had deterred the mob from the burning of another Catholic church, there was much resentment in the community against him.⁶⁴ A Grand Jury indicted Levin on the charge of inciting the Southwark riot by provoking the mob to violence.⁶⁵

Levin, in the meantime, had announced his candidacy for Congress in the First District of Pennsylvania, and now he made political capital out of the indictment. He called it part of a Popish plot to destroy Native Americans, and an invasion of freedom of the press, which he attributed to the dictation of the Repeal Clubs. They had fomented the passions of the Irish to madness; now they sought to silence the only press that had refused to be prevented from speaking out on behalf of American institutions.⁶⁶

The prevailing ideophobia, or distrust of reason, that affected Philadelphia after the cumulative effect of two riots showed itself most characteristically in Levin's election to Congress in October, 1844, an election in which he polled a large majority of the votes in a three-way race. In his campaign for Congress, as in his attitude during the riots, Levin's appeal was to man's brute nature and the voluminous emotions of cultural nationalism. His electoral victory bespoke the fact that, temporarily at least, worship of the Olympian gods of the air, the sky, and the sunlight was being replaced by the worship of underground deities.

Somewhat later there was still evidence that this situation had not yet abated. On Wednesday, February 5, 1845, Levin was arraigned on a charge that he had instigated a riot in the Southwark district; the charge was one of "riot, treason, and murder." He was found not guilty.⁶⁷

⁶³ *Daily Sun*, July 11, 1844.

⁶⁴ *Congressional Globe*, Thirtieth Congress, First Session, Appendix, p. 444.

⁶⁵ *Public Ledger*, October 4, 1844.

⁶⁶ *Daily Sun*, October 3, 1844.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, February 6, 1845.

THE SPIRIT OF NATIVE AMERICANISM

Lewis Charles Levin served in the Congress of the United States for six years; during that time he proved himself a provocative and belligerent speaker. He sought, as the representative of a new, minority party, to win political friends for his views, but instead his colleagues heaped only scorn and derision on him.

More than once, his florid eloquence in debate brought him into difficulties. There was the day when he chose to eulogize his party, the Native American, "as embodying all that was pure in patriotism, all that was lovely in virtue." Native Americanism, he assured his colleagues, would never die; "it is a living principle." In his lusty, long-winded style, he said that he represented only high-minded men whose aim it was to protect American institutions from that great and ever-growing evil, foreign influence. He reminded his friends in the House that unless some remedy were soon found to impede the influx of foreigners into the United States, the day would not be distant when American-born voters would find themselves a minority in their own land.⁶⁸

Levin's words did not rest lightly on some members of the House. He was anything but a popular orator in the Congress, for his words seemed to call forth only bitter enmity. Scornfully, Representative John S. Chipman, of Michigan, asked: "Who are the Native Americans . . . but those who derived their very existence from foreigners?" Though he began gently enough, Representative Samuel Gordon, of New York, soon ridiculed Levin's panegyric; Native Americans were, in his opinion, a "busy, talking, agitating, fanatical, proscribing" party, and he asked: "Was it not they who were setting man against man, all over the land, and trying to excite our native-born citizens against naturalized brethren?" Nor did Representative Mark Grover, of New York, miss the real meaning of Levin's furious assertions on the House floor, for he succinctly characterized the spirit of Native Americanism "as made up of religious bigotry and political intolerance."⁶⁹

The *Public Ledger's* conviction that the role of the Nativists in

⁶⁸ *Congressional Globe*, Twenty-ninth Congress, First Session, pp. 46-50.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 80, 82.

the Philadelphia riots would encounter almost universal condemnation throughout the country was nowhere better illustrated than in the House.⁷⁰ Levin tried to defend his party; he endeavored to prove that Native Americans fought in self-defense only after being wantonly attacked in the streets by "drilled bands of armed foreigners." He said: "We have lived to see the Bible driven from our public schools and burnt in our public streets." When Levin had finished speaking there was a pause. Reading the record today, one has the impression that something irremediable had happened, that the unforgettable and unforgivable had been said. The response to Levin's remarks was unfavorable, even contemptuous. He attempted to correct himself; he said that he was referring mostly to New York. Representative Henry C. Murphy, who came from New York, rose immediately to deny Levin's newest allegation. And Representative Charles Brown, of Pennsylvania, after castigating Levin's statement as one of his "habitual untruths," reminded the House of the bloodshed that Levin's rhetoric had caused in Philadelphia.⁷¹

The House seemed to live from day to day in a state of constant and irritating uncertainty as Levin led a clamorous and exultant denunciation of the Catholic Church. He resented, he said, being misrepresented to the public "by the paid agents of the Jesuits who hang around this Hall." He contended that the Pope and the Jesuits were planning to obtain control of the United States Government and thus establish the Catholic religion as the law of the land. He accused the Pope of having called together in the city of London, sometime in 1843, the most influential and wealthy of Roman Catholics to effect "the overthrow of Protestant rights and Protestant freedom in the United States."⁷² Jesuits — Levin cried — were everywhere busily at work, for having been driven out of France, Portugal, and Spain, they had now set out to establish a stronghold in America.

