

John Fiske

Professor of History

AMERICAN POLITICAL IDEALS VIEWED FROM THE STANDPOINT  
OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY

Lecture delivered three times in London, one in Edinburgh, seven times in

Boston; four times in New York; twice in Brooklyn, NY, Plainfield, NJ, and Madison,

Wisconsin; once in Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Milwaukee; in Appleton and Waukesha, Wis.; Portland,

Lewiston, and Brunswick, Me.; Lowell, Concord, Newburyport, Peabody, Stoneham, Malden, Newton Highlands, and Martha's Vineyard, Mass.; Middletown and Stamford, Conn.; Newburg and Poughkeepsie, NY; Orange, NJ; and at Cornell University and Haverford College.

(In 1870s and 1880s)

"Manifest Destiny"

The "manifest destiny" of the "Anglo-Saxon" race and the huge dimensions of our country are favourite topics with Fourth-of-July orators, but they are none the less interesting on that account when considered from the point of view of the historian. To be a citizen of a great and growing state, or to belong to one of the dominant races of the world, is no doubt a legitimate source of patriotic pride, though there is perhaps an equal justification for such a feeling in being a citizen of a tiny state like Holland, which in spite of its small dimensions, has nevertheless achieved so much . . . But my course in the present lecture is determined by historical or philosophical rather than by patriotic interest, and I shall endeavour to characterize and group events as impartially as if my home were at Leyden in the Old World instead of Cambridge in the New.

First of all, I shall take sides with Mr. Freeman in eschewing altogether the word "Anglo-Saxon." The term is sufficiently absurd and misleading as applied in England to the Old-English speech of our forefathers, or to that portion of English history which is included between the fifth and the eleventh centuries. But in America it is frequently used, not indeed by scholars, but by popular writers and speakers, in a still more loose and slovenly way. . . . The term "English," however, is so often used with sole reference to people and things in England as to have become in some measure antithetical to "American;" and when it is found desirable to include the two in a general expression, one often hears in America the term "Anglo-Saxon" colloquially employed for this purpose. A more slovenly use of language can hardly be imagined. Such a compound term as "Anglo-American" might perhaps be logically defensible, but that has already become restricted

to the English-descended inhabitants of the United States and Canada alone, in distinction from Spanish Americans and red Indians. . . Refraining from all such barbarisms, I prefer to call the English race by the name which it has always applied to itself, from the time when it inhabited the little district of Angeln on the Baltic coast of Sleswick down to the time when it had begun to spread itself over three great continents. It is a race which has shown a rare capacity for absorbing slightly foreign elements and moulding them into conformity with a political type that was first wrought out through centuries of effort on British soil; and this capacity it has shown perhaps in a heightened degree in the peculiar circumstances in which it has been placed in America . . . We may go on to consider some aspects of the work which the English race has done and is doing in the world . . .

When the highly-civilized community, representing the ripest political ideas of England, was planted in America, removed from the manifold and complicated checks . . . of the Old World, the growth was portentously rapid and steady. . . The assaults of barbarism constituted only a petty annoyance as compared with the conflicts of ages which had gone on in Europe. There was no occasion for society to assume a military aspect. Principles of self-government were at once put into operation, and no one thought of calling them in question. When the neighboring civilization of inferior type - I allude to the French in Canada - began to become seriously troublesome, it was struck down at a blow. When the mother-country, under the guidance of an ignorant king and short-sighted ministers, undertook to act upon the antiquated theory that the new communities were merely groups of trading-stations, the political bond of connection was severed. . .

It is enough to point to the general conclusion, that the work which the English race began when it colonized north America is destined to go on until every land on the earth's surface that is not already the seat of an old civilization shall become English in its language, in its political habits and traditions, and to a predominant extent in the blood of its people. The day is at hand when four-fifths of the human race will trace its pedigree to English forefathers, as four-fifths of the white people in the United States trace their pedigree today. The race thus spread over both hemispheres, and from the rising to the setting sun, will not fail to keep that sovereignty of the sea and that commercial supremacy which it began to acquire when England first stretched its arm across the Atlantic to the shores of Virginia and Massachusetts. The language spoken by these great communities will not be sundered into dialects like the language of the ancient Romans, but perpetual intercommunication and the universal habit of reading and writing will preserve its integrity; and the world's business will be transacted by English-speaking people to so great an extent, that whatever language any man may have learned in his infancy he will find it necessary sooner or later to learn to express his thoughts in English. . .the language of Shakespeare may ultimately become the language of mankind.

. .

War, as we have seen, is with barbarous races both a necessity and a favourite occupation. As long as civilization comes into contact with barbarism, it remains a too frequent necessity.

. . . Thus we may foresee in general outline how, through the gradual concentration of the preponderance of physical power into the hands of the most pacific communities, the wretched business of warfare must finally become obsolete all over the globe. The element of distance is now fast becoming eliminated from political problems, and the history of human progress politically will continue in the future to be what it has been in the past, - the history of the successive union of groups of men into larger and more complex aggregates. As this process goes on, it may after many more ages of political experience become apparent that there is really no reason, in the nature of things, why the whole of mankind should not constitute politically one huge federation, - each little group managing its local affairs in entire independence, but relegating all questions of international interest to the decision of one central tribunal supported by the public opinion of the entire human race. I believe that the time will come when such a state of things will exist upon the earth, when it will be possible . . . to speak of the United States as stretching from pole to pole, - or, with Tennyson, to celebrate the "parliament of man and the federation of the world." Indeed, only when such a state of things has begun to be realized, can Civilization, as sharply demarcated from Barbarism, be said to have fairly begun. Only then can the world be said to have become truly Christian. Many ages of toil and doubt and perplexity will no doubt pass by before such a desideratum is reached. Meanwhile it is pleasant to feel that the dispassionate contemplation of great masses of historical facts goes far towards confirming our faith in this ultimate triumph of good over evil. Our survey began with pictures of horrid slaughter and desolation; it ends with the picture of a world covered with cheerful homesteads, blessed with a sabbath of perpetual peace.