

Frontiers, Empires, and the New World: The Significance of the Frontier in American Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century frontier profoundly shaped American cultural values and political institutions, and continues to influence the way most Americans look at the world. Studies of how Americans dealt with their western frontier may hold important clues as to how American policy makers and the American public are likely to act in foreign affairs in the coming century.

Introduction

According to Mark Twain, history does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme. Historians challenged to predict the future thus find themselves attempting to guess the next line of a monumental poem. It is rarely an easy task, as predictable rhymes usually reflect poorly on the poem, and the poetry of human history is an artistic epic full of complexity and diversity, and yet remarkable subtlety. While we cannot predict the future, we can seek to understand the baseline patterns, what the Annales school of historians would call “the long durée,” that inform our view of the world. Cultural historians particularly seek to understand the intellectual framework—the worldviews—that policy makers construct to understand their world. It is usually within these frameworks that policy makers attempt to interpret the often unexpected events that challenge them, and fashion appropriate responses.

Recent American policies towards the rest of the world, especially President Bush’s doctrine of “pre-emptive warfare” and the invasion of Iraq, seem to mark a dramatic departure from previous practices. A number of studies have suggested that the United States has taken an imperialistic turn—a development a few have cautiously applauded, but most have criticized.¹

1 See for example Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U. S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2002); Andrew Bacevich, ed., *The Imperial Tense: Prospects and Problems of American Empire* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2003); Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin Moore, eds., *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power* (New York and London: The New Press, 2006); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire* (New York: The

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In seeking to understand American motives, some have placed the source of recent developments solely within the Bush administration, while others have noted a trend that was developing since the end of the Cold War. The quagmire that seems to have engulfed US troops in Iraq has also been compared to the quagmire of Vietnam, and the blind idealism of current policy makers has been compared to that of Woodrow Wilson's administration.

These comparisons suggest the patterns, or "rhymes," within American foreign policy that may indicate the worldview of current American policy makers. Yet historians who search for such comparisons rarely go farther back than one hundred years for their precedents, usually marking the 1898 Spanish American War as the beginning of the nation's imperial ambitions.² However a story's meaning often depends upon where you begin the tale.³ As a cultural historian of the American frontier, I have often found this late nineteenth century beginning of American imperialism puzzling. At the time of the Spanish American War, the acquisition of overseas possessions was criticized by a number of prominent Americans who claimed that it was contrary to the nation's anti-imperialistic origins.⁴ Much too often, I fear, diplomatic

Penquin Press, 2004); Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *The New American Empire* (New York and London: The New Press, 2005); David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Josef Joffe, *Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006); John B. Judis, *The Folly of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

² Not all analysts begin their study with the 1898 war, though most do see the experience as one that was profoundly different than what came before. Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997) does begin his study of American foreign policy with the colonial period, but sees a striking change coming with the Spanish-American War. Anders Stephanson, "A Most Interesting Empire" in Gardner and Young, *The New American Empire*, p. 253-275, makes a case remarkably similar to my own in this paper regarding the origins of American imperialism dating to the founding fathers, but does not make the frontier connection that I believe is vital.

³ William Cronon makes this point most elegantly in "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History*, 78 (March 1992), p. 1347-1376, in which he notes that interpretations of the Dust Bowl vary tremendously based simply on when they begin or end their narratives. Interpretations that begin with pioneers plowing up the plains topsoil and seeing it all blow away emphasize the damage mankind has done to the environment; narratives that extend the story to the 1940s and 1950s tend to emphasize the heroic recovery of mankind over the environment. Likewise, where we begin and end the story of American foreign policy can have a large impact on the lessons we draw from our studies.

⁴ See for example Robert L. Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898-1900* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

historians have taken these claims at face value, when the actual history of the United States up to that time does not bear out these assertions. Indeed, a closer look at the founding of the nation and of its westward-moving frontier would suggest that imperialism was very much a part of American foreign policy from the beginning.

That imperialism, however, was not the imperialism of nineteenth century Britain or ancient Rome. Indeed, recent studies of American foreign policy have stumbled badly over the concept of American imperialism.⁵ To some, America is an empire on par with that of Rome or Britain, while to others, America is not at all imperialistic. Some have tried to define the word “empire” in ways that promote whichever position they take towards American imperialism, or have tried to find different words to describe it, such as “hegemony” or “global leadership.”⁶ Others have tried to trace the changing American attitudes towards imperialism. Few, it strikes me, have tried to find the source of America’s imperial behavior.

What I wish to propose is that American Imperialism is real, that it has been a remarkably consistent feature of American foreign policy since its founding, and that as an intellectual framework it continues to have a powerful influence on American policy makers and the American public today. At the same time, though, I would also propose that comparisons between American imperialism and that of Britain or Rome obscure more than they illuminate. American imperialism is the distinct product of its own unique history, and has been significantly shaped by what Walter Prescott Webb and more recently William McNeill has called “the Great Frontier.” Understanding the origins of American imperialism, I believe, is

⁵ Bacevich, ed., *The Imperial Tense* nicely summarizes the different views of “imperialism” both in his introduction and in the articles included in this volume, including one by Victor Davis Hanson (noted and cited below) that rejects the notion of American imperialism outright.

