Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,”
(1893)

During a gathering of historians at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner presented an essay titled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Turner's article, also known as the Frontier Thesis, argued that the settlement of the frontier made the American nation unique. Turner credited the frontier's settlement as the primary force in shaping the nation's democratic institutions.

Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, continuous recession, and the advance of American settlements westward, explain American development. Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions. The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people -- to the changes involved in crossing a continent, this winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life.

Thus 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 American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the West.

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs and Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germ, any more than the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the Germanic mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. As successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics. Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic, and social results of its, is to study the really American part of our history.

Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone form the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has been forced upon them. He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves. For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant. There is not tabula rasa. The stubborn American environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions; the inherited ways of doing things are also there; and yet, in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier. What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely.

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**Viewpoint 2**

"The frontier hypothesis needs painstaking revision. By what it fails to mention, the theory today disqualifies itself as an adequate guide to American development."

**The Turner Thesis is Dated and Provincial**

George Wilson Pierson (1904-)

George Wilson Pierson, long a professor at Yale University, launched one of the first significant assaults on Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. The following viewpoint, written in 1942, remains a cogent critique. Although Pierson directly criticizes Turner's "emotion," his "too-literary" style, and his "hazy thinking," his most serious objection is that Turner ignores the economic concerns of post-industrial America. Pierson questions the advisability of basing so much of the interpretation of American society on the frontier. What happens to our understanding of America, for instance, now that it is gone? he asks. He asserts that Turner should have given more credit to individual character in the shaping of America.

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How much of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis is reliable and useful today? This problem has begun to trouble economists, sociologists, geographers, and most of all the teachers of graduate students in the field of American history.

For how shall we account for the industrial revolution by the

frontier? Do American music and architecture come from the woods? Did American cattle? Were our religions born of the contemplation of untamed nature? Has science, poetry, or even democracy—its cradle in the wilderness? Did literature grow fertile with innovation in the open spaces? Above all, what happens to intellectual history if the environment be all?

The predicament of the scholar, who has been living in a comfortable frontier philosophy, is beginning to attract some attention. Nor may we comfort ourselves with the assurance that ours is a purely academic debate. For frontier legends of one kind or another have now so permeated American thought as to threaten drastic consequences. Have not our most influential journalists and statesmen for some time been ringing pessimistic changes on the theme of “lost frontier,” “lost safety-valve,” “lost opportunity”? Such convictions can lead to legislation. In Congress the underlying issue could shortly be: was there but one economic frontier, was it really a “safety-valve,” and are both now gone? The cultural historian meanwhile asks: is it true that the frontier was the “line of most rapid and effective Americanization”? More particularly, since we are now trying to define and safeguard the “American way of life,” what share did the “frontier” have in its creation, and what cultural influences must we henceforth look for its preservation? . . .

**General Criticism**

First, let me say emphatically that it would seem small-minded to forget or to depreciate the inspiration that these essays originally offered to historians. Nor does it seem that we, of half a century later, have yet heard arguments that would warrant us in discarding the celebrated hypothesis entirely, out of hand. Too much of Turner’s interpretation still seems reasonable and corresponding to fact. . . . The poetic insights and the masterful grasp of an understanding mind are hardly to be disguised. No blanket repudiation is therefore here to be proposed.

On the other hand, Turner himself did make a number of flat-footed and dogmatic statements, did put forward some highly questionable interpretations, did on occasion guess and not verify, did exaggerate—and stick for more than twenty years to the exaggerations. Hence it would seem that, however badly the master may have been served by his students and continuers in other particulars these followers have been made the scapegoats a little too hastily. For they have not alone been responsible for the palpable errors and exaggerations that many of the rising generation recognize in the frontier theory as it is stated and applied today. At least they did not invent the safety-valve theory that now looks so dubious; they didn’t misquote when they attributed political invention, and most of the reforms and the reformers, to the frontier; they weren’t the first local and national patriots. In his work with his students, Turner seems to have been modest and tentative and open-minded to a degree; but in his essays he could be and was as inclusive and sweeping as any have been since.

