

THE AMERICAN FRONTIER
(Context and Consequences)
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This essay is a meditation on the antecedents and consequences of a remarkable time in America history when thirteen former British colonies at the eastern edge of North America became the seedbed for a sustained march across the entire continent to its western shore and, in the process of doing so, created a great continental nation.

Before the War of Independence, the British colonies were not encouraged to expand westward. Indeed, the opposite. A British royal decree of 1763 actually prohibited colonists from settling land west of a boundary closely aligned with the Appalachian Mountains.

About a decade later, the War of Independence changed everything, thus setting the stage for the long westward march of the frontier to begin.

Active hostilities between colonists and Britain began on April 19, 1775 at Lexington Green in Massachusetts with an unordered shot. All thirteen colonies signed a Declaration of Independence about a year later on July 4, 1776. Though still separate states the sense of unity among them was undoubtedly cemented in consciousness as the war progressed. Indeed, Articles of Confederation first drafted only days after the signing of the Declaration of Independence provided a framework facilitating united action by them in the war and afterwards.

The war was hard and continued for many long years. Military hostilities did not end until October 17, 1781 at Yorktown, Virginia when the British general sent a flag of truce to General Washington. Two days afterward British troops marched away in surrender.

Ultimately, on September 3, 1783 the war formally ended with the Treaty of Paris. Article One of the Treaty stated:

"His Britannic Majesty acknowledges the said United States, viz., New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, to be free sovereign and independent states, that he treats with them as such, and for himself, his heirs, and successors, relinquishes all claims to the government, propriety, and territorial rights of the same and every part thereof."

This Article did more than free the thirteen American States of British rule. It gave them legitimacy in the eyes of the British (and presumably other European nations) to move their frontiers of settlement westward.

Article Two of the Treaty described the British territorial right being conveyed to the

colonies:

"And that all disputes which might arise in future on the subject of the boundaries of the said United States may be prevented, it is hereby agreed and declared, that the following are and shall be their boundaries..." The article proceeds in great detail to describe these boundaries. Broad brush, they encompass the continental land to the east of the Mississippi river."

A subsequent series of events, treaties, and purchases led ultimately to the gradual incorporation into the United States of the territory extending from the eastern to the western oceans.

People willingly traveled great distances and risked dangers to reach frontier lands and establish lives there. Many threads of incentive might have motivated people to do so. I suggest two, often intertwined.

First are thoughts associated with the notion of "I'm game to take the risk because my current situation is so bad that I have little or nothing to lose."

Second are thought of opportunity for gain, that is, for something I perceive to be of value, for example, gold, land, money, adventure, or a "new life."

(Note: In some parts of the land west of the Appalachians there was the enforced migration of people as slaves. And everywhere there were Native Americans who had every reason to view the westward migration of non-natives as an invasion. Each of these is a subject unto itself and beyond the scope of this brief paper.)

According to the most influential historian of the frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner, people traveled westward in waves at unequal speeds. Turner distinguishes among the trader's frontier, the rancher's frontier, the miner's frontier, and the farmer's frontier. He envisions these frontiers traveling west at different speeds.

Of prime significance in assessing the lasting importance to the United States of the frontier process is the egalitarian nature of what travelers encountered, namely, a need to cope with the unknown and the unexpected in a difficult, dangerous, often hostile and unforgiving environment. As stated by Turner in his most famous essay, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), "In the crucible of the frontier, the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics." In effect, Turner posits a new breed of American, culturally different from those who remained in the eastern States or in Europe.

One effect of the frontier and its westward movement was the emergence of a "western American," a person of "liberated and fused race" (Turner, 1893) having in one way or another experienced the crucible of the frontier process, and having prevailed. Such people were transformed by the frontier experience. Their transformation served as the nucleus for transforming others, most directly their descendents but also, by

communication eastward, others who had not risked the journey. In this way the frontier had a lasting effect on an ever emergent, though not necessarily consciously realized, sense of self as American — a myth-making process.

Myths arguably have a longevity of their own, not limited to the time of the events which brought them into being, becoming cultural memes affecting generation after generation. Arguably, if certain cultural characteristics increasingly emerged during westward movement of the frontier, these same characteristics potentially may persist as cultural norms during subsequent years, decades, and perhaps centuries too. If one accepts this premise, Americans are still at least somewhat differentiated from Europeans in ways set in place by the cultural after-effects of life at the frontier more than a century ago. Turner in 1893 mentions the following traits as "still persisting as survivals in the place of their origin, even when a higher social order succeeded:"

coarseness and strength,
acuteness and inquisitiveness,
a practical , inventive turn of mind,
quick to find expedients,
masterful grasp of material things,
lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends,
restless, nervous energy,
dominant individualism (for good and evil), and
buoyancy and exuberance coming with freedom.

By 1932 the social context had changed enormously. The nation was in the grips of a serious economic depression. Both presidential candidates that year were articulate and spoke with differing points of view about the ways in which historic American attitudes should determine then-current government policy.

Both Herbert Hoover (the Republican presidential candidate) and Franklin D. Roosevelt (the Democratic presidential candidate) were campaigning in the fall of 1932. One of them would soon become President of the United States.

In their campaign speeches, the candidates presented quite different visions of America, its culture, and its values. Arguably, in the background of what they each said one can infer quite different understandings of whether the cultural characteristics set in place by the frontier experience were still dominant.

Roosevelt's campaign speech was delivered in San Francisco on September 23, 1932 and Hoover's in New York on October 31, 1932.