⁶ For a good discussion of this, see Niall Ferguson, *Colossus*, p. 3-24.

critical to understanding its more recent day context. What I offer are not final answers, but a broader approach to understanding the origins of America's imperialistic foreign policies.

Origins: The Great Frontier

Americans have traditionally distinguished between “empires” and “frontiers.” During the nineteenth century, Britain had an empire, while the United States had a frontier. As descendents of the American Revolution, we have usually denied our imperial tendencies and (until recently) boasted of our frontier character. Only when the United States acquired overseas possessions such as the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, etc., did we make the transition to empire—a transition that we also seemed to shrink from rather quickly. Indeed, a number of observers noted how very short-lived was America's experiment in empire. In such a view, America dallied with this forbidden fruit only marginally and temporarily, and then rejected imperialism.⁷

Yet this distinction between frontier and empire is problematic at best. In studying the American Frontier, a number of historians have placed America's westward movement within the context of a much larger global movement called “the Great Frontier.”⁸ Frederick Jackson

⁷ The use of the term “frontier” has fallen out of favor in recent years, especially among historians of the American West. See for example Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991); Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); and Richard W. Etulain, ed., *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991). Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), a recent history of the West that was noted for not once using the “f” word. Bacevich, *American Empire*, includes a good discussion of American attitudes towards “empire,” including its recent almost exclusive use in terms of the Soviet Union.

⁸ William H. McNeill nicely summarizes this historiography in *The Great Frontier* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983); The major relevant texts are Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, [1893] 1986); Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, [1964], 1986); Louis Hartz, *Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969).

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Turner in the 1890s argued that the American frontier was the leading edge of European influence, the line between civilization and savagery, and where Europeans were “Americanized.” Walter Prescott Webb in the 1950s coined the idea of a “Great Frontier,” significantly enlarging the phenomenon of the American frontier into merely one aspect of a larger global movement. Louis Hartz in the late 1960s found in the world’s various frontiers the creative mixing of European and indigenous elements. William McNeill in an elegant pair of lectures in 1983, ninety years after Turner’s presentation, brought these together and noted that the Great Frontier was a remarkably useful framework for global analysis. He argued that the Great Frontier was caused by the jump in communications and transportation technology that emerged around 1500 and helped launch the seaborne explorations of the likes of Columbus and Magellan. But he further argued that a land-based frontier accompanied the oceanic frontier over the following centuries, striking eastward across Eurasia and Siberia as well as westward across North and Central America.⁹

For each of these historians, the great engine of historical change was the meeting and interaction of different cultural groups on this frontier. McNeill argues that there was a great difference in the skill levels of Europeans and non-Europeans, and that interactions between them provided a great deal of technological innovation. He also argued that the frontier was a place of increased contrasts between freedom and authority. The greatest common characteristic of the frontier was the lack of an adequate labor pool in order for Europeans to impose their will in frontier areas. Thus slavery and indentured servitude increased in the colonies and serfdom in Russia. Bondage and strictly authoritarian legal systems characterized the frontier, at least up until about 1750, rather than the traditional notion of freedom. At the edge of the frontier some

⁹ McNeill, *The Great Frontier*, p. 3-9.

individuals could escape direct controls by fleeing into the wilderness, but even these were dependent upon some items of European manufacture, such as guns and ammunition, or were so thinly spread at the edge of the frontier as to need the military protection of the mother country.¹⁰ Perhaps the second great characteristic, at least of the American frontier, was insecurity. For all its potential freedom and opportunity, it remained open to attack from outsiders—ironically, most often displaced “insiders” who found no choice but to resist the frontier or be destroyed by it. Dealing with these threats required constant vigilance, and commitment to a military policy ranging from guerilla fighting to keep the outside threat at bay, to complete military domination aimed at eliminating the threat for good.¹¹

From this brief summary we can see the origins of four important cultural legacies of the frontier in current-day American foreign policy: first, the ideal of a broad, diverse, and negotiated community; second, devotion to continual expansion of that community; third, the importance of technology for advancement within that community; and fourth, the reliance on military power to safeguard the community from outside threats.

The League of the Frontier

The predominant characteristic of the frontier is that it is a “middle ground,” a place of cultural negotiation, enacted in an arena without a dominant political authority.¹² It is on the frontier that one can escape from religious, ethnic, social, and political authorities. The frontier is a place of diverse, mobile, and weakened populations that need to negotiate with each other to

10 McNeill, *The Great Frontier*, p. 9-29.

11 Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as a Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, [1950] 1970).

12 For a good discussion of how this process worked, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

survive. The community that comes into being on the frontier is a society of compromise and negotiation, not a society of authoritarianism. The moment a single authoritarian regime takes hold, the middle ground—and the potential attractions it holds—vanish.