⁷⁰ *Public Ledger*, July 7, 1844.

⁷¹ *Congressional Globe*, Thirtieth Congress, First Session, Appendix, p. 443. Brown was referring to the fact that it was Levin who was addressing the Native American group in Kensington when the May riots began.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 437.

Representative Joseph Ingersoll, of Pennsylvania, beside himself with anger at the frequent maledictions heaped by Levin on the Jesuits, challenged his fellow Congressman. "I do not know," he said, addressing Levin, "whether my colleague ever saw a Jesuit."

Levin. I think I see one now before me.

Ingersoll. Is that intended as a personal insult?

Levin. Certainly not.

Ingersoll. I neither give nor take insults; that is my rule.

Representative Charles Brown, of Pennsylvania, thought that Levin drew heavily on his imagination when he charged the Jesuits with forming a powerful and dangerous combination to spread the Catholic religion over the United States. Whatever the genesis of his thoughts, Levin's remarks were hardly calculated to endear him to his colleagues.⁷³

Despite strong disapprobation, Levin not only persisted in introducing religious subjects into debate, but also unleashed what must stand even today as one of the most vitriolic attacks on a Pope to be heard in Congress. The House was debating, one day, the propriety of establishing a diplomatic mission to Pope Pius IX in Rome. Such a proposal apparently did not surprise Levin. Sympathy with Pope Pius IX, he said, "appears to be the political hobby-horse of political leaders"; it was even a pet measure of the President of the United States. Then, with his usual intemperate righteousness, he attacked the Pope in violent diatribes; he flung accusations, insinuations, and reproaches in all directions. The Pope had been the "dictator, the trader, and the pander" of the foreign Roman Catholic vote. One day he acted the priest and the next day played the politician. Levin attributed the idea of an American chargéship at the Vatican to the basest of conspiratorial motives.

This embassy, and all the public turmoil that has led to its suggestion, is the work of an intriguing, restless, grasping, and ambitious priest, who fans in his bosom the nefarious hope that he is himself to be the destined organ between a free republic and an absolute hierarchy^{74*}

⁷³ *Congressional Globe*, Thirtieth Congress, First Session, p. 442.

⁷⁴ *Congressional Globe*, Thirtieth Congress, First Session, Appendix, pp. 437-38.

[* *Editor's Note*: That Pius IX was hardly less illiberal and less doctrinaire than his Congressional antagonist is evidenced by the publication of his *Syllabus* in 1864. See

The conspiracy, according to Levin, was well on its way to fulfilment. Already the Pope was the power behind the throne; already he moved the President of the United States! Already the Pope's servants, the Jesuits, were colonizing America. The population of Europe — paupers and criminals — was being dexterously relocated by the Jesuits, not only to gain control of the balance of power in certain states, but also to make preparations for the organization of new states, in which "slavery [would be] made eternal by modern rivets forged in the fire . . . of tyranny and . . . imbecility."⁷⁵

Levin tried to use his frightening assertions about the Catholic Church as a means of winning Southern support for the Native American cause. He wanted the South to know that his party had had a long and active concern for their rights and interests. His Southern colleagues were to understand that a "cloud was gathering over them," that "firebrands" and "provisoes" had been flung into the House by the Jesuits in order to overwhelm them. The anti-slavery Wilmot Proviso was grist for his mill. To underscore the sincerity of his zeal for Southern rights, Levin attacked the Free-Soil leadership of Representative Joshua R. Giddings, of Ohio. He denounced the Free-Soilers as great "disunionists." They were not friends to law and order; they were people who traduced the name of George Washington and delighted in defamation of the American Constitution and the American Union. It would likely prove necessary to increase the force of the army, argued Levin, not merely because the United States had to stand ready to defend herself against foreign foes, but also because she had everything to fear from internal enemies like the Free-Soilers.⁷⁶

Levin also sought support for his Nativism from Southern slaveholders by frequently denouncing antislavery tendencies as inspired by the Pope and his agents. Because Daniel O'Connell was a leading

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

⁷⁶ *Congressional Globe*, Thirty-first Congress, Second Session, p. 704.

