



Senate speech in favor of Chinese exclusion James G. Blaine (1879)

James Blaine was a white Pennsylvanian raised by a Catholic mother and a Presbyterian father; in adulthood, he was a nominal Protestant. At the time he gave this speech, he was a US senator representing Maine. He went on to serve as US secretary of state under three presidents and was himself the Republican presidential candidate in 1884. In this floor speech, Blaine as senator argues for renegotiating the Burlingame Treaty, an agreement made between the United States and China in 1868, which allowed Chinese immigrants to freely enter the United States. Renegotiating that aspect of the treaty had become a priority for anti-Chinese nativists. Siding with the nativists, Blaine paints the issue as a question of which race and religion will dominate the United States' western coast: Caucasians or Mongolians, Christianity or Confucianism. The treaty was subsequently renegotiated, allowing the US government to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

I am told by those who are familiar with the commercial affairs of the Pacific slope that a person can be sent from any of the great Chinese ports to San Francisco for about thirty dollars. I suppose in an emigrant train over the Pacific Railroad from Omaha—not to speak of the expense of reaching Omaha, but from that point alone—it would cost fifty dollars per head. So that in point of cheap transportation to California, the Chinaman today has an advantage over an American laborer in any part of the country, except in the case of those who are already on the Pacific coast.

Ought we to exclude them? The question lies in my mind thus: Either the Caucasian race will possess the Pacific slope, or the Mongolian race will possess it. Give Mongolians the start today, with the keen thrust of necessity behind them and with the ease of transportation and the inducement of higher wages before them, and it is entirely probable, if not demonstrable, that while we are filling up the other portions of the continent, they will occupy the great space of country between the Sierras and the Pacific coast. The Chinese are themselves today establishing steamship lines; they are themselves today providing the means of transportation; and when gentlemen say that we admit from all other countries, where do you find the slightest parallel? In a republic especially, in any government that maintains itself, the unit of order and of administration is in the family. The emigrants that come to us from all portions of the British Isles, from Germany, from Norway, from Denmark, from France, from Spain, from Italy, come here with the idea of the family as much engraven on their minds, and on their customs and habits, as ours. The Asiatic cannot live with our population and make a homogeneous element. The idea of comparing European immigration with an immigration that has no regard to family, that does not recognize the relation of husband and wife, that does not observe the tie of parent and child, that does not feel in the slightest degree the humanizing and the ennobling influences of the hearthstone and the fireside! When gentlemen talk loosely about emigration from European countries as contrasted with that, they certainly are forgetting history and forgetting themselves. [...]

I am opposed to the Chinese coming here; I am opposed to making them citizens; I am opposed to making them voters. [...] Is there any senator on this floor—and I ask to be answered if there is—who will say that under the operation of the Burlingame Treaty, as it is now administered, he

is willing that the Chinese should come in and occupy the three Pacific states to the exclusion of the whites? I will repeat my question in another form: Should we be justified in sitting still here in the administration of this government and permitting this treaty to remain in force, and the immigration which it allows to go forward, until those three states of the Pacific side should be overridden by that population? That is what I ask every senator. [...]

I supposed if the admonitions of our own history were anything to us, we should regard the race trouble as the one thing to be dreaded, the one thing to be avoided. We are not through with it yet. It has cost us a great many lives; it has cost us a great many millions of treasure. Does any man feel that we are safely through with it now? Does any man here today assume that we have so entirely solved and settled all the troubles growing out of the negro race trouble that we are prepared to invite a similar one? If so, he learns a lesson from history which I have not been taught. If any gentleman, looking into the future of this country, sees, for certain sections of it at least, peace and good order and absolute freedom from any trouble growing out of race, he sees with more sanguine vision than mine. With this trouble already upon us, it would, in my judgment, be the last degree of recklessness deliberately to invite or permit another, and possibly a far more serious one, to be thrust upon us.

“Treat them like Christians,” my colleague says; and yet I believe the Christian testimony from the Pacific coast is that the conversion of Chinese is largely a failure; that the demoralization of the white race is a much more rapid result of the contact than the conversion of the Chinese race; and that, up to this time, there has been little progress made in the one direction, while much evil has been done in the other. I heard the honorable senator from California [...] say that there is not, as we understand it, in all the 120,000 Chinese (whether I state the exact number does not matter in this point of view)—there does not exist among the whole of them the relation of family. There is not a peasant’s cottage inhabited by a Chinaman; there is not a hearthstone, as it is found and cherished in an American home, or an English home, or a German home, or a French home. There is not a domestic fireside in that sense; and yet you say that it is entirely safe to sit down and quietly permit that mode of life to be fastened upon our country. A half century ago, this question could not have been made a practical one. Means of communication, ease of access, cheapness of transportation have changed the issue and forced it upon our attention. I believe now that if the Congress of the United States should, in effect, confirm the treaty and the status of immigration as it now is, law and order could not be maintained in California without the interposition of the military five years hence. [...]

I do not justify the brutality of the treatment of those Chinese who are here. That is greatly to be regretted and greatly to be condemned. But you must deal with things as you find them. [...T]he question of substance is whether, on full consideration, we shall devote that interesting and important section of the United States which borders on the Peaceful Sea to be the home and the refuge of our own people and our own blood, or whether we shall leave it open, not to the competition of other nations like ourselves, but to those who, degraded themselves, will inevitably degrade us. We have, this day, to choose whether we shall have for the Pacific coast the civilization of Christ or the civilization of Confucius.

Source: John Clark Ridpath and Selden Connor, *Life and Work of James G. Blaine* (Philadelphia: Historical Publishing Company, 1893), 297-302, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t9959n17w>. Public domain.

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