

ROBERT G. INGERSOLL

FROM *Should the Chinese Be Excluded?* (1893)

Among the critics of the anti-Chinese legislation, the most articulate was Illinois attorney Robert G. Ingersoll (1833–1899). The era's most eloquent orator and an outspoken agnostic, he addressed more people than any other public figure in the nineteenth century. Ingersoll was a Civil War veteran who after 1865 promoted civil rights for the freed slaves and equal rights for women. He once declared that there was "but one use for law, but one excuse for government—the preservation of liberty." In the following speech he condemned the racist attitudes that lay behind the legislation renewing the Exclusion Act in 1892, known as the Geary Act.

From "Should the Chinese Be Excluded?" *North American Review* 157 (July 1893): 52–58.

The average American, like the average man of any country, has but little imagination. People who speak a different language, or worship some other god, or wear clothing unlike his own, are beyond the horizon of his sympathy. He cares but little or nothing for the sufferings or misfortunes of those who are of a different complexion or of another race. His imagination is not powerful enough to recognize the human being, in spite of peculiarities.

Instead of this he looks upon every difference as an evidence of inferiority, and for the inferior he has but little if any feeling. If these "inferior people" claim equal rights he feels insulted, and for the purpose of establishing his own superiority tramples on the rights of the so-called inferior.

In our own country the native has always considered himself as much better than the immigrant, and as far superior to all people of a different complexion. At one time our people hated the Irish, then the Germans, then the Italians, and now the Chinese. The Irish and Germans, however, became numerous. They became citizens, and, most important of all, they had votes. They combined, became powerful, and the political parties sought their aid. They had something to give in exchange for protection—in exchange

for political rights. In consequence of this, they were flattered by candidates, praised by the political press, and became powerful enough not only to protect themselves, but at last to govern the principal cities in the United States. As a matter of fact the Irish and the Germans drove the native Americans out of the trades and from the lower forms of labor. They built the railways and canals. They became servants. Afterward the Irish and the Germans were driven from the canals and railways by the Italians.

The Irish and Germans improved their condition. They went into other businesses, into the higher and more lucrative trades. They entered the professions, turned their attention to politics, became merchants, brokers, and professors in colleges. They are not now building railroads or digging on public works. They are contractors, legislators, holders of office, and the Italians and Chinese are doing the old work.

If matters had been allowed to work in a natural way, without the interference of mobs or legislators, the Chinese would have driven the Italians to better employments, and all menial labor would, in time, be done by the Mongolians. . . .

In our country, as a matter of fact, there is but little prejudice against emigrants coming from Bu-

rope, except among naturalized citizens; but nearly all foreign-born citizens are united in their prejudice against the Chinese. The truth is that the Chinese came to this country by invitation. . . .

These Chinese laborers are inoffensive, peaceable and law-abiding. They are honest, keeping their contracts, doing as they agree. They are exceedingly industrious, always ready to work and always giving satisfaction to their employers. They do not interfere with other people. They cannot become citizens. They have no voice in the making or the execution of the laws. They attend to their own business. They have their own ideas, customs, religion and ceremonies—about as foolish as our own; but they do not try to make converts or to force their dogmas on others. They are patient, uncomplaining, stoical and philosophical. They earn what they can, giving reasonable value for the money they receive, and as a rule, when they have amassed a few thousand dollars, they go back to their own country. They do not interfere with our ideas, our ways or customs. They are silent workers, toiling without any object, except to do their work and get their pay. They do not establish saloons and run for Congress. Neither do they combine for the purpose of governing others. Of all the people on our soil they are the least meddling. Some of them smoke opium, but the opium-smoker does not beat his wife. Some of them play games of chance, but they are not members of the Stock Exchange. They eat the bread that they earn; they neither beg nor steal, but they are of no use to parties or politicians except as they become fuel to supply the flame of prejudice. They are not citizens and they cannot vote.

