



Frontier and Region: The West and American Exceptionalism from John Winthrop to Ronald W. Reagan

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Nearly fivescore years have passed since Frederick Jackson Turner gave his paper entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" in the shade of the World Columbian Exposition at Chicago.¹ If, in so doing, he did not change the course of American history, he certainly changed the course of American historiography. His "Frontier Thesis" was to become official doctrine for the next generation of historians, politicians, civil servants, and teachers.

Not that he said anything startlingly new--or perhaps because he did not--but by articulating, in what one of his later critics termed an "unusually happy phrasing," a sweeping vista of the national experience of the American nation from a Western perspective, he struck a central fiber in the nervous system of the nation, thereby dooming the American West forever to remain a frontier, a mythic country—a metaphysical domain—rather than a geographical region.

The object of this essay is to show how the West has remained in the realm of special reality, as a frontier for the East—a workshop for and a repository of *Americanness*—despite its struggle to gain control of its own destiny. If Faulkner's dictum about the South being "a state of mind" has any merit, the

1 Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in Merle Curti et. al., eds., *American Issues: The Social Record, Vol. 2* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1971, 4th Ed. revised), pp. 88-100.

same in even greater measure is true of the West. The West was always—and particularly after 1893—an idea, a general concept, or even a state of mind, and then first and foremost a state of the mind of the outsider, the "Easterner."

Turner's essay gave credence to what had been a fundamental tenet in the national mythology, the uniqueness of the American experience, American *exceptionalism*. From the very inception of the Anglo-Saxon movement across the continent, the West was destined to serve as a colonial hinterland—a Western Reserve as it were—to the larger nation. It never was there in its own right; it was a mere adjunct, an enormous one at that, to the civilized East. The West was a positive concept because it was what made America different—unique—and yet it was not quite housebroken, because it embodied so many of the ambiguities, ambivalences, and paradoxes of the new nation—some of which were a constant source of embarrassment—that it came to be clouded in an aura of disbelief, as a kind of never-never land yonder.

Throughout our own century the West has struggled to rid itself of its frontier image, to shred its role as a symbolic entity of the past and join the ranks of real, geographical regions on an equal footing with other parts of the country. However, it has never quite succeeded in sloughing off its frontier skin; it is too much part of the national ethos. *West* is primarily a navigational term, a cardinal direction. In the context of the "winning of the West" it was a squarely Anglo-Saxon concept. The Spaniards moved north from Mexico while the French penetrated southward from Canada. The Anglo Saxons, however, traversed the country against the natural grain of the land. The West was fought and won, and hence became a process and a metaphor.

The sense of uniqueness is the backbone of American national self-esteem, perpetually reinforced through elaborate annual national rituals, particularly on Thanksgiving Day. The Puritan colonies represented a new start—a clean slate, as it were—"a Citty vpon a Hill ... the eies of all people ... upon [them]."² This sense of uniqueness and its corollary, the sense of mission, constitute the heartstrings of American exceptionalism. And this is exactly the central point of Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis." Clothing his thesis in a quasi-theological lingo, Turner nonetheless lifted the idea out of the exclusive sphere of theology proper and into the realm of civil religion and politics. He made American exceptionalism synonymous with democracy and he linked it inseparably to the West.

His visionary and highly poetic essay was inspired by the terse words of the *Census Report* of 1890, which asserted that one could no longer speak of a continuous frontier line of settlement in the West. To the census Bureau the word "frontier" was a technical term, designating an area in which the population density was between two and six persons to the square mile. To

2 John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in Perry Miller, ed., *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of their Writings*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 199.

historian Turner, however, it contained a whole battery of meanings: the "hither edge of free land," the "meeting point between savagery and civilization," the "line of most rapid and effective Americanization," to mention a few. Moreover, he added a significant sentence: "The term is an elastic one, and for our purposes does not need sharp definition."³

Here Turner was speaking his mind, because to him the frontier was a mystical phenomenon, a sort of enchanted wood in the realm of metaphysics. The crux of his argument reveals the religious dimension of his theory:

This American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating the American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.⁴

Turner's essay was a Westerner's rebellion against the dominance of the "Teutonic germ theory" advanced by his teacher at Johns Hopkins, the Easterner Harry Baxter Adams. At variance with his mentor, Turner claimed that the cleansing and regenerative, if not redemptive power of the Western environment transformed the migrant: "The wilderness masters the colonist," he stated initially. In imaginative and picturesque phrases he described how the American environs stripped the immigrant of his Old World baggage: "But the outcome is not old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs The fact is, that here is a product that is American." Hence the American Adam was a creation of the New World Garden. He was a European truly transformed as "the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality of the American people. In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated and fused into a mixed race."⁵