Encyclopaedia Britannica (11 ed.), XXI, 689-90; XXVI, 281-82. See also *Catholic Encyclopedia*, XIV, 369; *Jewish Encyclopedia*, X, 127.]

non-American figure in the antislavery campaign, Levin blamed the Irish in America for abolitionism. Still, except for William Yancey, Alabama Democrat and planter, Southerners were reluctant to support Levin, probably because he appeared to them too much the opportunist and hypocrite.⁷⁷

WAR AGAINST THE IMMIGRANTS

On the whole, Levin had an undistinguished Congressional career. In debate, he was almost always humorless, blunt in language, and provoking in speech. An economic conservative, he was generally found on the Whig side of an issue. Levin, of course, supported the Mexican War, as well he might, since he was an ardent expansionist, but it was, in any case, to be expected that he would champion a war against a Catholic country.

If Levin had a checkered Congressional career, on one issue at least he did show consistency; he was an inveterate, intrepid, indefatigable, and incorrigible advocate of changes in the naturalization laws. This became his one great issue. Like Native Americans everywhere, Levin demanded that the period of residence before naturalization be extended to twenty-one years. And in his futile attempts to accomplish his purpose, he was to cast many a stone into the waters of the almost irresistible tide of the states' rights doctrine.

He met the issue squarely when he first encountered it. In December, 1845, Robert C. Winthrop introduced into Congress a series of resolutions of the Massachusetts Legislature proposing the investigation of "gross frauds" in elections and, if necessary, "amendments to the naturalization laws." It was proposed to refer the bill to the Judiciary Committee, but Levin objected. He wanted the bill to secure a full and fair discussion on its merits, and since the Judiciary Committee was composed of men clearly opposed to the main principle of the bill, Levin urged that it be referred instead to a

⁷⁷ *Congressional Globe*, Twenty-ninth Congress, First Session, p. 62. Levin's words and deeds quite often did not match; though he later denounced the Wilmot Proviso, he was earlier recorded as having cast his vote for it. See the *Congressional Globe*, Twenty-ninth Congress, Second Session, p. 501.

“select” committee of its friends. The question of its referral brought on a prolonged debate.⁷⁸

Among those who wanted the resolutions referred to the Judiciary Committee, none was more eloquent in defending states’ rights than Representative Thomas H. Bayly, of Virginia. Bayly regarded the resolutions as a bold attempt to interfere with the acknowledged rights of states. He argued that the Federal government had no jurisdiction in the matter and could not control suffrage. It could do no more than deprive the foreigner of his right to habeas corpus, property-holding, and other perquisites of citizenship. But the right of suffrage, Bayly contended, was exclusively under the jurisdiction of the states. A change in the naturalization laws as the resolutions proposed would deter men of property and character from coming, but would not keep out paupers, as Native Americans argued. He could not consent to a proposal that a great constitutional question be taken from the law committee of the House and referred instead to a special committee.⁷⁹

Levin agreed that the resolutions concerned a great constitutional question; for that reason, they should not be referred to the Judiciary Committee. The eyes of the nation were turned on the House. The people expected consideration for these resolutions, and Congress could not grant a smaller act of justice.

Then Levin began his long peroration. Naturalization was not a right, a boon, or a favor granted to an alien. No alien, he said, had a right to naturalization. It was granted in “self-defence,” as a protection to American institutions; “. . . it is one of the political fortifications of our free system of government; it is a Bunker-Hill entrenchment to repel foreign assault.” Exclusion had been the original object of naturalization — not admission to citizenship. Had it been otherwise, he argued, we should have had no naturalization laws,

⁷⁸ This debate began on December 15th, and was continued on December 17th, 18th, 29th, and 30th. *Congressional Globe*, Twenty-ninth Congress, First Session, pp. 67-74, 77-82, 105-7, 113-18.

⁷⁹ Bayly’s argument overlooked one important point: some states had made United States citizenship a qualification for suffrage. It followed that a Federal law hindering naturalization could act effectively to deprive the majority of foreigners of their rights to suffrage. See Frank George Franklin, *The Legislative History of Naturalization in the United States* (Chicago, 1906), p. 253.

and all foreigners would have become American citizens the moment they landed on America's shores. And did not a naturalization law extend to the idea of the ballot box? Did not citizenship generate the idea of the good citizen, of the sound republican, of the "glorious patriot"? Of course it did, said Levin, and the power to pass uniform laws of naturalization was vested in Congress. Why? Levin promptly supplied an answer: "to prevent aliens from filling the offices of the Republic — and to prevent the States from naturalizing aliens to suit the cupidity, ambition, and intrigue of local demagogues . . ."