It is from this society that the United States itself emerged. Each of the thirteen original colonies was born of the British participation in the Great Frontier, and had long experienced frontier conditions. By roughly 1760, the American colonies were undergoing a tremendous transformation directly tied to the Great Frontier. The American population had grown and diversified to the point that it could maintain a strong frontier push of its own, supported by its own numbers and its now growing manufacturing. Having recently defeated New France, it acquired that vast territory for future expansion. Yet at just the moment that the colonies were preparing their own imperial ventures westward, Great Britain tried to reign in and redirect colonial expansion to serve its own ends, declaring the west off limits to American would-be imperialists/pioneers, while demanding imperial taxes to support and maintain its own imperial directives. American colonists rebelled, demanding the right to direct their own affairs rather than having them directed by a distant imperial core.¹³

What united them, however, was not so much their “American-ness;” ironically their sense of continental unity was much more fully conceptualized in London than in Boston, New York, or the Virginia backcountry. Instead, the colonists fought each other over boundary titles and trading rights both within the empire, between the colonies, and between themselves and their Indian neighbors. Nor were colonists even united within a single colony. They were often bitterly divided by religion, not only between different religions and sects, but even between “New Lights” and “Old Lights” in the aftermath of the Great Awakening; by ethnicity, which not

¹³ Frederick Merk, *History of the Westward Movement* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 61-86.

only tended to views Africans as slaves separate from the rest of the population, but also new immigrants, such as the Scotch-Irish, who were pushed into western defensive buffer zones as opposed to coastal and tidewater communities; as well as a myriad of other social, political, and economic divisions.¹⁴

When it came time to form their new nation, the founding fathers found in the halls of the Continental Congresses the middle ground of a frontier community—a negotiated gathering in which no faction had the power to enforce its own authority over the whole. Inter-colonial meetings such as these had failed to produce any agreements in 1754 during the Seven Years War, and produced only weak agreements in the opening years of the Revolution. The vote for independence itself only came more than a year after Lexington and Concord, and six months after the publication of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*. The original governmental framework of the new nation, the Articles of Confederation, effectively display the distrust the States had for each other more than any common interests; the debates that took place years later during the Constitutional Convention show that this distrust did not lessen over time.

The new nation that the founders established has always reflected this sense of frontier negotiation rather than political unity. The title itself—the “United States of America”—suggest the inherent tension between a league of states and a single American identity. In the Articles of Confederation, the original governing framework of the new nation, Congress specified that the United States—plural—were in fact a “firm league of friendship” entered into by the states severally. And though this framework was replaced in 1789 by the Constitution, it is worth noting that the new framework sought to establish “a more perfect union,” but not an absolute

¹⁴ See Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Gary B. Nash, *Red, White, and Black*, Fifth Edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, Prentice-Hall, 2006)

union. Indeed, for the first hundred years the nation was most commonly referred to in the plural—“*these* United States *are*,” rather than “*the* United States *is*.”¹⁵

From the beginning, Americans have been more comfortable with a political structure—a league of states—than with a single authoritarian nation-state. This structure is a legacy of the Great Frontier, and in its governing framework that spirit is institutionalized in the shared sovereignty of the federal government and the states, the checks and balances of its various branches, and the short terms and frequent elections which limit the powers of any political figure or party. It is a society made up not of a dominant political entity—a king, for instance—but organized around negotiated roles between equals in a dynamically changing league of friendship. The seaborne empires of Spain, Britain, France, and the Netherlands, as well as the land-based frontier of Russia, were all the extension outward of European powers. They were at their heart European ventures propelled by European powers. The British empire, for example, bore the stamp of British society, culture, and political authority; it was the British-ness of these colonies that marked them for what they were. The United States, however, by rejecting this central identity, radically redefined what imperialism was. The Revolution, seen from the perspective of the Great Frontier, was brought about not by the emergence and triumph of a new “American” character, but by the emergence of a Frontier character; Americanism, rather, was constructed by the political elite of that time and later decades to gain at least some handle of authority over the constantly negotiated world of the frontier. Appeals to Americanism as being more critical than state or regional identity rang hollow until well after the Civil War. A mass

15 Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 145, argues that the Gettysburg Address alone changed this grammatical construction; in reality, it lasted somewhat longer, lingering through the late nineteenth century.

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culture that was “American” did not really begin to emerge until the early decades of the twentieth century, with the arrival of movies, radio, automobiles, and eventually television.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nation was considered to be something much looser than a single political union. The very malleability of the states, especially during the nineteenth century, is remarkable. The South was not, after all, the first block of states that threatened to secede. New York hinted that it would not join the United States at all when the Constitution was first proposed; New England threatened to secede near the end of the War of 1812; Utah was reluctant to join at all, and was established as a refuge from the United States; California hinted it would not join if Congress did not resolve its own inability to administer the West in the wake of the Mexican War. And this is to say nothing of Texas, whose admission was held up by Congress for nearly a decade, so that its admission could be paired with a northern “free” state—a process that had hindered the admission of several states following the deadlock over Missouri. Within this system each state has not only written its own unique constitution, but many have rewritten them more than once.