Out of this mystical process of regeneration grew the American brand of egalitarian democracy. Turner had broadened and reshaped the idea of American exceptionalism, from an elitist notion among William Bradford's and John Winthrop's few Elect in the early New England colonies, into a democratic doctrine for Middle America. And it was in the Middle Region—between the Puritan Northeast and the Cavalier Southeast—that the process had started. However, it was when it reached the Great Valley of the West that it attained its full working power: "It was the nationalizing tendency of the West that transformed the democracy of Jefferson into the national republicanism of Monroe and the democracy of Andrew Jackson.... On the tide of the

3 Turner, *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

4 *Idem.*

5 *Zbid.*, p. 95.

Father of Waters, North and South met and mingled into a nation.... The effect reached back from the frontier and affected profoundly the Atlantic coast and even the Old World."⁶

Not only was the frontier—with all its aspects of the American Dream—conducive to egalitarian democracy; it also wrought profound changes in the individual and collective psyche, molding the American national character. In the closing paragraph of his 1893 essay, Turner sums up the impact of the frontier in this way: "The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics."⁷

Turner's thesis was a rationale for and a justification of the American Dream. But his view was the result of a backward glance—perhaps both romantic and nostalgic—conceived out of the knowledge that the frontier was gone. It was really an epitaph to the pioneer history of the nation. But when the public gratefully grabbed hold of his thesis—firmly with both hands, in a manner of speaking, sensing the mystical dimension of the concept, matching man's immense "capacity for wonder"—most did so without grasping the tragic aspect of his hypothesis: If America owed its democratic spirit and unique characteristics to the existence of free land in the West, there was little reason to rejoice: the frontier was now closed.⁸ Turner, on his part, was quite outspoken on this point, ending his tract in the following manner: "And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."⁹

This point, however, was lost on the larger audience. With real frontier enthusiasm Americans, both learned and lay, refused to balk. The thesis was boiled down and simplified almost beyond recognition as it trickled down from graduate to undergraduate courses, to grade school classrooms and lyceum lecture halls. People capitalized on the positive aspects of the hypothesis: the revitalizing and rejuvenating effect of the American environment with its characteristics of growth, expansion, mobility, and its opportunity of escape. In the frontier thesis they found justification for having it both ways—having their cake and eating it too, as it were.

In retrospect Turner's thesis has proven to be at best inaccurate and, at worst, an entirely false representation of American history. After the obligatory period of mourning set by academic decorum following Turner's death in 1931, his "Frontier Thesis" came under heavy attack. When Turner had claimed that the frontiersman was experimental and innovative, his detractors found the pioneer utterly imitative; while Turner had perceived the frontier as

6 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

8 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Harmondsworth:Penguin, 1979 (1926)), p. 188.

9 Turner, *Op. cit.*, p. 100.

a safety valve for the Eastern cities, his disclaimers turned the tables, maintaining that if there was a safety valve in operation, it was the town and the cities easing the pressure off the Western communities; and whereas Turner had depicted the frontier communities as a testing ground for social mobility, his critics found the social structure of the frontier communities extremely rigid and stable in terms of social stratification, at least after the initial decade of settling.¹⁰ Nonetheless, in one folksy observation, "Turner may have gotten the facts all wrong, but he sure as hell got the truth all right," because his bold thesis expressed what people instinctively felt to be true, what they wanted to believe.¹¹ Despite its public appeal, however, Turner's thesis was rife with ambiguities, paradoxes, and seeming contradictions, although they were not all of his own making.

The return to nature was a return to primitive conditions. Supposedly life under such conditions ennobled the individual, breeding self-reliant yeoman farmers, Jacksonian men in a society free of complex institutions, in keeping with the traditional American myth of the Garden. But nature was also a wilderness, a Darwinian world brutalizing its inmates and blunting their appreciation of complex relations and sophisticated institutions. Turner detected in the frontier community a growth of excessive individualism and a concomitant lack of civic spirit. At the same time that he lauds the frontiersman as a prototype egalitarian democrat who rises against the corrupting and artificial complexity of Eastern institutions, Turner criticizes the contemporary Populists for their preference for inflated money. Says Turner, in his trail-blazing essay: "A primitive society can, hardly be expected to show the intelligent appreciation of the complex business interests in a developed society."¹²

If Turner was a geographical determinist, convinced of the power of the American environment "to master the colonist," he was also a Darwinian believing in the inescapability of social evolution. And in order to have it both ways he invested the American landscape with a mythic dimension, having the American democrat approach closer to perfection on each successive frontier. Turner's frontier was a process—a mobile experiment in democracy—but nevertheless it was also a place, the geographical frontier. And this was his tragic dilemma: his explanation of American exceptionalism rested on the availability of free land. What would happen now that the free land was gone? Like his Puritan forebears on the New England seaboard, Turner was con-

10 See Ray Allan Billington, *The American Frontier Thesis: An Attack and a Defense* (AHA Pamphlet, Richmond, Va.: W. Byrd Press, 1971), pp. 5-9.

