

"France Must Be a Great Country!" (1883)

Jules Ferry

The next selections comment on another motive for imperialism. The desire for power can be justified through the pride that one has in one's nation. Nationalism and imperialism seem to be intimately connected. And the European accumulation of empire in India and Africa during the nineteenth century certainly inspired the competitive juices. If Britannia "ruled the waves" and Germany deserved its "place in the sun," then the process of global confrontation was necessary and was an opportunity to demonstrate national superiority. So thought the French prime minister, Jules Ferry, in his 1883 speech to the assembly in Paris, and so too the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, who was certainly anxious to seize the opportunity for glory as noted in the militaristic speech that follows.

Jules Ferry: Gentlemen, it embarrasses me to make such a prolonged demand upon the gracious attention of the Chamber, but I believe that the duty I am fulfilling upon this platform is not a useless one: it is as strenuous for me as for you, but I believe that there is some benefit in summarizing and condensing, in the form of arguments, the principles, the motives, and the various interests by which a policy of colonial expansion may be justified...

In the area of economics, I will allow myself to place before you, with the support of some figures, the considerations which justify a policy of colonial expansion from the point of view of that need, felt more and more strongly by the industrial populations of Europe and particularly those of our won rich and hard working country: the need for export markets...

Gentlemen, there is a second point, as second order of ideas to which I have to give equal attention, but as quickly as possible, believe me; it is the humanitarian and civilizing side of the question. On this point the honorable Camille Pelletan [a conservative politician] has jeered in his own refined and clever manner; he jeers, he condemns, and he says "What is this civilization which you impose with cannon-ball? What is it but another form or barbarism? Don't these populations, these inferior races, have the same rights as you? Aren't they masters of their own houses? Have they called upon you? You come to them against their will, you offer them violence, but not civilization." There, gentlemen is the thesis...But, I must speak from a higher and more truthful plane. It must be stated openly that, in effect, superior races have rights over inferior races.

Jules Maigne: Oh! You dare to say this in the country which has proclaimed the rights of man!

"France Must be a Great Country'!" is from Ralph Austen, ed., Modern Imperialism (Lexington, Mass: D.C. Heath, 1969), pp. 70-73.

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M. De Gulloutet: This is a justification of slavery and the slave trade!

Jules Ferry: If M. Maigne is right, if the declaration of the rights of man was written for the black of equatorial Africa, then by what right do you impose regular commerce upon them? They have not called upon you.

Raoul Duvan: We do not want to impose anything upon them. It is you who wish to do so!

Jules Maigne: To propose and to impose are two different things!

Georges Perin: In any case, you cannot bring about commerce by force.

Jules Ferry: I repeat that superior races have a right, because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilize inferior races...Gentlemen, in Europe as it is today, in this competition of so many rivals which we see growing around us, some by perfecting their military or maritime forces, others by the prodigious development of an ever growing population; in a Europe, or rather in a universe of this sort, a policy of peaceful seclusion or abstention is simply the highway to decadence! Nations are great in our times only by means of the activities which they develop; it is not simply "by the peaceful shining froth of institutions" that they are great at this hour...

[The Republican Party] has shown that it is quite aware that one cannot impose upon France a political ideal conforming to that of nations like independent Belgium and the Swiss Republic; that something else is needed for France; that she cannot be merely a free country, that she must also be a great country, exercising all of her rightful influence over the destiny of Europe, that she ought to propagate this influence throughout the world and carry everywhere that she can her language, her customs, her flag, her arms, and her genius.

Consider This:

According to the French Prime Minister Jules Ferry, why was it important for France to be a "great" country in 1883? What actions needed to be taken in order to make this a reality? Did Ferry answer his critics effectively?

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Germany's Place in the Sun (1901)

Kaiser Wilhelm II

In spite of the fact that we have no such fleet as we should have, we have conquered for ourselves a place in the sun. It will now be my task to see to it that the sun's rays may fall fruitfully upon our activity and trade in foreign parts, that our industry and agriculture may develop within the state and our sailing sports upon the water; for our future lies upon the water. The more Germans go out upon the waters...whether it be in journeys across the ocean, or in the service of the battleflag, so much the better will it be for us. For when the German has once learned to direct his glance upon what is distant and grate, the pettiness which surrounds him in daily life on all sides will disappear...

As head of the empire I therefore rejoice over every citizen, whether from Hamburg, Bremen, or Lubeck, who goes forth with this large outlook and seeks new points where we can drive in the nail on which to hang our armor.

Compare & Contrast:

Compare Jules Ferry's vision of "greatness" with that of the German Kaiser Wilhelm III. What is your reaction to the Kaiser's proposal that Germany must seek "new points where we can drive in the nail on which to hang our armor"?

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