Perhaps the most malleable of all states was Virginia, the oldest colony within the new union, as well as the birthplace of several of the nation’s framers—including James Madison, who is given much of the credit for drafting the U.S. Constitution, and Thomas Jefferson, whose contributions to the Northwest Ordinances, the framework that would essentially govern the admission of new states to the union, or league. As the first English colony, Virginia’s boundaries were originally immense, but were reworked and reduced throughout the colonial period. After the Seven Years War Virginia administered Illinois as part of its own jurisdiction. By that time, though, it had also encouraged a backcountry migration to act as a buffer for the seaboard settlements, a backcountry that would soon expand into Kentucky and claim its own

statehood. The demographic and economic differences between the tidewater and the state's mountainous west, however, remained in place, and when Virginia seceded from the union, West Virginia was torn from the state and made a separate state. Virginia then was reconstructed and re-entered the union with a new federally mandated state constitution.¹⁶

The idea of a "league" has had long legs in American history, whether it was called a league of states, a league of nations, or more recently, a world trade organization or even a coalition of the willing. As a nation always in the process of "becoming," the stability of its critical parts—the states themselves—was never critical. Indeed, their inclusion in the union itself was sometimes considered optional.¹⁷

Expansionism

If the spirit and experiences of the Great Frontier are institutionalized in the political framework of the United States, so is its devotion to continual expansion, for only by expanding do frontiersmen find potential profits but also cultural renewal. Americans often remember their Revolution as a rejection of imperialism, but it was hardly that. The founders were active, even aggressive imperialists. The first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, referred to the new United States as "an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world."¹⁸ And

16 L. Scott Philyaw, *Virginia's Western Visions: Political and Cultural Expansion on an Early American Frontier* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004) elegantly argues for the importance of Virginia in the formation of the nation's political expansion.

17 Stephen Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors* (New York: New American Library, 1975), makes the point of United States culture in the nineteenth century being characterized by a striving towards "becoming," as opposed to Native American, and particularly Sioux, culture, which was more focused on "being."

18 Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist No. 1," Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Mentor Books, 1961).

even Thomas Jefferson, for all his adherence to political independence, envisioned the new nation in an imperial role, as an empire both of and for liberty.¹⁹

That the United States would be an imperialistic nation by character is not surprising; rather, it would have been shocking had it not been. The nation was formed directly by British imperialism. Those who volunteered to go to Britain's American colonies chose to marry their interests to imperialistic enterprises; those brought forcibly also soon found that their lives were ruled by imperial projects. And British colonists proved themselves to be ambitious imperialists. Several "British" colonies, such as South Carolina, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, were in fact colonies of other colonies. On the verge of the American Revolution, colonial land companies had formed to create new settlements across the Appalachian Mountains.²⁰ Indeed, it was the effort to block colonial expansion across these mountains by the Proclamation of 1763 that set the stage for much of the alienation that would culminate in the Revolution itself. George Washington was only one of many prominent Americans who sought to circumvent the Proclamation Line in order to secure "a good deal of land" to the west.²¹ Later as president, Washington remained almost obsessed with western expansion—and his own ability to make a profit from frontier land speculation—by searching for new ways to facilitate western settlement (especially navigation improvements and canal schemes for the Potomac River, which would

19 Stephanson, "A Most Interesting Empire," p. 257-258, notes the two uses of liberty "of" and "for" that Jefferson envisioned. See also Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and Peter S. Onuf, *Statehood and Union: A History of the Northwest Ordinance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

20 Examples abound of these developments. Peter Wood, *Black Majority* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974) suggests the imperial-mindedness of British colonists, in this case Barbados planters creating a colony of a colony in South Carolina, and the impact their quests for frontier profits had on everyone engaged in the colonies. Charles Royster, *The Fabulous History of the Dismal Swamp Company* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999) nicely details the ambitions of the mainland colonial elite in securing new opportunities for land speculation on the frontier before, during, and after the American Revolution. Philyaw, *Virginia's Western Visions*, elegantly traces the experiences and ambitions of Virginia's colonial elite in establishing further colonial control over an immense backcountry extending for a time over formerly French settlements in Illinois.

21 Philyaw, *Virginia's Western Visions*, p. 62-63.

make his own western holdings more accessible). Through such expansion, however, Washington envisioned not only personal profit but also national greatness.²²

This rejection of British imperialism coupled with the promotion of a new American empire was in the founders' view neither contradictory nor entirely self-serving. Its roots were deep in the experience of the Great Frontier. American in the late eighteenth century was first and foremost a frontier community. The "firm league of friendship" that the founding fathers established in 1776, furthermore, was never meant to be a static entity. The trans-Appalachian west secured by the new nation in the aftermath of the Revolution demanded that the founders consider what kind of an empire they would create, not whether one would be created or not. Through its commitment to frontier expansion, and the legacy of its own various and even competitive colonial origins, as well as the long frontier tutelage from which each state emerged in 1776, the framework of the new government was both expansive and imperial, but instead of projecting the identity of an imperial mother country, the new nation would be organized on and project the negotiated spirit of the frontier. New states would be added, but they would not be forcibly added to the union. Indeed, as no force could be used (the new nation was militarily weak, and suspicious of a standing army), it was initially expected that states could only join by choice. When it was suggested that western colonies seeded by the United States might choose not to join, several prominent American leaders proclaimed that such an event would not be against the interests of the United States, since if the nation were too large it would become unwieldy, and since western nations that sprang from American initiatives would in any case be so similar to the United States in their culture and situation that they would be close allies. Or, to push the

²² Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency, George Washington* (New York: Vintage, 2004), p. 154-156.

idea only to its logical end, such nations would still be within a firm (though perhaps informal) league of friendship.²³

Following the Mexican War and the disastrous struggle over the future of slavery in the new territories, the United States dramatically slowed its expansionist drive. Since California and Oregon were already states by mid-century, it was assumed that the internal territories of the West would eventually become states. But Secretary of State William Seward's suggestions for more expansion—to eventually take control of all of North and South America—went nowhere. Alaska, which was acquired almost immediately after the Civil War, was purchased without enthusiasm and was in part the result of negotiations begun before the war. With the failure to entice British Columbia to enter the union and Congress's rejection of the annexation of Santo Domingo, both in 1870, the drive to acquire new lands to transform into states lost steam.

Yet the inclusion of other "states" into the league—through reciprocity treaties and most notably through the policies of the Open Door—continued in the tradition of a "league of friendship" among states.²⁴ By the time of the Open Door Policy, and Wilson's formulation of a League of Nations, the ideas embodied in both visions were over one hundred years old. Furthermore, as a product of the Great Frontier, their relevance in the twentieth century was not diminished but enhanced. As McNeill formulated the conceptual framework of "the Great Frontier," the revolutions in transportation and communications, that brought different cultures together both externally (on their borders) and internally (through immigration); it did not end in 1890 but continued on through the twentieth century.²⁵ America continued to see relevance in the frontier with boatloads of immigrants arriving in record numbers on its shores, while

23 Philyaw, *Virginia's Western Visions*, p. 95-97.

24 See for example John Bartlet Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle: The Interplay of Canada, the United States, and Great Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945).

25 McNeill, *Great Frontier*, p. 31-61.

American fortunes continued to be hinted at in economic ventures in Mongolia, the Middle East, and elsewhere throughout the world. Under these circumstances, the frontier character of American institutions remained relevant. It became easy to believe that “the American Way of Life” was a system that would be widely accepted because it did not include the political projection of a monarch or a particular homeland, but was suited to the circumstances of a dynamic global community. When in the twentieth century “imperialism” became a nasty word, Americans could with some honesty claim that they were not projecting a political authority into remote regions of the world, but reflecting instead the negotiated, open spirit of the Great Frontier, a place where equality reigned among competing interests, bound by friendship (ie culture and economy) instead of political dominance.

The Engine of Advancement

If negotiation characterizes the Frontier, technology has been its driving engine. Improvements in transportation technology spurred the Europe’s initial expansion, giving Europeans a road upon which to see and interact with the world. But it was also a one-way street: those who possessed the technology directed imperial ventures, choosing the grounds on which interaction would take place—both literally and figuratively. Early advances in navigation skills and ship design and construction gave imperial Europeans the power to dominate the world.

That power, however, was also surprisingly limited; for though ships could travel the seas at will, the number of Europeans that could be carried to new lands was limited. This lack of a sufficient labor pool to emphatically dominate frontier regions was one of the factors that led to the negotiated spirit of the frontier itself. Early imperial settlers solved this problem through

heavy use of indentured servants and slaves. But frontier peoples were also keen on finding technological solutions to the labor problem as well.

The combination of a long frontier period and the vast size and geographical diversity of the North American continent fostered a cultural bent toward innovation. Early forms of this technology included: the American ax; with its balance, it allowed woodsmen to clear three times the amount of forest as a traditional European ax (ie, allowing one man to do the work of three); the “hopper boy,” a mechanical device that fed grain into a mill, which allowed a miller to dispense with the services of an actual human boy to do the same job; the “cotton ‘gin,” that allowed a single operator to clean as much cotton in a single day as it previously took ten workers to do (and turned by a horse or waterwheel, it replaced the labor of fifty workers); the use of interchangeable parts, which allowed unskilled workers to repair weapons and machinery where gunsmiths and blacksmiths were in short supply.²⁶ From the earliest days of the nation, the United States encouraged technological innovation. During the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, the delegates unanimously passed a motion authorizing Congress “to promote the progress of science and useful arts” by granting inventors limited patents. Three years later President George Washington asked Congress to write a more effective patent law, which Congress quickly passed, and immediately began issuing patents.²⁷ Oliver Evans, one of the nation’s first inventors and holder of some of its earliest patents, developed machinery such as hopper boys and grain elevators to make milling less labor intensive; Evans also harnessed

26 Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 19, 70-81.