11 This observation this author found in a "Western" magazine, appropriately onboard a Western Airlines plane some years ago. Perhaps the best brief evaluation of the impact of the Turner Thesis on the historical profession is Warren I. Susman, "The Useless Past: American Intellectuals and the Frontier Thesis, 1910-1930," *Bucknell Review*, 11 (1963), 1-20.

12 Turner, *Op. cit.*, p. 98.

fronted with the problem of regenerating American innocence and simplicity, and like those early Pilgrims he came up with a kind of Halfway Covenant for the unregenerate. "It is in the realm of the spirit, to the domain of ideals and legislation," Turner wrote in 1920, "that we must look for Western influence upon democracy in our days."¹³

Naturally it was in the West that the nation must look for deliverance. Turner tried to reconcile the opposing poles of frontier simplicity and modern social complexity by landing on an institution born of the American West: the state university. (Appropriately, its legislative basis, the Morrill Act, had been passed the same year as the land bill which came to be the very symbol of frontier democracy, the Homestead Act of 1862). This great educational institution, born of frontier conditions, was to provide the "perennial rebirth" of Western democracy by providing equal opportunities for all Americans, thus replacing the geographical frontier with an urban-industrial frontier operating according to frontier ideals. But Turner was never fully convinced about the viability of the new frontier, and it fell upon his successors, Charles Beard and Carl Becker, to adapt the frontier philosophy to the new realities of an increasingly complex industrial world. But by that time the frontier philosophy had become so deeply imbedded in the national psyche that it had virtually taken on a life of its own: it had become a kind of national self-fulfilling prophecy, steadily growing more elaborate.

Over the years the terminology changed—from physio-geographical to urban-industrial, then business, high-tech, and spatial, although always a new frontier—yet its fundamental characteristics remained the same. At its core was the notion which historian William Appleman Williams has labeled "an infinity of second chances."¹⁴ The frontier was an avenue of escape, a place to run away to and start over again, not only once but several times. The notion of a safety valve was closely related to the accessibility of unlimited resources, abundance. It created unconcern about natural resources, the land and the people. The Western frontier was the budding throw-away society.¹⁵

Historian David W. Noble sees a polarity between *frontier* and *home*. You do not *live* permanently on the frontier—making it your home, sinking roots. You go out to the frontier to fight it out with your adversaries, but you return home to recharge your batteries, to heal, and regenerate.¹⁶ The frontier is a

13 Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962 (1920)), p. 261.

14 William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (New York: Norton, 1988 (1961)), p. 257.

15 For this aspect of the frontier experience, see Gene Marine, *America The Raped: The Engineering Mentality and the Devastation of a Continent* (New York: Discus Books/Avon, 1969).

16 David W. Noble, *Historians Against History: Turner's Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American History* (Minneapolis: U. of Minn. Press, 1965).

battleground or a territory to be explored and mined for its treasures, but it is never a real home, a generational abode. Another intellectual historian, Harold Simonson, argues that the permanent availability of a gateway of escape explains the absence of great literary tragedy in America up to the end of the nineteenth century. In order for a tragic situation to arise, says Simonson, one must be faced with a wall, an absolute obstacle. Otherwise one can always evade the choice.¹⁷ American philosophers have generally emphasized man's free will to choose—as have politicians—and the frontier of abundance provided the American Adam with an extra choice: that of not choosing, but opting for the third alternative—to sun away. The American Adam could preserve his idealism uncorrupted because he could always "cop out," like Huck Finn "lighting out for the Territory."¹⁸