The House was singularly unimpressed by Levin's arguments. The resolutions were sent to the Judiciary Committee on December 30, 1845.⁸⁰

A short time later, on the tenth of February, 1846, the committee presented an emphatic report. Liberal naturalization was not to be disregarded, nor were any disadvantageous or repulsive restrictions to be added to the laws. It was wise and prudent to Americanize aliens as soon as possible. The committee, therefore, recommended a resolution: that no alteration of the naturalization laws was necessary; the states controlled suffrage and themselves possessed the remedy for evils.⁸¹

Levin replied later to some of the points in the committee's report. His speech was made in connection with a motion of his to amend a bill for raising a regiment of mounted riflemen by providing that the officers and soldiers should all be Americans by birth. The committee had tried to make it appear that the states possessed the power to create citizens of the United States; its report had referred to state laws for every right, civil and political, that an alien could possess. Levin, however, disagreed. The Federal system, he said, was purely political, and naturalization must confer rights purely political — suffrage and office-holding. The states had the right — "an unquestionable right" — to decide on what terms American citizens could vote. But only Congress could determine who should vote. If the states could admit aliens to vote within a shorter period than the five years required by the Federal government, the Constitu-

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

tion was a "dead letter"; for if states could grant aliens suffrage for presidential electors, they could also grant aliens eligibility to the Presidency. The committee, charged Levin, had tried to sustain the view that naturalization laws were designed only to confer rights relative to property and other civil and personal rights of residents of states. But, argued Levin, the very idea of naturalization applied to the ballot box; experience sustained this view.⁸²

In effect, and in contradistinction to the committee, Levin was arguing against the dual status concept of citizenship; he was championing the idea that the framing of the Constitution had established a distinct Federal citizenship, into which the various state citizenships had merged. According to his theory, the right of suffrage now derived from this "new citizenship." Since the adoption of the Constitution it could be gained only by birth on United States soil, or by naturalization. And the power of naturalization was wholly in the hands of the Federal government; the states no longer had anything to say as to who became citizens; they had control only of the terms on which citizens could vote.

In advocating the concept of a Federal citizenship, Levin was denying the right of each state to qualify voters. He wanted the Federal government to be supreme in this area. With this argument, of course, Levin was losing the few Southern friends whom he had tried to woo by his previous arguments defending states' rights. In this case, perhaps, party principle seemed more important than party converts. Be that as it may, his plea fell on deaf ears.

Not until the next session did Levin resume his attack on the naturalization laws. On January 11, 1847, Levin pontificated once again on this constitutional question. The issue at hand was a bill to establish the territorial government of Oregon. Levin wanted the Congress to pass on the qualifications of voters and for holding office. There was no question, he maintained, as to the controlling authority of the Federal government over the whole range of the subject as it applied to the territories. "The Fathers of the Constitution intended that only natives should be law-makers of Americans." But aliens, along with other "corruptions," had polluted the ballot

⁸² *Congressional Globe*, Twenty-ninth Congress, First Session, p. 605.

boxes; respect for the Constitution was rapidly passing away; love for foreigners was rapidly absorbing our love for our own American brethren, and love for foreign territory was rapidly swallowing up all love of our original native land. (Levin's proexpansion sentiments depended upon the direction which expansion was taking: against Catholic Mexico, yes; towards taking in "Jesuit-colonized" Oregon, no.) He concluded with an attack on those of his colleagues in the House who, he said, were ready to open the floodgates of the West to the alien paupers and criminals who had caused such evil in the East.⁸³

The next month Levin spoke alone in opposition to a bill intended to prevent crowded conditions on immigrant ships. Representative George Rathbun, of New York, favored the bill because such conditions were "a revolting spectacle, a disgrace not only to our laws and our country, but to humanity itself." Levin, however, said that he was opposed to the whole system of importing voters and attributed it to Democratic Party policy intended to weaken the Native American Party. The bill championed by Rathbun was to regulate the carrying of passengers in merchant vessels by providing in law that sufficient space should be reserved on board the immigrant ships for the comfortable accommodation of the passengers. Levin proposed that the bill be amended to read: "A bill to afford additional facilities to the paupers and criminals of Europe to emigrate to the United States." The naturalization laws were obsolete in principle, object, and tendency — he remonstrated to the House — and most destructive in practice. They admitted to our shores a class of aliens who were not qualified by morals, manners, or education to aid either in expanding the country or in consolidating the new territory. He would feed them, "but not rally to the polls that living mass of moral putrescence and pitiable ignorance."⁸⁴

But Levin's agitation was crowned only with defeat. Party lines were tightly drawn, and there was little use in asking political opponents for votes in the Congress. The last act in this drama was

⁸³ *Congressional Globe*, Twenty-ninth Congress, Second Session, p. 167.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

played on January 23, 1850, when Levin gave notice of his intention to sponsor a bill for the protection of the ballot box by an extension of the naturalization law to twenty-one years and by a capitation tax on aliens.⁸⁵ There is, however, no evidence that he ever actually introduced such a bill.