Their employers are about the only friends they have. In the Pacific States the lowest became their enemies and asked for their expulsion. They denounced the Chinese and those who gave them work. The patient followers of Confucius were treated as outcasts—stoned by boys in the streets and mobbed by the fathers. Few seemed to have any respect for their rights or their feelings. They were unlike us. They wore different clothes. They dressed their hair in a peculiar way, and therefore they were beyond our sympathies. These ideas, these practices, demoralized many com-

munities; the laboring people became cruel and the small politicians infamous.

When the rights of even one human being are held in contempt the rights of all are in danger. We cannot destroy the liberties of others without losing our own. By exciting the prejudices of the ignorant we at last produce a contempt for law and justice, and sow the seeds of violence and crime. . . .

Both of the great parties ratified the outrages committed by the mobs, and proceeded with alacrity to violate the treaties and solemn obligations of the Government. These treaties were violated, these obligations were denied, and thousands of Chinamen were deprived of their rights, of their property, and hundreds were maimed or murdered. They were driven from their homes. They were hunted like wild beasts. All this was done in a country that sends missionaries to China to tell the benighted savages of the blessed religion of the United States. . . .

The idea of imprisoning a man at hard labor for a year, and this man a citizen of a friendly nation, for the crime of being found in this country without a certificate of residence, must be abhorrent to the mind of every enlightened man. Such punishment for such an "offense" is barbarous and belongs to the earliest times of which we know. This law makes industry a crime and puts one who works for his bread on a level with thieves and the lowest criminals, treats him as a felon, and clothes him in the stripes of a convict,—and all this is done at the demand of the ignorant, of the prejudiced, of the heartless, and because the Chinese are not voters and have no political power.

The Chinese are not driven away because there is no room for them. Our country is not crowded. There are many millions of acres waiting for the plow. There is plenty of room here under our flag for five hundred millions of people. These Chinese that we wish to oppress and imprison are people who understand the art of irrigation. They can redeem the deserts. They are the best of gardeners. They are modest and willing to occupy the lowest seats.

They only ask to be day-laborers, washers and ironers. They are willing to sweep and scrub. They

are good cooks. They can clear lands and build railroads. They do not ask to be masters—they wish only to serve. In every capacity they are faithful; but in this country their virtues have made enemies, and they are hated because of their patience, their honesty and their industry. . . .

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This law is contrary to the laws and customs of nations. The punishment is unusual, severe, and contrary to our Constitution, and under its provisions aliens—citizens of a friendly nation—can be imprisoned without due process of law. The law is barbarous, contrary to the spirit and genius of American institutions, and was passed in violation of solemn treaty stipulations.

The Congress that passed it is the same that closed the gates of the World's Fair on the "blessed Sabbath," thinking it wicked to look at statues and pictures on that day. These representatives of the people seem to have had more piety than principle.

After the passage of such a law by the United States is it not indecent for us to send missionaries to China? Is there not work enough for them at home? We send ministers to China to convert the heathen; but when we find a Chinaman on our soil, where he can be saved by our example, we treat him as a criminal. It is to the interest of this country to maintain friendly relations with China. We want the trade of nearly one-fourth of the human race. . . .

After all, it pays to do right. This is a hard truth to learn—especially for a nation. A great nation should be bound by the highest conception of justice and honor. Above all things it should be true to its treaties, its contracts, its obligations. It should remember that its responsibilities are in accordance with its power and intelligence.

Our Government is founded on the equality of human rights—on the idea, the sacred truth, that all are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Our country is an asylum for the oppressed of all nations—of all races. Here, the Government gets its power from the consent of the governed. After the abolition of slavery these great truths were not only admitted, but they found expression in our Constitution and laws. Shall we now go back to barbarism? . . .

Let us retrace our steps, repeal the law and accomplish what we justly desire by civilized means. Let us treat China as we would England; and, above all, let us respect the rights of Men.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did Ingersoll believe that the differences among people led to charges of racial inferiority?
2. What were some of the positive characteristics that Ingersoll attributed to the Chinese?
3. Why did Ingersoll think that the exclusion law contradicted American principles?