



Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act (Contention; 7)

Andrew Gyory

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The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred practically all Chinese from American shores for ten years, was the first federal law that banned a group of immigrants solely on the basis of race or nationality. By changing America's traditional policy of open immigration, this landmark legislation set a precedent for future restrictions against Asian immigrants in the early 1900s and against Europeans in the 1920s.

Tracing the origins of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Andrew Gyory presents a bold new interpretation of American politics during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. Rather than directly confront such divisive problems as class conflict, economic depression, and rising unemployment, he contends, politicians sought a safe, nonideological solution to the nation's industrial crisis--and latched onto Chinese exclusion. Ignoring workers' demands for an end simply to imported contract labor, they claimed instead that working people would be better off if there were no Chinese immigrants. By playing the race card, Gyory argues, national politicians--not California, not organized labor, and not a general racist atmosphere--provided the motive force behind the era's most racist legislation.

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