As already mentioned, the culmination point of early triumphant Westernism, as Turner saw it, came with President Jackson's veto against the Second Bank of the United States, the very symbol of Eastern colonial capitalism and an extension of European complexity and Old World aristocratic privilege. In the 1840s and 1850s, Western expansion or "internal improvement" became the key issue in national politics. Politicians and economic developers sensed that the destiny of the nation lay hidden in the vast expanses of the West. Three big exploring expeditions had traversed the region in the first quarter of the century: those led by Lewis and Clark (1804-05), Zebulon Pike (1806), and Stephen H. Long (1820). Confirming Pike's findings, Long proposed that the country which he had traversed should be designated the "Great American Desert" and should be considered "a barrier to prevent too great an extension of [the] population westward."¹⁹

His observation helped implant for years in the American psyche the image of the Great American Desert as a God-given western limit to contiguous American territory. But when American settlers started to swarm into the eastern part of Mexican territory—soon to become the Republic of Texas—the notion of "National Completeness" suddenly became obsolete and a new slogan, "Manifest Destiny," was born.²⁰ Clearly the fate of the Union would be decided in the West, the North seeking dominance through the spread of the

17 Harold P. Simonson, *The Closed Frontier: Studies in American Literary Tragedy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

18 Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Harmondsworth.: Puffin Books, 1986 (1884)), p. 281.

19 Quoted in Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931), p. 157. A good analysis of the idea of the "desert" is found in Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West As Symbol and Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), pp. 201-213.

20 John Louis O'Sullivan, "Annexation," in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, vol. XVII, no. LXXXV, July and August 1845, quoted in Hans Kohn, *American Nationalism* (New York: Collier Books, 1957), pp. 158-160, 188-190.

free states west of the Mississippi, the South entertaining hopes of expanding the plantation system throughout the Southwest.

Beginning in the 1830s, a gradual modification of the Great American Desert myth started to seep into the promotional literature of Western expansion. In keeping with the idea of progress and the American Adam's mandate to subdue nature, the Missourian Josiah Gregg first launched a revolutionary hypothesis regarding Western expansion: "Why may we not suppose that the genial influences of civilization—that extensive cultivation of the earth—might contribute to the multiplication of showers, as it certainly does fountains?... At least ... many old settlers maintain that the droughts are becoming less oppressive in the West."²¹

As Henry Nash Smith points out in his path-breaking study on the West as symbol and myth, entitled *Virgin Land*, by building irrigation systems and developing "dry farming" methods—which were the equivalent of increasing the rainfall—the settlers bore out the implication of the Garden Myth. In Smith's words, "the myth of the garden was contrary to the empirical possibilities on the plains, but it was true to the course of history."²²

Western expansion seemed to be blessed by the Supreme Being; the agrarian republic was to extend across the Great Plains. Promoters of the Trans-continental Railroad eagerly seized the new prospects. The railroad had originally been conceived of as a link between the two settled parts of the country, across the intervening arid lands. A series of exceptionally wet years after the Civil War lent credence to the slogan "the rain follows the plow," a terse epigram with a dimension of magic and myth, finally honed out by Charles Dana Wilber, connoting the most sacred of agrarian symbols of calling down life-giving waters upon the land.²³

In short, not only the Great Plains, but the apparently arid lands beyond the Great Divide, might be fit for settlement by homesteaders, to string together a republic of yeomen farmers "from sea to shining sea." In consequence, with blatant disregard for the reports of experts on the cultivation of arid lands—recommending homesteads of 640 acres (a section) beyond the line of twenty inches of annual rainfall (app. the 100th meridian)—Congress extended the original Homestead Act, based on the quarter section. Wishful thinking, grounded in American exceptionalism, demanded the extension of the yeoman republic based on Eastern conditions across the continent in harmony with a supposedly divine plan for the nation.

Jefferson Davis' ill-fated Camel Experiment must be seen against this background. As Secretary of War the would-be President of the Confederate States of America in 1855 sent a subordinate to the Levant to purchase two shiploads

21 Nash Smith, p. 208.

22 Ibid., p. 209.

23 Ibid., p. 211.

of camels. A total of about 75 camels landed at Indianola, Texas, in 1857, and were stationed at Camp Verde near the Bandera Pass. The camels were used for transportation in the arid southwestern part of Texas and made at least one expedition to California. Although the animals adapted well and proved useful, the experiment turned into a failure.* Later the incident became the butt of innumerable jokes—a part of southwestern folklore—although the camels squared far better with reality than the myth of the Garden. But the concept of desert animals—alien to American soil to boot—violated the national Garden myth too severely.

