

Document 5.4: Excerpts from William Gladstone's speech to Britain's House of Commons, 1840

Member of Parliament William Gladstone would go on to serve four terms as prime minister of Great Britain (between 1869 and 1893). He is remembered as a humanitarian and a tireless reformer. At the time he gave this speech, his twenty-four-year-old sister was addicted to laudanum, a legal painkiller made up of a mix of red wine and opium. Thomas Macaulay, Secretary of State for War, proposed military action against China. The debates in the press and in Parliament were extensive; many strongly opposed the opium trade.

Does he [Macaulay] know that the opium smuggled into China comes exclusively from British ports, that is, from Bengal and through Bombay? That we require no preventive services to put down this illegal traffic? We have only to stop the sailing of the smuggling vessels...it is a matter of certainty that if we stopped the exportation of opium from Bengal and broke up the depot at Lintin [near Guangzhou] and checked the cultivation of it in Malwa [an Indian province] and put a moral stigma on it, we should greatly cripple if not extinguish trade in it.

[The Chinese government] gave you notice to abandon your contraband trade. When they found you would not do so they had the right to drive you from their coasts on account of your obstinacy in persisting with this infamous and atrocious traffic...justice, in my opinion, is with them [the Chinese]; and whilst they, the Pagans, the semi-civilized barbarians have it on their side, we, the enlightened and civilized Christians, are pursuing objects at variance both with justice and with religion...a war more unjust in its origin, a war calculated in its progress to cover this country with a permanent disgrace, I do not know and have not read of. Now, under the auspices of the noble Lord [Macaulay], that flag is become a pirate flag, to protect an infamous traffic.

Source: Quoted in Hanes, W. Travis III, and Frank Sanello. *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another*. Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002. 78–79.