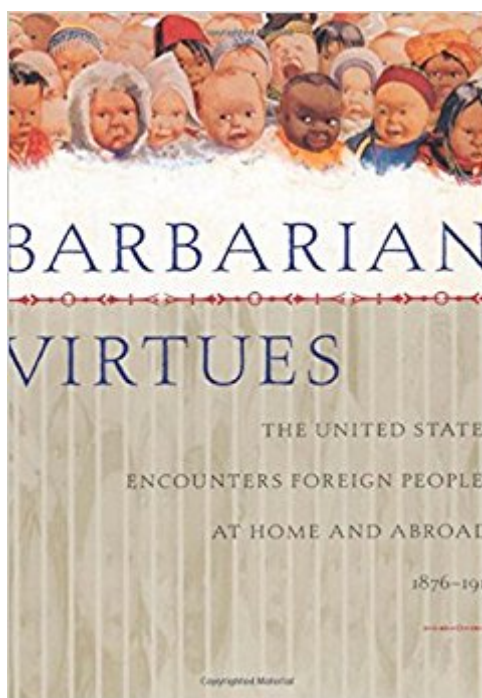


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# Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples At Home And Abroad, 1876-1917



## Synopsis

How a new American identity was forged by immigration and expansion a century ago. In *Barbarian Virtues*, Matthew Frye Jacobson offers a keenly argued and persuasive history of the close relationship between immigration and America's newly expansionist ambitions at the turn of the twentieth century. Jacobson draws upon political documents, novels, travelogues, academic treatises, and art as he recasts American political life. In so doing, he shows how today's attitudes about "Americanism" -- from Border Watch to the Gulf War -- were set in this crucial period, when the dynamics of industrialization rapidly accelerated the rate at which Americans were coming in contact with foreign peoples.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A sense of moral outrage simmers throughout *Barbarian Virtues*, an outrage that tacitly informs Jacobson's exploration of U.S. attitudes toward immigration and foreign policy (which he sees as two sides of the same coin) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but which is kept from boiling over until the last page. There, Jacobson concludes: "Despite some opposition, the United States consciously chose imperial power along with the antidemocratic baggage and even the bloodshed that entailed; and many Americans liked it." This is not really news. But Jacobson, a professor of American Studies at Yale and author of *Whiteness of a Different Color*, does have an interesting thesis: at a time when America depended on nonwhite foreigners as both reliable consumers of American products abroad and industrious workers in the U.S., it also reviled them as "primitives" in

need of civilization and as potential threats to the national order. The strength of his book is the wealth of evidence it provides; referring to a wide range of documentation--from journalism to literature, political rhetoric to pseudo-scientific studies, Tarzan to Teddy Roosevelt--Jacobson explores every conceivable nuance of his thesis. He might have written a book with far greater resonance, however, had he devoted more than a few pages to sketching out how his thesis also applies to America today. Still, Jacobson succeeds in presenting an analysis of a crucial period in the development of American identity as forged in the simultaneous "crucible of immigration" at home and "empire-building" abroad. 24 pages of b&w photos not seen by PW. (Apr.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Though the growth and prosperity of the United States was made possible by the labor of immigrants and the availability of external markets, foreigners have often been viewed by Americans with ambivalence. In this study, Jacobson (American studies, Yale), the author of *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (LJ 11/1/98) and other works exploring race and the immigrant experience, examines complex political and social views during a period of explosive immigration and overseas expansion. By considering a wide variety of contemporary sources such as newspapers, novels, academic treatises, and political writings, he discovers attitudes that offer striking similarities to those still voiced by politicians and political action groups in the latter part of the 20th century. Based upon a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, this readable and thoughtful work is recommended for large academic libraries.-Theresa McDevitt, Indiana Univ. of Pennsylvania Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"At its core 'civilization' was an economic concept" (p. 50). So shows Jacobson, in his wonderful book, *Barbarian Virtues*. Vile racial hatreds define these hegemonic notions of "civilization." Jacobson's extensive research shows persistent and everyday racism operating in the daily discourse of American power. Presidents McKinley and (Teddy) Roosevelt, as well as major newspapers and magazines, spew a stream of racism, and show it as a basic part of elite common sense at the time. I want to second the reviewer from Durham, who found this book short on Blackness. (Jacobson's excellent *Whiteness of a Different Color* helps somewhat.) One might add that this book only skims over the important experience of the violent conquest of the West and the Indians, in shaping "civilization" and "savage" during these years. (Drinnon's *Facing West: The*

Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building is a larger and longer contribution in this regard.) The book could be faulted for lingering on the Tarzan novels, for example, when more pressing political issues ruled the day. And I was hungry for a more sustained discussion of the colonization of the Philippines. But Jacobson is in pursuit of "civilized" ideas in everyday American thought--that's his safari here and, as such, he pursues his subject with great talent. *Barbarian Virtues* is a fast and gripping read. And it exposes what school textbooks and the mass media forget so well: America has a long and vicious history of racial hatred. When our politicians today speak of "civilization," we ought to remember its deep, poisonous roots, and its longstanding use to justify the most brutal exertions of capitalist greed.