On the mythic level the clod-hopper pioneer was no match for the popular imagination. The American Dream certainly offered a core of hard work as a means of self-realization, but it also presupposed a large portion of good luck and had a certain careless happy-go-lucky dimension of dare-devil to it. The mountain man and the roving cowboy were the Western figures that were inflated into heroic stature, by popular literature and, later on, by the Western movie. But it was not the fur-trapping chores of the mountain man—the pneumonia-ridden nights that resulted from exposure to ice-cold mountain streams, nor the drab days of the cowhand on the cattle drive hunting stray calves and pulling stubborn cows out of quagmire swamps—that were focussed on. No, it was the free-wheeling mountain philosopher—the graduate of Rocky Mountain College, as one of them put it—and the saddled *deus-ex-machina* hero, saving towns chronically pestered by baddies before riding off into the eternal sunset.

The national sense of progress meant taming the Western wilderness, imposing regimented civilized order—the rectilinear grid—on the chaos of nature. Yet the concept of nature as a repository of virtue and innocence lived alongside the idea of nature as vicious wilderness, setting up a tension in the American mind. The frontier philosophy demanded that nature as a resource, as a *terra incognita* for exploratory journeys and as an ultimate avenue of escape, be there. It was no mere coincidence that the man who brought the natural conservation movement to the White House was an Easterner gone west to draw on the healing power of the western wilderness. The Rough Rider of San Juan Hill had been a dude rancher in the West. Neither was it a mere coincidence that his friend, Owen Wister—who had spent many a day on the purifying and revitalizing range of Medora, North Dakota, seeking inspiration for his prototypal Western novel, *The Virginian*—was an Easterner. And perhaps it was no happenstance that the nameless hero of his book was a Southerner gone west, emerging out of its cathartic gulches a New Man, the *vanquero* gone proprietor, the New Westerner—a man of substance and a bearer of fundamental values.

When the Cattle Kingdom virtually froze to death in the blizzards of 1886-87, its demise signified the end of the open frontier. However, when the cow-

boy faded away into the sunset, he was not gone forever; he resurfaced years later as a celluloid version on Sunset Boulevard. The movie cowboy, produced in the West primarily by Easterners, was made into a mythic figure as an ultimate refinement of the West to embody the true, fundamental values of the nation refined in the open space of the Great West. His mobility, symbolized in the horse, elevates him above the dirt farmer and the townspeople as a truly Western Knight Errant. He is a free agent, not a man of leisure in the traditional Old World sense with its negative connotations of (alien) absentee ownership, all the same he is chronically unemployed. He is in charge of his own time; he is his own boss, that is he cannot be bossed around. In short, the film cowboy—far from being a working buckaroo—represents a variety of incarnations of the Western spirit, a latter-day Noble Savage.

The concepts of conversion and rebirth, which are such vital ingredients in the Western myth, are indispensable constituents of American Exceptionalism. The selfmade man may be a *reformed* man; a baddie may mend his ways in various ways. The moral dimension of the Western landscape is so strong that even a villain, through sustained exposure, may eventually see the light and "shape up"—often through a cathartic experience, a symbolic rebirth. This tradition runs steadily on, from Plymouth Rock to Beverly Hills. The regenerate is welcomed into the light of grace, on the side of virtue and righteousness, even if he betrays his former friends in the process or, perhaps, particularly then. The noble savage may be a novel savage.

A key phrase is loyalty to high principle. Among the many puzzling paradoxes in American culture inherent in the Western myth is the concept of the West as a playground for unbridled individualism, on one hand, and unquestioned, regimented conformity, on the other, both frequently highlighted by mob justice and "neck-tie parties." Actually, one of the features of American life—epitomized in the West—which has made possible *institutional decentralization*, symbolized by Andrew Jackson's fight against institutional complexity and centralization represented by the Second Bank of the United States and Ronald Reagan's "New Federalism," is the incessant drive towards *ideological centralization* and conformity.

Starting with the Puritans' failure to keep their underlings regimented in a theocratic state, and continuing with the Eastern establishment's realization that the backwoods were slipping out of their control as Daniel Boone guided hosts of emigrants through the Cumberland Gap, the Easterners recognized the need to impose ideological control on the West. The pressure towards conformity of thought was noticed by Alexis De Tocqueville on his Grand Tour of the United States in the 1830s, resulting in his classic *Democracy in America*: "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America.... In America, the majority raises formidable barriers against the liberty of opinion; within these barriers, an author may write what he pleases, but woe him if he goes beyond

them."²⁵ This tendency to tolerate only a core of conventional behavioral patterns and views—the truly Western code, accompanied by "instant lamp-post justice"—is a central trait in Western life as perceived by Easterners.