27 Cowan, *Social History of Technology*, p. 120-122.

steam engines to ships, and envisioned railroads and self-propelled steam-driven devices— forerunners of the automobile—only a few years after the American Revolution.²⁸

This attraction to technology was born in the frontier experience, and became central to the American character. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner noted that a spirit of practicality and inventiveness were hallmarks of the American character. Walter Prescott Webb, who later first described “the Great Frontier,” noted the inventiveness of Americans when faced with the challenges of the Great Plains, who developed barbed wire and simple windmills to make farming and ranching on the plains possible.²⁹

This attachment to technology lies deep in the American identity, so it is no surprise that it would also figure prominently in foreign policy. Tied to the early frontier, technology such as the railroad and the steamboat also extended the American reach across both the continent and the oceans. The Open Door policy of a hundred years ago as well as NAFTA were based on the premise that on a level playing field, American products would have a competitive edge. The American conception of an *open* frontier society is based on the supposed technological advantage of American industry. In an age of the internet and Thomas Friedman’s so-called “Flat World,” American technology is still assumed to make America more competitive, whether based on the steam engine or the search engine.³⁰

Meanwhile, military technology further enhances America’s ability to project military might farther and faster than its enemies. Since 1945 American military power has been based not on manpower but on its technological sophistication, whether symbolized by the atomic

28 Cowan, *Social History of Technology*, p. 70-76.

29 See Turner, “Significance of the Frontier;” Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, [1931] 1981), and Webb, *The Great Frontier*.

30 See Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006); Bacevich, *American Empire*, especially Chapter 4, “Strategy of Openness.”

bomb, the stealth bomber, or the cruise missile. Yet, once again, reliance on technology to make up for the limits of manpower has long been a part of the American way of war. For the ancestor of the cruise missile is the gun boat, and the ancestor of the gun boat is the Kentucky rifle. Each represents a technological ability to strike beyond the limits of an enemy's ability to respond.³¹

Safeguarding the Frontier Community

To Americans, the frontier was a place of opportunity, freedom, and cultural identity. It provided the open marketplace in which participants could interact within a flexible and responsive legal framework. Yet for all its transformative power, it was also a place that was vulnerable to disruption from agents outside the negotiated community. For all its opportunities, the frontier was always understood to be a transitory phase, a fragile place threatened by those who refuse to participate in the frontier vision.

Traditionally this opposition has come from those who have lost their own societies to the expansive community of the frontier—be they Native American Indians, Chinese Boxers, North Vietnamese Communists, or Islamic fundamentalists. Because no single authority dominates the frontier, it is a place where those displaced by the frontier may mount vigorous and often desperate challenges to re-establish their own power. These challenges are truly life-or-death struggles for ultimately the world of the frontier and the world it tries to supersede cannot coexist. Negotiation can be accomplished from *within* the frontier community, but not *between* that community and a differently organized society, particularly an authoritarian regime occupying the same physical space.

31 Bacevich, *American Empire*, p. 148, makes the connection between gun boats and cruise missiles; the earlier linkages are my own.

From this peculiar confrontational situation emerges a distinct military doctrine, one that shifts between conciliation, or attempts simply to impose stability (even on an unstable situation), to constant and escalating guerilla fighting, often climaxing in near total warfare, waged not so much to force an outside community into the frontier league or community, as much as to safeguard the frontier system itself from outside interference. It is this military goal that gives Americans the somewhat paradoxical role of innocent victims fighting a defensive war while ignoring the expansive and destructive qualities of their own society. It allowed American settlers to claim they were victims of treacherous Indian aggression from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, as well as to see view American involvement in South Vietnam in the 1960s or Iraq in the current day as a defensive war.³²

From the perspective of the world, American military dominance is a new phenomenon, dating from the end of WWII and especially from the end of the Cold War.³³ But from the perspective of the United States, such dominance looks different. From within the United States the current military situation points directly back towards the frontier.³⁴

The myth of American safety is that the United States was secure behind two oceans, vast moats that protected the United States from attack. Only in recent times has that moat been breached—by the Japanese in 1941, by Al Qaida in 2001, and by the threat of attack from the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Yet from the beginning of English interest in North America, colonial boundaries were not secure. Indeed the first attempted English settlement at Roanoke in the 1580s vanished, the presumed victim of Native American attack. Indeed, from

32 Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

33 Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) argues that very recently Americans have taken an even more militaristic turn than usual.

34 James Chace, "In Search of Absolute Security," in Bacevich, ed., *Imperial Tense*, makes the compelling case that the ever-widening search for security is a fundamental theme throughout the history of American foreign policy.

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roughly 1600 to 1690 the American colonies stood in constant threat of Indian attack; after 1690, the colonies were threatened by combinations of Indians and competing European colonies—New France and New Spain in particular.

Between 1760 and 1820 the nation's borders were threatened by Indians, especially under Tecumseh, as well as potential British, Spanish, and French interventions in North America. Though this threat lessened considerably after that time, lingering threats remained in the far west, enough to help justify (at least to American policy makers) the seizure of California, the Pacific Northwest, and the use of Regular troops to defeat Western Indian tribes through the 1860s and 1870s. Only by the 1880s did the nation's borders begin to reach a level of calmness that could satisfy the American search for security, and even then, from the 1880s through the 1920s, the calls to remain vigilant found expression in Wild West Shows and early Hollywood westerns. Though threats to American security remained small during this period, enough smaller incidents—such as the Sioux “uprising” which ended at Wounded Knee, and Pancho Villa's raids in the Southwest—suggested that the nation's security still needed military protection.