VAE VICTIS

Lewis Charles Levin's failure to win converts to the Native American cause in Congress matched the failure of political Nativism to impress large segments of the voting population with the virtues of its program. As early as 1845 political Nativism had won local successes in city politics: in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and St. Louis. But the demise of the party came swiftly; by 1848 it had disappeared as a political party until, in the 1850's, it was to reappear as the "Know-Nothing" movement.

Why Native Americanism failed as a political force in the late 1840's is no part of our story here. What is important is to evaluate the part that Levin played in organizing the party and his personal impact on its deliberations.

The germination of hate engendered by the riots in Philadelphia coupled with Henry Clay's defeat in the Presidential election of 1844 fired Levin's ambition to make Native Americanism a national political force. He believed that Clay's defeat would convince many Americans who had espoused the older parties that the foreign vote was directly responsible for James K. Polk's election. Levin persuaded himself that the masses could be roused to support a new party and undertook to campaign through Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts, where he rallied support for a Native American Party convention to meet in Philadelphia on July 4, 1845, to start a "new independence movement against foreign control."⁸⁶ Wherever he spoke to Native American enthusiasts, he decried the older parties. Democracy, he said, was based on "one idea" — the popular element in the ascendant, even though it might be the foreign

⁸⁵ *Congressional Globe*, Thirty-first Congress, First Session, p. 219.

⁸⁶ *Daily Sun*, January 2, 3, 14, and 30, 1845.

element. "Whigism," too, he characterized as a party of "one idea": an aristocracy of talent, or the conservatism of the money interests. Native Americanism was equally based on "one idea," but an idea that was more "American" since, as Levin proclaimed, it was dedicated to the task of placing America's institutions beyond the danger of corruption, until Europe should have ceased to lust after our government or aim at our subjugation. He accused the Polk administration of being pledged to a sectional cabal which wanted "to throw American workingmen to insecurity and plunder and oppression," and he urged that Native Americans work to elect a Congress which would be above contamination by the executive, so that the President would not dare to venture so boldly on the "prostitution" of his power.⁸⁷

The fact that 186 delegates representing fourteen states did assemble in Philadelphia at a Native American Party convention on July 4, 1845, is evidence that Levin's demagogic appeals had had their effect. The work of this convention is familiar enough to students of Nativism. Largely ignored, however, is the fact that it was Levin who was responsible for pinning the label of "Native American" on the party — and this over the objections of the New York delegation, which favored the designation "American Republican" and objected to the word "native" in any party label. Levin, however, was demagogic as usual; he was opposed to foreigners who were "vomited on our shores, [who] come upon us like devouring tigers." His resolution carried the day; when the final vote was taken, the name "Native American" was accepted.⁸⁸

Levin's success in 1845 turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory, however. He had tried to mold the party around his own views. But his "megalomania," his ambition, was to prove his undoing. A large segment of the party did not accept Levin's leadership, and the events of 1847 are evidence of this.

Another party convention assembled in Pittsburgh on the second Tuesday of May, 1847, to nominate a Presidential ticket. So few delegates appeared, however, that the convention was postponed

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, January 14, 1845; February 2, 1845.

⁸⁸ *Public Ledger*, July 7, 1845.

until September 10th, when it reassembled, this time in Philadelphia, where 100 delegates, representing seven states, convened.⁸⁹

Levin's presence at first seemed enough to dominate the convention. Unable to decide on a Native American Presidential ticket, the delegates chose instead to recommend Zachary Taylor, the Whig nominee, as worthy of the votes of Native Americans, and proclaimed, "The Hon. L. C. Levin endorsed the proceedings as far as they had gone." As the leader of the Pennsylvania delegation, Levin rallied his forces to defeat a New York delegate's proposal that the word "native" be deleted from the official title of the party and the appellation "American Party" be used instead — a proposal which would have permitted foreign-born voters to enter the association. But when Levin himself introduced a resolution that "birth upon the soil be the only requisite for citizenship," he caused eighty-three members to bolt the convention in defiance of his leadership.⁹⁰

Thus the convention of 1847 had ended with a split in the party; its career as a political force was ended. It no longer commanded much support in any case, but Levin gave it the *coup de grâce*. He had been willing to accept "Old Zack," but he would not compromise further. To the very end, he had shown himself unwilling to accept anything but American birth as a passport to the American ballot box.