The "melting pot" described by Turner was primarily an Anglo-Saxon caldron with Anglo-Saxon high priests administering the broth. In electing to become American, the immigrant was expected to shed his past, to slough off his Old World ways. Theodore Roosevelt, the White House resident who had been forged for his national mission in the rugged Bad Lands of the West, put it bluntly: "We can have no 'fifty-fifty' allegiance in this country. Either a man is American and nothing else, or he is not American at all."²⁶ The "Americanism" of the West was mainly "Anglo conformity," so much so that the Mexicans in the Southwest called even the black immigrants from the East "Anglos."

In the tough environment of the elemental West truly indigenous values were to be honed down and sharpened into a clear-cut code. In Owen Wister's novel, *The Virginian*, the New England schoolmarm, Molly Stark Wood, is being lectured on the morality of Western popular justice by Judge Henry, who admits that he occasionally is obliged to waive petty formalities in order that quick, direct justice be carried out: "But so far from being a *defiance* of the law, it is an *assertion* of it—the fundamental assertion of self-governing men, upon whom our whole social fabric is based."²⁷

However, probably nowhere has American exceptionalism made itself felt as strongly as in foreign policy—either in the form of stubborn or splendid isolationism or fervent interventionism, both expressions of a unilateralist position based on the notion of American uniqueness. And again, both trends have seemingly found their most ardent advocates in the West and consequently have been associated in the public mind with "Westernism."

In short, the West is America's "big hang up," a bundle of national superiority-inferiority complexes, an entanglement of paradoxes. The West, as a frontier, is what made America unique and superior, a source of Americanness and Americanism refined—optimism and dynamism, expansion and progress—i. e. opportunities unlimited. But then the West has also been a constant source of embarrassment: the West is "in the sticks," "hick country," home of "hayseeds" and "rednecks," a primitive backyard and primeval attic. To the Easterner, the Westerner is the uncouth, unkempt country-cousin side-

25 Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Abridged edition (New York: New American Library, 1956), p. 117.

26 Theodore Roosevelt, *The foes of Our Own Household* (New York: George H. Doran, 1917), pp. 62-63.

27 Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (New York: Pocket Books, 1977 (1902)), p. 314.

kick. It was this schizoid characteristic of the nation that Turner invited the nation to celebrate.

Writers and artists of the real-life West—the West of ordinary flesh-and-blood people living among tumbleweed, tornadoes, droughts, blizzards, earthquakes, parking meters, supermarkets, pollution, and beautiful sunsets—have struggled for their right to depict life in their province truthfully according to their own lights. More often than not they have, at least partly, failed in their objective, simply because they have not been permitted by Eastern publishers or screen directors to deal truthfully with the real West. By definition Western fiction is the "Western" and Western history the accumulation of lores and legends about great men and events in the distant West. Publishers—speaking for the reading public—want to deal with the West as frontier, not as region. This choice reveals not only a certain time orientation—the past rather than the present—but also a preference for fabrication to fact.

Consequently, the writing of Western writers on Western literature has often taken a defensive bent, since they have found themselves caught up in the superiority-inferiority syndrome in their attempts to justify their position. Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols* (1892) is a case in point.²⁸ Vardis Fisher, Frederick Manfred, Frank Waters, and Wallace Stegner are other examples. The latter has articulated his predicament eloquently in an essay titled "Born a Square—The Westerner's Dilemma." Stegner, an indigenous product of the American and Canadian Wests, complains that the mental map of the United States in the minds of many publishers and editors is "shaped like a dumbbell: New York at one end, California at the other, and United Airlines inbetween." And, mind you, says Stegner, "California is not part of the West. It is about as much the West as Florida is the South; it is less a region than an extension of the main line."²⁹

Stegner points to a new irony in Western life. The New West of the Pacific Rim, which is now being celebrated as the hub of national economic and political life—highlighted in the Reagan White House years—is less a part of the "real West" than an extension of the mythic West, the make-believe world of Hollywood. In California, the ultimate frontier, the American Dream has been allowed to develop almost without restraint because, as California writer Joan Didion puts it in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, "California is a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in an uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried but ineradicable suspicion that things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent."³⁰

