Lesson 2

Student Handout 2.2—Primary Sources on the Causes of Industrial Imperialism

Document A.
An excerpt from a speech that Jules Ferry, Premier of France, delivered before the French National Assembly, July 28, 1883

In the area of economics, I 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 own rich and hard working country: the need for export markets. Is this some kind of chimera? Is this a view of the future or is it not rather a pressing need, and, we could say, the cry of our industrial population? I will formulate only in a general way what each of you, in the different parts of France, is in a position to confirm. Yes, what is lacking for our great industry, drawn irrevocably on to the path of exportation by the (free trade) treaties of 1860, what it lacks more and more is export markets. Why? Because next door to us Germany is surrounded by barriers, because beyond the ocean, the United States of America has become protectionist, protectionist in the most extreme sense, because not only have these great markets, I will not say closed but shrunk, and thus become more difficult of access for our industrial products, but also these great states are beginning to pour products not seen heretofore into our own markets. …

At this time, as you know, a warship cannot carry more than fourteen days’ worth of coal, no matter how perfectly it is organized, and a ship which is out of coal is a derelict on the surface of the sea, abandoned to the first person who comes along. Thence the necessity of having on the oceans provision stations, shelters, ports for defense and revictualling. (Applause at the center and left. Various interruptions.) And it is for this that we needed Tunisia, for this that we needed Saigon and the Mekong Delta, for this that we need Madagascar, that we are at Diego-Suarez and Vohemar and will never leave them! (Applause from a great number of benches.) 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 forth of institutions” (Interruptions and laughter on the left and right) that they are great at this hour. …


What are Jules Ferry’s fundamental arguments in favor of imperial expansion? [Common Core State Standards, 9-10, Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source.]
Document B.
French economist Charles Gide writing in 1885

If we consider particularly the case of France the arguments of the adversaries of a colonial policy take on a special force.

First, regarding emigration, France has no one to spare. Its population is sparse and grows so slowly that it is only foreign immigration that will fill the country.

France … has no merchandise to export. French industry specializes in making expensive and high quality, even luxury goods. It is not for selling to the Indochinese who live on a fistful of rice, nor for the Blacks in the Congo who dress in a swatch of cotton cloth …

The profit that the inhabitants of a country make from founding colonies thus appears uncertain; the profit that the State could make appears even more problematic. This [revenue to the State] … is the goal that states pursue when setting up colonies, but experience teaches them that this is a mirage. Everywhere, it is the [capital] that pays dividends to its colonies.


Do Gide’s views on imperial expansion differ from Ferry’s (Document A)? If so, in what ways? How does Gide support the argument that the French economy will not benefit from imperial expansion? [Common Core State Standards, 9-12, Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author’s claims.]

Document C.

Although the new Imperialism has been bad business for the nation, it has been good business for certain classes and certain trades within the nation. The vast expenditure on armaments, the costly wars, the grave risks and embarrassments of foreign policy, the stoppage of political and social reforms within Great Britain, though fraught with great injury to the nation, have served well the present business interests of certain industries and professions. …

If the £60,000,000 which may now be taken as a minimum expenditure on armaments in time of peace were subjected to a close analysis, most of it would be traced directly to the tills of certain big firms engaged in building warships and transports, equipping and coaling them, manufacturing guns, rifles, and ammunition, supplying horses, wagons, saddlery, food, clothing for the services, contracting for barracks, and for other large irregular needs. Through these main channels the millions flow to feed many subsidiary trades, most of which are quite aware that they are engaged in executing contracts for the services. Here we have an important nucleus of commercial Imperialism. Some of these trades, especially the shipbuilding, boiler-making, and gun and ammunition making trades, are conducted by large firms with immense capital, whose heads are well aware of the uses of political influence for trade purposes.