The breakup of the Native American Party foreshadowed Levin's eventual defeat in his Congressional district. It is true that he managed to win a third term in 1848, when he found it politically prudent to adopt for himself a new party label, that of "Whig-Native American." But new forces were at work, and a political realignment in his district was in the making. The story is a complex one and would make a research paper in itself. Suffice it to say that enough Whigs combined with disaffected Native Americans to retire Levin from Congress in 1850.

Defeated in his quest for a fourth term, Levin, who for six years in Congress had preached Nativism with almost fanatical zeal, returned to Philadelphia. There he took up the practice of the law

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, May 15, 1847; September 11, 1847.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, September 12, 1847.

and married his second wife, Julia Gist, a widow. His first wife had died some years before. He dropped out of sight politically until the Presidential campaign of 1856, when he reappeared to support Millard Fillmore against candidates John C. Frémont and James Buchanan. It was to be his last campaign but, as in his first one, he resorted to the old clichés of Nativism:

Americans are fighting a new Revolution . . . they do not now enjoy equal rights, even with foreigners. Look at your Custom House and your Post Office. They are filled with foreigners — the servile slaves of the national administration

He denounced the “Black Republicans” and Abolitionists as agents of the Pope!⁹¹

The rest of Levin’s life was spent in loneliness. His restless and suspicious state of mind gave way at length to madness, which, in the natural course of things, was perhaps inevitable. For several years he was incarcerated in hospitals for the insane in Philadelphia and in Baltimore. The end came on March 12, 1860; he was interred in the nondenominational Laurel Hill Cemetery. His wife tried to raise money by public subscription to build a monument to his memory, but a young man connected with the enterprise apparently absconded with the funds, and no tombstone now rests upon Levin’s grave.⁹²

One final touch of irony: in 1880 his wife and son, Louis, were both converted to Catholicism.⁹³

A KIND OF HOLINESS

How may we sum up Lewis Charles Levin and evaluate his demagoguery?

Like Adolf Hitler, or, better still — to draw a comparison from the recent American past — like Joseph McCarthy, Levin is typical

⁹¹ Lewis Charles Levin, *The Union Safe! The Contest between Fillmore and Buchanan! Fremont Crushed!* (New York, 1856), n. p. (American Party Campaign Pamphlet).

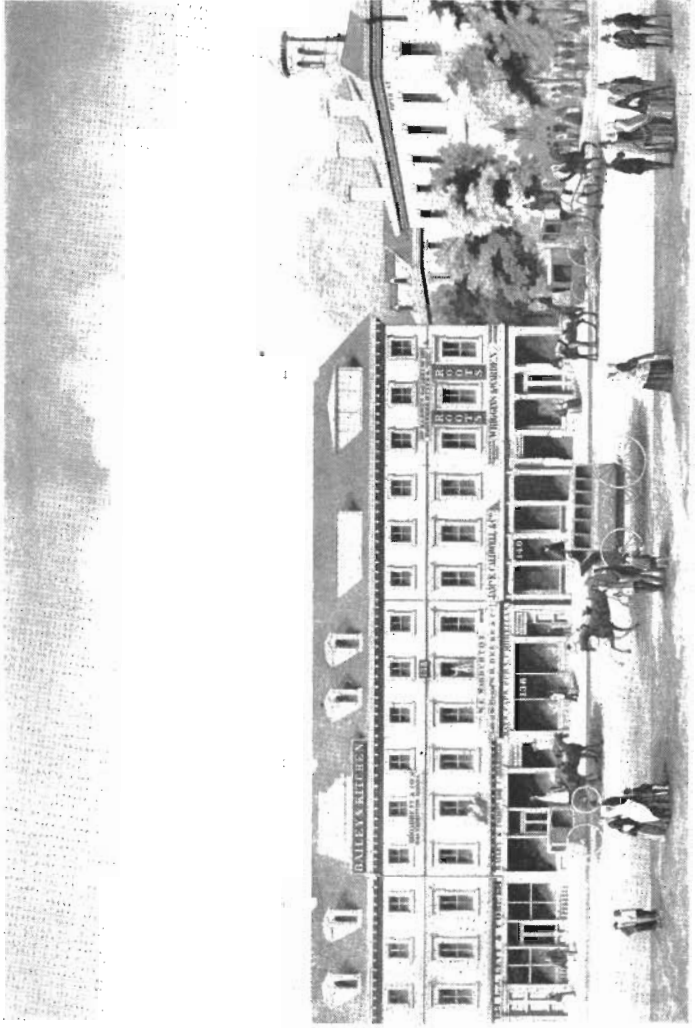
⁹² Laurel Hill Cemetery records.