28 Hamlin Garland, *Crumbling Idols* (Chicago and Cambridge: Stone and Kimball, 1894).

29 Wallace Stegner, "Born a Square: The Westerner's Dilemma," *The Atlantic Monthly*, (January 1964), 213, p. 48.

30 Joan Didion, *Slouching toward Bethlehem* (New York: Delta Books, 1968), p. 71.

In typical American pragmatic eclectic fashion, Southern California has adopted a Selective version of Turner's frontier theory. Whereas Turner warned against excessive individualism, and in his later years emphasized the barn-raising communal spirit, the collective experience of true westering, California—the final frontier of geography and expectations (in contiguous USA)—has made “absolute freedom, mobility and privacy” its distinctive trademark, capitalizing on what Joan Didion calls “the instinct which drove America to the Pacific ... the desire ... to live by one's own rules.”³¹ That the City of Angels has become the ultimate frontier town is illustrated by the fact that it has no center, no core, no HOME. As one wisecrack phrased it, Los Angeles is “one hundred suburbs in search of a metropolis.”³² It is a city of individualism and rootless anonymity, the most successful attempt at what Philip Slater calls “The Pursuit of Loneliness.”³³

Many of the selfmade men on the California free-enterprise frontier are Easterners gone west to experience a conversion in the Golden State Garden of Eden. Ronald Reagan is a case in point. As a born-again New Westerner he went back to the Atlantic seaboard to bring the revitalizing and rejuvenating influence of the frontier to bear on the nation's political life. To many New Westerners the Old East—including the Rust Bowl of the lower Midwest—is Europe reincarnate: gone stale, decaying, dying. Reagan's inaugural, taking place for the first time in history on the West side of the Capitol building, symbolized the transfer of power from East to West—from Plymouth Rock to the Golden Gate, from the tidewater East to the Pacific Rim, from Madison Avenue to Sunset Boulevard—fulfilling Archbishop Berkeley's prophecy that “westward the course of empire takes its way.”

However, to many traditional Westerners, especially outside Southern California, this change of power center means merely the substitution of one colonial lord for another. Whereas in the past Westerners felt exploited by the railroads and Eastern business interests—inspiring novels such as Frank Norris' *The Octopus* (1901), and the populist revolt—today many Westerners feel that they are being “milked” by the big urban centers, southern California in particular.³⁴

If Americans have followed the command of the Lord to “subdue the Earth,” southern California has followed His dictum more thoroughly than any other part of the country. Here both the myth of the garden and the determination to impose the grid on the land have been implemented in full measure.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

32 Hoyt Gimlin, ed., *American Regionalism: Our Economic, Cultural and Political Makeup* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Editorial Research Reports, 1980), p. 145.

33 Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).

34 Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California; The Epic of Wheat* (Bridgeport, Conn.: Airmont, 1968 (1901)).

Despite the fact that, from a physical point of view, the area was virtually a desert, the Californians decided to make it into a garden. Although California by nature is quite hot in summer, they decided to make it cool. Their resolutions created an enormous demand for water for irrigation and hydro-electric power and, in the case of southern California, the water had to be fetched somewhere else. Whereas two-thirds of the rainfall in California occurs in the north, 60% of the population lives in the south.³⁵

Gigantic aqueducts and canal projects have materialized, for instance the Colorado River Aqueduct leading water across the Colorado Desert from the Parker Dam in the Colorado to the metropolitan region, and the All-American Canal linking the Colorado with the Imperial Valley. Today the area faces a severe water crisis: A US Supreme Court decision a few years ago affirmed Arizona's right to some of the water from the Colorado River which had previously been received by the Los Angeles region. The Central Arizona Project of waterways and aqueducts will divert to its own urban centers such as Phoenix and Tucson about half the water that Los Angeles has been receiving in the past. Furthermore, environmentalists are suing in court to stop the transfer to Los Angeles of water from the Owens Valley and the Mono Lake Basin. Moreover, in 1982 the Peripheral Canal Project, which was to transport water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin delta to southern California, was rejected by the voters.

The water crisis illustrates the powerfulness of the agrarian myth of a yeoman republic and free enterprise individualism. The Reclamation Act (Newlands Act) of 1902 aimed to bring irrigation water to the arid West and settle small farmers on 160-acre homesteads. Over the years the government has looked the other way while agribusiness has established big spreads covering thousands of acres in the San Joaquin Valley in particular. When an activist group, National Land for People, started a campaign to make the authorities enforce the 160-acre limit for federally subsidized water, the big landowners launched a counter-attack. The Farm/Water Alliance — consisting of landowners, water districts, banking and real estate associations — spent \$250,000 a month lobbying in Washington.³⁶ They also filed a suit against the Department of Agriculture for not having submitted an environmental impact statement before issuing the new regulations for enforcement of the act. The end result was an extension of the land allotment to 960 acres per family member, but the Imperial Valley holdings of 530,000 acres were exempted. Congressman George Miller (D., Cal.) called it "the biggest Western stage robbery since Jesse James."³⁷

35 Gimlin, *American Regionalism*, pp. 141-146; Robert Hine, *The American West: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), pp. 350-352.