After World War I the nation might finally have found itself with secure borders, but the threatening moves of Germany and Japan, culminating in the attack on Pearl Harbor, meant that the era of “natural” security for the United States was limited to a period of perhaps only a few decades, in the face of four hundred years of security vouchsafed by military might. The current military dominance of the world might be new, but the reliance on the military for security in a hostile world is quite traditional.

Nor has America's concern for military-based security been the only legacy of the frontier. The preferred mode of fighting—American military doctrine itself—also has a frontier

character. From the beginning, American military forces have been faced with an unconventional enemy—Native Americans, who fought in a much different manner than their European counterparts. This was a fight for survival, in which both sides knew that the loser essentially faced extinction. Unlike the seventeenth and eighteenth century European wars, that were limited in order to preserve the overall economic and political order, warfare in North America approached total war—with no dividing line between combatants and non-combatants, with little thought other than complete annihilation. Yet at the same time this fighting was carried on between small forces—both Native and Colonial—that simply could not afford to take heavy losses. Victories, acquired at heavy losses, could doom both tribes and colonies to ruin. Thus the dilemma: the need for total war balanced by the need to keep losses limited.³⁵

Americans responded to these imperatives in two ways. First, it adopted the irregular fighting methods of guerilla fighters on a widespread level. Colonial militia learned to camouflage their clothing, to fight as individuals under the general command of their officers, and to seek creative attacks against non-military targets in order to break their opponent's will to continue fighting. This new way of fighting was widespread before Robert Rogers first published his guide to frontier fighting in 1765. It has dominated the public imagination of warfare ever since, glorifying the citizen warriors rather than their commanders. It found expression not only in the colonial Indian wars, but in all the Indian wars of the United States, as well as in the Philippines and Vietnam.

Technology was wed to this guerilla war, whether with Kentucky rifles or with jeeps or aircraft. The goal was to fight an irregular war, to hit the enemy in a way that would make him

³⁵ On the colonial wars, see John Ferling, *Struggle for a Continent* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1993); on the development of military doctrine and its differences from European doctrine, see Weigley, *The American Way of War*.

quit the fight, and to do so with the least possible casualties. Recent studies have suggested that American policy makers believe that Americans will not tolerate heavy combat losses, thinking perhaps of the legacy of Vietnam. But Franklin Roosevelt had similar concerns in WWII. And these concerns go much farther back in American history. They are culturally rooted in the frontier experience.³⁶

Yet, for all this insistence of a new way of fighting, it rarely had the intended effect. Guerilla fighters found that they had not eliminated the enemy, but merely temporarily crippled him. In the end, guerilla fighting could devolve into a seemingly endless series of raids and counter raids. As long as either side was unable to achieve a complete victory, the raids continued. It was this mentality that permitted Americans—aggressively pushing into lands held by Native Americans—to envision themselves as defenders, and those being attacked instead of doing the attacking.

But when an outside threat could be dealt with decisively, Americans were willing to use massive force to do so. The use of massive forces to essentially wipe out an enemy was occasionally used during the Indian wars, such as the Puritan attack on the Pequot in 1637.³⁷ It was a central feature of the Seven Years War in North America, when it became British policy to eliminate France altogether from North America. It was adopted by Ulysses Grant in the Civil War, when McClellan's repeated limited campaigns yielded no results.³⁸ It was repeated in both the first and second World Wars, and in the arms race and military build up in the Cold War.³⁹

36 David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), discusses Roosevelt's concerns at some length.

37 Ferling, *Struggle for a Continent*, p. 35-38.

38 See Charles Royster, *The Destructive War* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

39 Weigley, p. 312-398.

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In the end, the rise of America's military might was designed neither to dominate the world nor to conquer its neighbors, but to ensure its own security. If it is put to service now to safeguard American security on a greater scale than ever, it remains essentially defensive in nature—and retains a defensive stance even when acting aggressively. The trap of such a view, however, is that it ends up pitting two foes against each other who both see themselves in defensive roles, unable to do much more than respond to events rather than to shape them. As a result, negotiated ends to conflicts are difficult and rare. To others in the world this may seem, may certainly be, nothing but a sham covering blatant military expansion. To Americans, however, military dominance is designed to ensure security.