⁹³ Martin Griffin, “Conversion of a Native American Rioter’s Family,” *American Catholic Historical Researches* (Philadelphia, 1911), XXVIII, 189.

of the frothing emotional psychopath in political life, one who tries to carry people along a path of hate until his star begins to fade and his "medicine" fails. And like them, too, Levin did not have a social philosophy or even a social program, so that his demagogic appeal was a negative one. It was wholly personal and an outgrowth of his experiences, and whatever may have been the psychological basis for his attitudes, his entire appeal, such as it was, may be summed up in one word: obscurantism.

Yet there was a psychological basis for Levin's demagoguery. He was, after all, a man who could not adjust to an America that was both changing and maturing, to an America that was becoming more cosmopolitan. In an era when American arts, science, and industry were advancing, indeed, when technology was beginning to help transform America, Levin expressed the fear of some Americans that large-scale immigration posed a threat to American security. America's well-being and institutions, after all, had come about largely as a result of independence from the "foreign control" which seemed in Levin's day to be a threat again. Levin's success is proof that, behind every demagogue, there is a social resentment or grievance which cries for expression and will not be ignored, and if the responsible politician is often considered responsible partly because he evades some of these issues, then the demagogue will seize upon them as *his* issues and make such strange amalgams of good and evil out of them that unsophisticated voters will frequently find themselves powerless to untangle the skein.

Besides a psychological basis for his demagoguery, there was also in Levin a psychological continuity with all his agitations. All his various crusades — whether they involved dueling, temperance reform, or Nativism — were undertaken together. All his feelings on these subjects were interlaced, and one crusade was often the basis for argument in another. In one sense, these agitations developed from sentiments which he discovered around him; in another sense, they were the result of personal feelings or compulsions, or both. Once he had embarked on a crusade, he was just enough of a master of political oratory and invective to reach the kind of rapport with an audience that was needed to make these crusades seem moral and



Courtesy, *The Historical Society of Pennsylvania*

A PHILADELPHIA STREET SCENE IN 1856

vital to all. In this he was aided by the technology of the times, which had helped produce the Penny Press Era and also enabled a ne'er-do-well like Levin to purchase newspapers and to use them as cheap vehicles through which communication with the masses was possible.

Because he was a product of his age, Levin could understand the psychological fears that the sight of indigent Irish Catholics arriving in great numbers could conjure up in people's minds. This was the age of Manifest Destiny, and because these were "backward" people who came to us, illiterate, "primitive," and clannish, they could be used as puppets in the power politics of a dynamic, "civilized" nation like America. This was the age of isolation, of separateness — a kind of political holiness — and when Levin said that European monarchies were too much wedded to the old ways, that we as a nation, having been conceived in liberty and the rights of man, were to go our own way, he was expressing a tradition which had been the dominant idea of American civilization for over forty years and was to remain so for the next sixty. And because people believed in this tradition, they preferred to overlook the less palatable aspects of his thinking, the racial and religious hatred implicit in his thesis.

Finally, Levin's career illustrates the fact that grievances in our political and social life breed demagogues. Demagogy, I dare say, must be understood as a more or less normal aspect of our political culture. Of course, the demagogue fails — and it is to our everlasting credit that he does — but he leaves his mark, and the elements that made him still remain; and when he passes on, a dozen grimy hands reach eagerly for the banner that he has dropped. So it was with Levin, for after the Civil War and Reconstruction other men were to resuscitate his ideas of racial destiny and national allegiance. The process continues today; the pattern and the ingredients remain much the same, and we see from the past into the future with yet another of the illuminations that history has to offer us.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

This study on Lewis Charles Levin is based primarily on his own writings and speeches and on available newspaper accounts.

A fire which destroyed the Levin family home in Charleston, South Carolina, during the 1880's also destroyed whatever early records there were, and I was unable to locate any letters which Levin might have written.

Primary Sources

The mind is the key to Lewis Charles Levin, and in his own writings one may trace the attitudes and prejudices that made the man. Levin's insistence on regarding Catholicism as an international conspiracy is well expressed in his *A Lecture on Irish Repeal, in Elucidation of the Fallacy of Its Principles and In Proof of Its Pernicious Tendency in the Moral, Religious, and Political Aspects* (Philadelphia, 1844). His mature temperance views are to be found in his essay, *Intemperance the Prelude to Gambling and Suicide in the Life of the Rev. C. C. Colton, Author of "Lacon"* (Philadelphia, 1845), a lecture which was delivered before the societies attached to Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, in September, 1844. Both works have become rare gems, and are available with special permission from the Carson Collection in the Philadelphia Free Library, Logan Square.