After stating his intent to speak not of parties but of universal principles, Roosevelt's line of reasoning proceeded with a recitation of relevant historic experience. In doing so, he began with brief comment about Hamilton's and Jefferson's conflicting points of view and then launched into comments about the western frontier.

"So began, in American political life, the new day, the day of the individual against the system, the day in which individualism was made the great watchword of American life. The happiest of economic conditions made that day long and splendid. On the Western frontier, land was substantially free... Depressions could, and did, come and go; but they could not alter the fundamental fact that most of the people lived partly by selling their labor and partly by extracting their livelihood from the soil, so that starvation and dislocation were practically impossible. At the very worst there was always the possibility of climbing into a covered wagon and moving west where the untilled prairies afforded a haven for men to whom the East did not provide a place."

Roosevelt's remarks then fast forwarded to the middle of the nineteenth century when a new dream emerged, the industrial revolution. Roosevelt saw that development as changing both the nature of work and the role of government.

"Heretofore, Government had merely been called upon to produce conditions within which people could live happily, labor peacefully, and rest secure. Now it was called upon to aid in the consummation of this new dream."

Roosevelt turned next to the situation in his own time, late in 1932.

"A glance at the situation today only too clearly indicates that equality of opportunity as we have known it no longer exists. Our industrial plant is built; the problem just now is whether under existing conditions it is not overbuilt. Our last frontier has long since been reached, and there is practically no more free land... There is no safety valve in the form of a Western prairie to which those thrown out of work by the Eastern economic machines can go for a new start. We are not able to invite the immigration from Europe to share our endless plenty. We are now providing a drab living for our own people."

With this background in mind, Roosevelt next described his vision of the political remedy for the malaise which gripped the nation at that time.

"Clearly, all this calls for a re-appraisal of values... Our task now is not discovery or exploitation of natural resources, or necessarily producing more goods. It is the soberer, less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand, of seeking to reestablish foreign markets for our surplus production, of meeting the problem of underconsumption, of adjusting production to consumption, of distributing wealth and products more equitably, of adapting existing economic organizations to the service of the people. The day of enlightened administration has come."

Hoover had a different point of view but his opening remarks mirrored and even amplified Roosevelt's view: more was at stake than a contest between two candidates or two parties. Hoover, calling it a "contest between two philosophies of government," stated that Roosevelt's approach amounted to an alteration of "the whole foundations of

our national life which have been builded through generations of testing and struggle, and of the principles upon which we have made this nation."

Hoover, in effect, remained optimistic about staying the course without need or desirability for altering and expanding the role of government. He said,

"I do challenge the whole idea that we have ended the advance of America, that this country has reached the zenith of its power and the height of its development. That is the counsel of despair for the future of America. That is not the spirit by which we shall emerge from this depression. That is not the spirit which has made this country."

Hoover based his optimism on faith in the ongoing inventive and practical ingenuity of Americans, saying,

"I have recited to you some of the items in the progress of this last generation. Progress in that generation was not due to the opening up of new agricultural land; it was due to the scientific research, the opening of new invention, new flashes of light from the intelligence of our people. These brought the improvements in agriculture and in industry. There are a thousand inventions for comfort and the expansion of life yet in the lockers of science that have not yet come to light. We are only upon their frontiers."

In effect, Hoover saw Roosevelt's approach to governance as an abandonment of America's forward-looking historical stance.

"This philosophy upon which the Governor of New York proposes to conduct the Presidency of the United States is the philosophy of stagnation and of despair. It is the end of hope. The destinies of this country cannot be dominated by that spirit in action. It would be the end of the American system."

In important respects these two presidential candidates appear to be talking past each other, emphasizing different kinds of remedy for the malaise of serious economic depression.

Hoover saw the remedy in a traditional free enterprise "government hands-off" attitude, relying on unspecified future events, most obviously technological innovation, to right the ship of state. Indeed, since then, as Hoover envisioned, technologies unfathomable in those days have generated important new industries and new employment.

Roosevelt's focus was different. He saw imminent danger from emergent concentration of wealth and economic power in the hands of an elite few. He concluded that the nation would be well advised to use government in ways intended to create economic circumstances which better serve the people.

Given the influences of the industrial revolution and the sharp differences of cultural

context between the days of frontier life and the days of economic depression, it seems reasonable to ask whether cultural norms set in place during frontier days were still a dominant part of what it meant to be an American in 1932. Is it possible that frontier cultural norms had been substantially modulated or rendered meaningless for some American but not for all? I suggest it is okay to answer to this question "yes and no." I mean to imply that our culture is influenced by many threads of history, all blending together in greater or lesser discomfort as we continue evolving, learning, and gradually altering our perception of what it means to be an American.

Moving on beyond frontier times, lets extrapolate from 1932 to more recent days and ask about the relevance today of Hoover's and Roosevelt's points of view. Does either or both still resonate? Has a third theme emerged? For example, might it have to do with issues of inclusiveness?

As policy questions such alternatives are amenable to public discussion, but there is a deeper mythical dimension too, and that is where one encounters beliefs about the core sense of what it means to be an American. To examine that we could do worse that bring to mind the Statue of Liberty and its reminder that most of us are immigrants or the descendents of immigrants.

As Turner said during days long since gone by, it was in the crucible of the frontier that immigrants were Americanized. Now, many years later, that story of transformation from immigrant to American at the frontier can be viewed nostalgically and particularly for what it was.

Alternatively, the crucible of the frontier can be viewed as exemplary and generally to include men and women of the most diverse origin. This more inclusive point of view, applicable even today, is about any such people becoming Americanized by traveling with resoluteness and hope toward fulfilling their personal dreams in and as part of American citizenry.