In *Barbarian Virtues*, historian Matthew Jacobson thoughtfully outlines the dramatic changes in the political and cultural landscape of an evolving “Americanism,” following the Civil War. Spanning from the Centennial Exhibition in 1876 (when the United States proclaimed its power to international eyes and ears) until the beginning of World War I (when America utilized that power through military force), Jacobson examines the formation of a national identity in the midst of expansionist foreign policy abroad and massive population influxes at home. He asserts that from these defining dual developments, an over-the-top confidence in American superiority was manufactured to mask a “plaguing-if-quieter-sense-of self-doubt” (3).

This central thesis becomes powerfully embodied for readers, as Jacobson provides exhaustive evidence—through political documents, travelogues, academic treatises, and visual imagery—of America’s highly racialized anxiety. Moreover, he describes the ways in which the newly expansive economy was put into overdrive by a dependence on immigrant labor on one hand and a reliance on overseas markets to absorb American products on the other. As Jacobson writes, “Immigration and expansion constituted two sides of the same coin.” Furthermore, the massive population increases and interventions abroad, both stemming from the same economic engines of industrialization, generated a fusion of “public discussion of problematic aliens at home” with “national debate over the fitness for self-government of problematic peoples abroad” (4).

Jacobson reminds us that modern American identity was brought into being within a global cauldron of immigration and empire-building. Through this process, there was a sweeping obsession not on ‘sturdy’ American virtues, but rather on barbarian virtues themselves. Jacobson wittily borrows his title from an 1899 quote by Theodore Roosevelt in a transcribed conversation with his psychologist G. Stanley Hall. Roosevelt claims that “Over-sentimentality, over-softness, in fact washiness and mushiness are the great dangers of this age and of this people. Unless we keep the barbarian virtues, gaining the civilized ones will be of little avail” (1). By using Roosevelt’s ironic dichotomy and civilization rhetoric as the theoretical grounding of his argument, Jacobson positions himself to counter the historical erasure and amnesia within collective American memory, regarding both immigration and imperialism.

In particular, Jacobson uses the US involvement in the Philippines at the close of the century, as a springboard for his analysis. First, he wants to awaken our faulty national memory, as the American presence in the Philippines continues to be the “most forgotten war.” From there, he illustrates his theory of collateral damage, in which U.S. imperial strategists used the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico as mere stepping stones to the aggrandized China-market and to the Isthmian Canal. Jacobson goes on to assert that “This approach to entire peoples as pawns in a vast geopolitical game represented a heightened degree of imperialist vision, which was to become standard fare over the course of the twentieth century” (7). Any violation of a colonial subject’s rights was collateral damage in a larger project of global domination through industrial imperialism.
Barbarian Virtues is a forceful book that poignantly reflects the author’s passion to rethink, disrupt, and unravel the myths of American political life and question the tactics of erasure produced to hide our very real legacies of domination and empire-building. The work comes to life with a sense of urgency, as Jacobson contests the assertion that a re-evaluation of history “is worth looking at so closely precisely because neither the processes nor their results are safely fossilized in a bygone epoch,” particularly in an age where dominant notions of national identity are heavily relied on to justify interventionist actions taken in the name of “democracy” (8). More than ever, Jacobson’s contribution to a contested version of American identity should be required reading for all students of history.

Faron Levesque
Smith College