

**History 282 US Diplomatic  
Discussion Transcript for September 22, 2020  
Global Diplomacy**

**Main Reading: Chapter 7, Herring**

Herring's discussion of post-Civil War diplomacy covers his usual wide array of topics, but among the most compelling was how foreign policy intersected with domestic politics in the 1880s and 1890s, especially over the question of immigration.

The following selections come from student comments & questions.

**GILDED AGE PREJUDICES**

STUDENT COMMENT: "The episodes of prejudice described in this chapter demonstrate the attitude of American superiority that was shaping U.S. domestic and foreign policy. Although Washington's foreign policy principles recommended observing the "traditional rule of noninterference in the affairs of foreign nations" (272), the Gilded Age still spurred the desire to spread U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere and Pacific, which were largely untouched by Europe. This is further emphasized by the explosion of the Protestant missionary movement after the Civil War, "persuaded that God had blessed them with modern technology to facilitate their evangelizing of the world and fervently committed to 'bring light to heathen lands'" (274). Meanwhile, on a domestic level, as new immigrants came to the nation with less familiar ethnicities, language, religion, and culture, proving harder to assimilate, there rose a fervent desire to preserve American culture from foreign influence. Although this is more related to world history than U.S. diplomacy history, I would have been curious to see Herring compare U.S. response to immigration to that of previous rising great powers, to understand if their response was harsher or any more discriminatory."

STUDENT COMMENT: "Without any major international conflict, the Gilded Age was comparatively peaceful and quiet. The introduction of new advanced technologies such as railroads, steamships, and telegraphs speeded up the pace of world diplomacy and triggered globalization. Countries like Germany, Russia, and Japan were growing their economic and military power. Many western countries including the United States were on their way to imperialism, and Charles Darwin's book "Origin of Species" promoted the idea of survival of the strongest and backed up the argument of western powers for justifying their imperialist ambition. America, domestically, was recovering the wounds of the Civil War and growing in its size of the territory. Six new states were admitted to the Union between 1889 and 1893, and the population in the American west increased steadily. Not only white American population grew but also the population of the immigrants from foreign countries like China and Italy increased. As the numbers of aliens grew, the United States had to deal with a new type of internal problem. Particularly, the increasing number of Chinese immigrants was one of their concerns. Although the Chinese laborers played an "instrumental role" in mines and railroad construction sites in the west, they "were beaten, lynched, and brutally murdered" (p. 282). They confronted a harsh anti-china sentiment because of "cultural differences, resistance to assimilation, and willingness to work for cheap wages..." (p. 282)."

STUDENT COMMENT: "Immigration issues was in the mid-nineteenth century and is currently a contentious debate as it blurs the lines between domestic and foreign policy and American Idealism. Prior to the Civil War, immigrants in the U.S. predominantly came from Western Europe; however, the aftermath of the Civil War brought the less developed Southern and Eastern European countries as well as Asian immigrants. With this new influx of immigrants added increasing tension, due to, as Herring puts it, "less familiar in terms of their ethnicity, language, religion, and culture." (Herring 281). This chapter lists the main undesirable immigrants in this era as hailing from Catholic Ireland, China, Italians, and Russian Jews. All of these groups shared less traits with the Anglo-Saxon background that the Americans were accustomed to. Interestingly, a major issue many held with immigrants from these comparably impoverished places, was they were to believe to only be a financial burden to the U.S. As Secretary of War Gresham said in regard to the influx of Russian Jews, "forcing upon our shores a numerous class of immigrants destitute of resources and unfitted in many important respects for absorption into our body politic." (Herring 284). This assumption that the immigrants had nothing to offer to their new country is largely unfounded as they literally built modern America."

### **CHINESE EXCLUSION**

STUDENT COMMENT: "The Chinese exclusion act of the late 1800s was the first type of law to block people to come to the US based on race. While Herring tries to say that this was more complex than racial prejudice his argument is unconvincing. This is because his main explanation of why the Chinese immigrants were brutalized lynched and discriminated against was that their culture was "too different" and they "refused to assimilate" seems to be very xenophobic in nature. Senator Blaine called a bill passed by congress a blow to the "Civilization of Confucius". While I agree that the way the Chinese exclusion act was created was different than how the Italians or the Irish were dealt with it is still racist in nature. However, what was different from the Irish and Italians was China's reaction. They were angered by the treatment of Chinese expats and couldn't protect their citizens abroad. The United States, however, negotiated a treaty with China which allowed the U.S. to limit immigration from China to the U.S. Congress responded by suspending Chinese immigration for ten years."