Levin's newspaper output was fantastic; one needs to read through the whole body of his editorials in order to understand the prodigious energy which went into his many agitations. The earliest instances of his journalism are to be found in the pages of the *Temperance Advocate*, for the years 1841 to 1843, which I consulted in the rooms of the New York Historical Society. Even better are his writings in the *Daily Sun*. In these pages, the reader may follow Levin's trend of thought all through the Philadelphia riots of 1844, though he should be warned that Levin's account of what other people said and did is often untrustworthy. The issues of the *Daily Sun* for 1843 and 1844 are available at the New York Public Library's newspaper division; those for the years 1845 to 1848 I consulted at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Especially rewarding are Levin's Congressional speeches for the period 1845 to 1851, which are available in the journals and appendices of the *Congressional Globe*, Twenty-ninth, Thirtieth, and

Thirty-first Congresses. If studied diligently enough, his speeches furnish a personal inventory of the man.

The lone document of his last years is his campaign broadside of 1856, *The Union Safe! The Contest between Fillmore and Buchanan! Fremont Crushed!* (New York, 1856), which is available at the New York Public Library. As a matter of fact, however, it is rather unrewarding, since it is merely a collection of the old, familiar Levin clichés.

The newspaper literature on Levin is large, and could be even larger, but in evaluating Philadelphia newspaper criticism of him, I stayed within the year 1844, the year of the riots, as furnishing more material. Catholic criticism of him, though it is sparse, is to be found in the *Catholic Herald*. More important is the Nativist viewpoint of the *Native American*, and especially rewarding is the view of a Democratic journal, the *Spirit of the Times*, which also contained many stories about Levin which were interesting, but not particularly relevant to my study. The best exposé of Levin was in the *Public Ledger*, which also contained the most comprehensive reports on the riots. Not very helpful were two other newspapers which I consulted: the *North American*, a Whig paper which temporarily became a Native American organ in 1844; and the *Daily Chronicle*, which lacked party affiliation as well as clear opinions on the important issues that grew out of the riots. All these newspapers are available at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Two contemporary accounts which assay Levin's part in the riots are Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *A History of Irish Settlers in North America to the Census of 1850* (Boston, 1852), which is downright inaccurate; and Alexander K. McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1905). Only the first volume is pertinent, and the reader is warned that where McClure is gossipy, he is also untrustworthy.

Two wholly contrary viewpoints on the Philadelphia riots and the Native American Party are available in two contemporary works of the time. John Hancock Lee, *The Origin and Progress of the American Party in Politics, Embracing a Complete History of the Philadelphia Riots in May and July, 1844* (Philadelphia, 1855), is unquestionably Nativist propaganda, but is absolutely necessary for any social history of the Native American movement. Equally

necessary is *The Truth Unveiled; or a Calm and Impartial Exposition of the Terrible Riots in Philadelphia, on May 6th, 7th, & 8th, 1844, by a Protestant and Native Philadelphian* (Philadelphia, 1844), a work of anonymous authorship, which is another of those rare assets of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

The inside news of the Native American Party conventions in 1845 and 1847 was difficult to find, but the best accounts are contained in the *Public Ledger* for each of the years given.

The most recent study of American Nativism in the pre-Civil War period, and the one most plentiful in bibliographical material, is Ray A. Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (New York, 1938), which also contains the most literate and accurate account of the Philadelphia riots. Two older accounts of the riots merit mention, however. The Catholic view, by John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (4 vols., New York, 1886-1892), is still useful (although only Volumes III and IV are applicable to my subject), as is another viewpoint, that of Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia: A History of the City and Its People* (4 vols., Philadelphia, 1912), which contains (in Volume I) an interesting interpretation of the social milieu in which the riots occurred.

Most useful in providing a historical background for Levin's Congressional views on naturalization is Frank George Franklin, *The Legislative History of Naturalization in the United States* (Chicago, 1906). Although it is useful, even a cursory glance by the interested scholar is enough to warrant the conclusion that this area of study is still virgin soil.

Some miscellaneous, though hardly extensive, information pertinent to the story of Levin is available in three works which I consulted: Charles Reznikoff and Uriah Engelman, *The Jews of Charleston* (Philadelphia, 1950); John Hill Martin, *Martin's Bench and Bar* (Philadelphia, 1883); and Martin Griffin, "Conversion of a Native American Rioter's Family," *American Catholic Historical Researches*, XXVIII (1911), 189-90. Finally, mention must be made of the Laurel Hill Cemetery records, which were put at my disposal through the very kind assistance of William J. Proud, Superintendent, Laurel Hill Cemetery Company, and which yielded their morsels of choice scandal, some of as recent date as 1950.