However, military dominance, whatever the goal, does tend to bring out the more blatantly imperialistic tendencies of American foreign policy. In an article entitled “What Empire?,” Victor Davis Hanson denies the rise of American Imperialism by asking “Where are America's proconsuls?”⁴⁰ Andrew Bacevich, in *American Imperialism*, gives a compelling answer: they are the regional CINCs, the field commanders-in-chief who, in the last decade, have been given more responsibility for local political as well as military planning. Bacevich notes this development with concern, pointing to General Wesley Clark's actions in Eastern Europe as an example of a particularly bad management of a region by a modern proconsul.⁴¹ Yet the use of military commanders in areas on the frontier of American interests is not new. Bacevich himself refers to Hodge in Germany and MacArthur in Japan following World War II. Yet military commanders were originally used in frontier areas by the United States in the immediate aftermath of the American Revolution, as governors of newly acquired territories. As such, these early American proconsuls were responsible for both military and political activities under their

40 Victor Davis Hanson, “What Empire?” in Bacevich, ed., *Imperial Tense*.

41 Bacevich, *American Imperialism*, Chapter 7 “Rise of the Proconsuls.”

jurisdictions. And as the case of James Wilkinson suggests, these positions had as much authority and room for imperial scheming as Wesley Clark ever imagined.⁴²

In the field of state-building, the United States has at least fifty successfully constructed states to its record. But it also has a record of rebuilding states. The current mess in Iraq might parallel in some ways the problems of state-building in South Vietnam. But it also parallels efforts by the United States to reconstruct the defeated southern states of the Confederacy after the Civil War. In each of these cases the United States attempted to force a government to draft a local government that was in accordance with the US government. All have seen the use of military “proconsuls” who attempted to ensure the friendliness of the new governments to US interests. The effort failed in Vietnam and in large measure in the American South (at least in terms of civil rights for southern blacks), and the end of the current attempt remains to be seen. In both Reconstruction and Vietnam the American public eventually forced policy makers to discontinue their efforts, and the same may yet happen in Iraq.⁴³

Finally, American policy makers have had a very difficult time dealing with the natives of the lands that they have come to dominate. This is true in Iraq, and was true in Vietnam and the Philippines. But the same could also be said of the American South after Reconstruction and most especially about Native Americans throughout the United States. Essentially, those outside America’s league of friendship have troubled American policy makers because they have had no place to fit them within the framework by which they believe the world works. If America is the cause of all mankind, as Paine and the founding fathers believed, then resistance to

42 See especially Jack Ericson Eblan, *The First and Second United States Empires: Governors and Territorial Government, 1784-1912* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968).

43 See for example Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Perennial Library, Harper and Row, Publishers, 1988). Studies of the current military problems in Iraq remain to be written, but an early account worth noting is Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006).

Americanization made little sense. And since resistance most often took the form of a life or death struggle, threats were assumed to threaten the vitality of the community. Policy makers thus went to create a different and unique system of law to deal specifically with them. Today this manifests itself in the Bush administration's burgeoning institution of Homeland Security and the evolution of legal separate legal systems for Guantanamo Bay detainees; on the American frontier it involved the creation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Pine Ridge and other Indian reservations.

Conclusion

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, President George H. W. Bush announced the beginning of a "new world order." Just what this order consisted of was never made clear by the Bush administration; in fact, the end of the Cold War caught Bush and his advisors by surprise.⁴⁴ Yet the phrase "New World Order" might very well capture American attitudes towards foreign policy quite well. After four hundred years of experience with a New World frontier, the United States has come to see itself and the rest of the world in *New World* terms: the imperialistic vision of the Great Frontier—a negotiated league of competing but friendly states, interacting to take advantage of their very differences. Within this league technological advantage, not political power, decide the balance of power, thus promoting ever increasing levels of innovation, ingenuity, and technological sophistication, each of which in essence promotes the conditions of the frontier itself. Understood as the cause of all mankind, it is open to all who would participate, and its members are guarded by a military might from those who, having been displaced by this new world order, seek to restore their old world order.

⁴⁴ See both Bacevich, *American Empire*, and John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005).

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One difference between an empire and a frontier is that a frontier is assumed to be transitory, that it has a definite end. Indeed, most frontier historians believe that the end has just occurred. Turner placed it in 1890, Webb in the Great Depression of the 1930s, McNeill in the 1950s. It is tempting to say that the end of the Cold War has finally brought about the end of the global frontier. Yet any discussion of globalization—many of the processes of which began or were rooted in the “Great Frontier”—makes clear that it is a process that is still ramping up, still forging a new world order. In globalization Americans may see their frontier past reinvigorated, and continue to see relevance in their own frontier-oriented cultural values and institutions as they play out on a world stage. At the same time Americans are unlikely to give up their insistence on massive military security, though that very reaction is likely to undermine its attempts to foster the natural emergence a league of equal states. Or the United States may decide that the frontier has indeed passed, and that the twenty-first century truly is a new world, in which the old spirit of the open frontier must give way to a new imperialism safeguarded by military strength.⁴⁵ More likely, United States policy makers will oscillate between these two ideas, as they face the challenges of a new century.

In the coming century, history will not repeat itself. But American foreign policy has a long history of rhyming, and the similarities and patterns Americans see in the world around them will be the source of debate and inspiration, humility and opportunism. In the end, we must remember that human beings make history, that they chose from the human record what is significant to them based upon their values, their experiences—their vision of themselves. It is not a question of whether the future will rhyme, but exactly which words will be used to

⁴⁵ Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, has grown especially concerned that this is the direction of American foreign policy.

construct the verses. It is virtually certain that Americans will leap into globalization and attempt to make it their own. The challenge to both policy makers and the American public is whether or not they will be able to listen carefully to the voices of the world, without listening only for the echoes of their own past experiences.

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