This is an extraordinary book. It traces the intersecting lines of the American imperial drive for markets during this period, with the push for immigration as a source of cheap labor. Interwoven with both policies was an unremitting ethnocentrism and racism. This book explains the relationship between these factors, and how they helped shape American nationalism and consciousness during the period. One can also recognize the roots of recent American history in this earlier period.... The book is brimming with startling and thought-provoking information. Even one familiar with this period of American history will find much that is new. The quotations in the book are worth the price alone: almost every page contains a quotation to make the jaw drop! This book is exceptionally well written, and extremely fascinating. It's one of the rare books that had me grabbing my friends and urging them to read it!

Great price

In *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917*, Mathew Frye Jacobson explored the American perception of ourselves and the foreign peoples we came into contact with at the turn of the last century, as empire building and immigration expanded our interaction with the outside world. The title comes from a quotation by Theodore Roosevelt calling on Americans to not abandon their hearty roots in the quest for civilization, and to "keep the barbarian virtues" in order to escape from decadence. Anxiety over civilization and barbarity characterized American culture at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Jacobson, political culture during this period was characterized by a paradoxical combination of supreme confidence in U.S. superiority and righteousness, with an anxiety driven by fierce parochialism. The paradox stemmed from the United States

economic dependence on an influx of labor from peoples that were considered to be inferior. Popular media characterized these people as barbarian others in need of the fatherly hand of the civilized United States. The labor and resources of the "barbarians" were invaluable in propelling this country to a position of power. It is not the uniqueness of this relationship and mentality during the period that Jacobson finds interesting. As he points out, these attitudes have long roots in American culture. The scale of these endeavors is what sets this period off from the past. Industrial production, mass population movements, expanding and active government, and a developing mass media characterized this time of explosive growth and involvement in the world. But in order to facilitate such involvement, the old attitude Americans had taken toward American Indians and, to a lesser extent, Mexicans, needed to be refashioned for use overseas. The people of Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Panama all had to be seen as "pawns in a vast geopolitical game," as Jacobson describes it. This shift in perspective took a conscious cultural effort to accomplish. According to Jacobson, the worldwide search for markets drove American colonialism. "A whole range of forces" could unsettle people from their homelands, he argued, "but the labor market and the laws of supply and demand dictated where they were likely to go." This search for a marketplace, in turn, drove industrial demand for more and more labor, as new customers were found at home and abroad. This labor came in the form of immigration from diverse cultures, many of which were radically different from the Anglo-American culture that had been so dominant in the United States. Americans openly wondered if these new peoples could be assimilated, or whether they would ever be fit for self-government. This created an anxiety regarding our national identity, especially since the Civil War had raged only a few decades before. Unfortunately, Jacobson never gives a voice to the "barbarians." In a book about national character and identity, it seems unusual to not include the perspective of the immigrants themselves. After all, the immigrants of the 1870s became the Americans of the 1910s. The book portrays them and the overseas peoples as mere pawns (to use his term), subject to economic and cultural forces. Likewise, Jacobson focuses on and criticizes domestic images of foreigners, but he does not present an alternative view to show why those perspectives were incorrect. With a knack for clear and concise explanation, *Barbarian Virtues* contributes to our understanding of the national character of the United States at the turn of the last century, but it takes a condescending and political tone. Jacobson does not shy away from promoting a social and political agenda. As he warns in his introduction, "it behooves us to ponder the continuities between [Teddy] Roosevelt's day and our own," because he fears that "the civilities of public discourse" might only be a veneer over the same kind

of sinister perspectives and activities he thoroughly condemned. In other words, American society has always had this sickness, and Jacobson is the enlightened doctor who has diagnosed the problem. The originality of Jacobson's argument is undeniable, and *Barbarian Virtues* contains vivid descriptions and analysis drawn from a large volume of primary sources. The words of the principal actors in his narrative jump off of the page, and their motivations, hopes, and desires become clear. As to how Americans saw their place in the world, Jacobson provides a vivid tapestry. Overall, *Barbarian Virtues* is a worthwhile but intentionally provocative study of the dynamics of empire, economics, and immigration, and the national mentality that accompanies a young country in transition onto the world stage.

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