36 Gimlin, pp. 146-148.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

In the Great Plains the pushing of the Garden Myth eventually created the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. Improved dry-farming methods and other soil-conservation techniques along with federal water projects have alleviated the most acute problems over the years. Today 148,000 farms in seventeen Western states receive federally subsidized water at a fraction of its actual cost. Nonetheless, most southwestern states are fighting each other over water rights, and in most cases the First Americans, the tribal peoples, are caught in the middle. They have in turn filed more than five dozen lawsuits involving practically every water-user system and source in the West, referring to the so-called Winter's Doctrine, which dates from a 1908 US Supreme Court decision giving senior rights to Indian use of water guaranteed by treaties with the government in the late 1800s.³⁸

So in the end it may be water—so symbolically significant to the vitality of the Garden Myth—that checks the modern westering movement from the Frostbelt to the Sunbelt. The Oglalla Aquifer—the huge underground lake which sprawls from northern Texas through parts of Oklahoma, New Mexico, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming and South Dakota—at its present rate of decline may be completely drained early in the next century. Furthermore, the ground water table has been sinking steadily throughout the Southwest over the last twenty years, as a warning of an impending major ecological crisis.³⁹ So, eventually, Americans may be compelled to accept a world of limits, even in the West: a closed frontier. Ironically, the general drought in the Southwest may bring about the redemption of the Old West, the Great Lakes area, as the waterbelt. And in keeping with the mainstay of the frontier philosophy—optimism and the inventive spirit—New Westerners are developing plans to divert water from the Great Lakes to the Southwest. If those plans materialize, one of the earliest myths about the West will come true, at least on the symbolic level: the Passage to India, a waterway to the Pacific.

Towards the end of his life Frederick Jackson Turner devoted his time to the study of sections. What he found, however, reminded him increasingly of the Old World—sectional conflicts and strife—leaving him dispirited and pessimistic about the future of America. This one nation under God, which had stepped outside history to establish the Millennium in timeless perfection, seemed very much of the old order. Today's mounting conflicts of interests among the various states and regions—over water, natural resources, and ecological impact, particularly in the West—may seem to bear him out.

Naturally Turner's sectional theory had no charm for the American public. His frontier theory, on the other hand, has continued to exert influence both on the symbolic and practical levels. The New Deal progressives used the closed-frontier argument as a justification for establishing governmental insti-

38 *U.S. News and World Report*, Oct. 31, 1983, p. 60.

39 *Ibid.*, 59.

tutions and huge federal projects—such as taming the Colorado and the Columbia rivers—as an urban-industrial frontier, a substitute for the geographical frontier of opportunities, merely an extension of Turner's perception of the role of the state university. John F. Kennedy resurrected the frontier thesis in glory, cashing in on its symbolic content, by declaring a "New Frontier" of opportunities. For the nation had never been willing to let go the notion of a frontier of unlimited opportunities. Without it the notion of American exceptionalism could not be sustained.

By the late seventies the nation had repeatedly been told, by experiences at home and abroad—the Vietnam disaster, the energy crunch and, finally, the Iran hostage crisis—that Americans too were living in a world of limits, like other peoples. Then America was ready for a new frontiersman, the Great Communicator, a man reborn in the Great West. In his *Inaugural Message* in 1981, Ronald Reagan reminded his people about the symbolic significance of the West: "This is the first time in our history that this ceremony has been held ... on this West Front of the Capitol." Underscoring this point, he also admonished the nation about their special mission: "It is time for us to realize that we are too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams."⁴⁰ As his first period of tenure in the White House was nearing the end, he declared, in his *State of the Union Message* in 1984: "There is renewed energy and optimism throughout the land. America is back—standing tall, looking to the 80's with courage, confidence, and hope.... Send away the hand-wringers and doubting Thomases.... We can develop America's next frontier."⁴¹

And to a people whose response to shortage always has been to bake a bigger pie—never to consider redistributing the pieces to make it go around—it was equally reassuring to hear him explain, in his *Inaugural Message* in 1985, that Americans again were living in a world without limits: "We believed then and now there are no limits to growth and human progress when men and women are free to follow their dreams."⁴² It was the frontier idea all over again, being received with ovations. Can a historical theory with that kind of vitality, resilience, and staying power—giving expression to the most intense wishes of a nation—ever be proven false?

40 Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address," Jan. 20, 1981.

41 "State of the Union Message," Jan. 25, 1984.

42 "Inaugural Address," Jan. 21, 1985.