STUDENT COMMENT: "The explanation Herring provides in this chapter for the Chinese Exclusion Act and the discrimination against Chinese immigrants in the US that preceded and accompanied it is that Chinese immigrants' "growing numbers, pronounced cultural differences, resistance to assimilation, and willingness to work for cheap wages provoked a vicious national backlash" (Herring, 282). Of the four factors that Herring identifies leading to the backlash and the Chinese Exclusion Act, two seem unrelated to racial prejudice against Asians: the growing Chinese immigrant population in the US, and the low pay they would work for. By including these among the factors he identifies, Herring complicates the discussion of the Chinese Exclusion Act through showing that there was likely an economic dimension to the eventual prohibition of Chinese immigration: due to the vast number of Chinese laborers, especially in the West, and the fact that they were content to work for cheap, Chinese immigrants may

have "undercut" other groups looking for work in the same areas as they were, making it difficult for those groups to find work and eliciting a negative response. However, it is clear from the other factors Herring identifies (the significant cultural differences and resistance to assimilation of Chinese immigrants), as well as from other episodes involving foreign groups in the US that Herring recounts in this chapter that racial prejudice was a dominant factor in many of these foreign policy decisions. This episode, along with the conflict between the US and Italy over the killing of eleven Italians in New Orleans, shows that in many circumstances when it comes to US foreign policy, the tail wags the dog. In each of these situations, despite the executive branch being better equipped and informed to form a policy response, their options were limited by domestic attitudes: despite Hayes' initial vetoing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Herring notes that the US was forced to recognize "the political strength of the agitators" (Herring, 283), and negotiate a treaty with China that allowed for suspension of Chinese immigration, a treaty that was then repeatedly used by Congress with such zeal that China had "no choice but to acquiesce" (Herring, 283). Similarly, during the Italian dispute, Secretary of State James Blaine's rhetoric would eventually come to reflect the outrage towards Italians felt domestically, showing in each scenario the ability of domestic politics and political spirits to have undue influence on foreign policy making decisions."

### **RUSSIAN ANTI-SEMITISM**

STUDENT COMMENT: "Herring's review of Gilded Age US diplomacy suggests that domestic politics, especially racial and ethnic concerns, were a key driver of foreign policy in the late nineteenth century. A number of cases illuminate this tension, particularly the passage of the Chinese exclusion laws and the decline of US-Russian positive relations. In private terms, the efforts by US missionaries in China were driven by a powerful desire to "bring light to heathen lands," a task of "self-righteous arrogance" amongst people "often guilty of the worst kind of cultural imperialism" (pg. 274). While missionaries also opposed opium use in China and the exclusion of Chinese immigrants (pg. 274), they still shared the colonial mindset....Russian pogroms against the Jews also strained tensions in the United States, though to a lesser degree. There was some concern amongst officials that Russia was "conspiring to undermine American society" by forcing a mass immigration of Jews, who were seen as "destitute of resources and unfitted... for absorption" (pg. 284). However, many people mobilized in favor of assisting American and Russian Jews. The State Department managed the former, protecting its citizens when abroad, while a growing American awareness of the conditions of Russian Jews led "some Americans to call for revolution in Russia" (pg. 285). Again, domestic concerns – about and from its own citizens – shaped the US response, and "soured the traditional Russian-American friendship" (pg. 285).

### **LYNCHING OF ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS**

STUDENT COMMENT: "The Gilded Age was a time of American industrialization and progress. At the time, Americans sought out foreign markets and possibilities to make more money, but also, according to Herring, held "strong opposition to international involvement" (Herring 271). When immigrants from Asia and northern, southern, and eastern Europe began immigrating to America, they brought with them issues from their

own countries. For example, the Irish immigrants who came to America “played an increasingly prominent role in the ongoing Irish rebellion against British rule. The United States became a leading source of arms and explosives for Irish terrorists” (Herring 281). Herring also states that “the harsh treatment of the new ethnic groups by bigoted Americans provoked diplomatic crises with the nations of their origins,” as seen with the Chinese exclusion act and the treatment of Italian immigrants. In New Orleans, eleven Italians were killed by a mob, provoking tensions between the United States and Italy, who demanded protection for Italians in the United States and reparations, demands the U.S. refused to give in to. This led Italy to remove its ambassador from Washington and there was talk of war. Eventually President Harrison “expressed regret for the killings” and all was well. Though Americans hoped for more isolationist policies and disliked the influx of immigrants during this period, they also treated the newcomers so poorly that they provoked involvement from abroad. They also openly opposed Russia’s treatment of its Jewish population, beginning a long history of U.S. involvement in humanitarian crises from abroad and provoking foreign policies relating to human rights that were not always reflected in its domestic policies.”