These men are Imperialists by conviction; a pitiful policy is good for them. With them stand the great manufacturers for export trade, who gain a living by supplying the real or artificial wants of the new countries we annex or open up. Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham, to name three representative cases, are full of firms which compete in pushing textiles and hardware, engines, tools, machinery, spirits, guns, upon new markets. The public debts which ripen in our colonies, and in foreign countries that come under our protectorate or influence, are largely loaned in the shape of rails, engines, guns, and other materials of civilization made and sent out by British firms. The making of railways, canals, and other public works, the establishment of factories, the development of mines, the improvement of agriculture in new countries, stimulate a definite interest in important manufacturing industries which feeds a very firm imperialist faith in their owners.

The proportion which such trade bears to the total industry of Great Britain is very small, but some of it is extremely influential and able to make a definite impression upon politics, through chambers of commerce, Parliamentary representatives, and semi-political, semi-commercial bodies like the Imperial South African Association or the China League. …


Compare the views of Hobson, Ferry, and Gide on imperial expansion. How does Gide’s critique of French imperialism differ from Hobson’s views on British imperialism? [Common Core State Standards, 9-12, Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics.]

**Document D.**
A letter from British missionary John G. Paton urging annexation of the New Hebrides Islands (1883).

The thirteen islands of this group on which life and property are now comparatively safe, the 8,000 professed Christians on the group, and all the churches formed from among them are, by God’s blessing, the fruits of the labors of British missionaries, who, at great toil, expense, and loss of life have translated, got printed, and taught the natives to read the Bible in part or in whole in nine different languages of this group, while 70,000 at least are longing and ready for the gospel. On this group twenty-one members of the mission families died or were murdered by the savages in beginning God’s work among them, not including good Bishop Peterson, of the Melanesian mission, and we fear all this good work would be lost if the New Hebrides fall into other than British hands.

For the above reasons, and others that might be given, we sincerely hope and pray that you will do all possible to get Victoria and the other colonial governments to help and unite in urging Great Britain at once to take possession of the New Hebrides group. Whether looked at in the interests of humanity, or of Christianity, or commercially, or politically, [surely] it is most desirable that they should at once be British possessions.


How do John Paton’s arguments for British imperial expansion differ from those of Jules Ferry’s advocacy of French expansion? [Common Core State Standards, 9-12, Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics.]
Cecil Rhodes, the late nineteenth-century diamond magnate and prime minister of the Cape Colony in South Africa, on the subject of British imperialism. This selection comes from a “confession of faith” that Rhodes wrote while he was a young student at Oxford University.

It often strikes a man to inquire what is the chief good in life; to one the thought comes that it is a happy marriage, to another great wealth, and as each seizes on his idea, for that he more or less works for the rest of his existence. To myself thinking over the same question the wish came to render myself useful to my country. I then asked myself how could I and after reviewing the various methods I have felt that at the present day we are actually limiting our children and perhaps bringing into the world half the human beings we might owe to the lack of country for them to inhabit than if we had retained America there would at this moment be millions more of English living. I contend that we are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race. Just fancy those parts that are at present inhabited by the most despicable specimens of human beings, what an alteration there would be if they were brought under Anglo-Saxon influence, look again at the extra employment a new country added to our dominions gives. I contend that every acre added to our territory means in the future birth to some more of the English race who otherwise would not be brought into existence. Added to this the absorption of the greater portion of the world under our rule simply means the end of all wars, at this moment had we not lost America I believe we could have stopped the Russian-Turkish war by merely refusing money and supplies. …

In the present day I become a member of the Masonic order. I see the wealth and power they possess, the influence they hold and I think over their ceremonies and I wonder that a large body of men can devote themselves to what at times appear the most ridiculous and absurd rites without an object and without an end.

The idea gleaming and dancing before one’s eyes like a will-of-the-wisp at last frames itself into a plan. Why should we not form a secret society with but one object: the furtherance of the British Empire and the bringing of the whole uncivilized world under British rule, for the recovery of the United States, for the making the Anglo-Saxon race but one Empire? What a dream, but yet it is probable, it is possible. …


What words and phrases in this selection suggest the influence of nineteenth-century European racial ideology on Rhodes’s thinking? [Common Core State Standards, 11-12, Evaluate an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.]