What were the statements and attitudes which we regard as extreme or with which we would disagree? . . . Let me conclude with a brief organization of the most cogent reasons for regarding Turner’s original doctrine on the frontier and American institutions as defective and in need of repair.

To begin with the details and proceed to the general, it seems first of all necessary to suggest that—whatever may later be decided about Turner’s theory—his evidence and proofs leave much to be desired. I am not here referring to our difficulty in accepting Turner’s reasons for believing that the frontier stimulated invention, liberal ideas, educational improvements, or humanitarian reforms—a difficulty that remains substantial enough in itself. Rather, it is the quantity of his evidence to which I would now call attention. How few were his concrete examples, and how often he would repeat them is really astonishing. . . . Undoubtedly, Turner was more interested in discovering than in proving. . . .

It is dangerous and ungenerous, I acknowledge, for a man living in a later climate of opinion to disparage the attitude of an earlier day. But since our problem concerns the present applicability and future usefulness of these frontier essays, certain assumptions and definitions cannot be allowed to pass without challenge.

**Some Specific Objections**

As has been pointed out, first of all, the essays are in a high degree unsatisfactory in clarity, or definition. Turner’s Master Force is defined and used as area, as population, as process. As if such inharmonious and confusing interpretations were not sufficiently inclusive, this force is then made to cover soil and mineral resources as well—and at times everything Western, or preindustrial, or non-European! I think it fair to say that the word frontier has been, and will be found again, a Pandora’s box of trouble to historians, when opened to such wide interpretation.

Again, there seems to be haziness in the statement of means, and real doubt as to many of the results claimed for the frontier. At moments the wilderness, and even the flow of our population westward, seem to have been destructive rather than constructive experiences. And when the rebuilding is scrutinized, the proportion of invention looks surprisingly small. In particular, the contribution of the frontier to our educational, economic, and political institutions needs cautious reappraisal.

Once again, the emotional attitudes or assumptions of the au-
Author—and of his generation?—color his essays unmistakably. It would have been strange had they not done so. No personal censure is therefore intended. On the other hand, for the interpretation of American history in 1942, the emphasis of 1893 may become a serious handicap; it may even obscure or distort the elements in the theory that are still most meaningful. To be specific, the frontier hypothesis seems—as has been indicated several times already—too optimistic, too romantic, too provincial, and too nationalistic to be reliable in any survey of world history or study in comparative civilization. And it is too narrowly sectional and materialistic—in the sense of assigning deterministic forces to physical environment—to seem any longer a satisfactory gauge for internal cause-measurements. ...

At an earlier point in the argument, the migration factor was isolated—as a sort of foreign substance—out of the frontier concept; and it was suggested that, at the least, a comparison with city-ward movements and with migrations the world around is in order. It now seems pertinent to suggest the extension of such comparisons from migration to the whole story of settlement or environmental adjustment in South America, Australia, and Africa. Did comparable situations always produce comparable results? Moreover, if we repeat such comparisons within the American experience, do we really find much similarity between the frontiers of Colonial Massachusetts, the Mississippi Delta, the Plains, and the mining country? If not, it would appear that the applicability of Turner’s frontier hypothesis is far more limited than has been supposed.

Along another line of thought, I have suggested that Turner’s views were deterministic. They were almost fatalistic. Again and again one gets the impression that western man was in the grip of overpowering forces. “The people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them.”

Now what makes this determinism particularly questionable is the fact that it is materialistic, yet in a high degree confused and cloudy in its statement of causes. Turner has been attacked by the economic determinists for not regarding commercialism, industrialism, and capitalism as more important than the continent—and the frontier essays certainly pay far too little attention to the commercial character of nineteenth-century American society, East or West. This school of critics is also quite correct in labelling Turner a geographer and a sociologist rather than a champion of the Marxian dialectic or interpretation. Nevertheless Turner remains, in his own way, almost as convinced a materialist as the author of Das Kapital himself. Only Turner’s mastering force is a multiple thing, a cluster of causes singularly disparate and inharmonious. Part of the time the essays cite the natural environment, the physical continent, the wilderness; at other moments the source of change is located in the state of society: the sparseness, mobility, or indiscipline of settlement. Admittedly, America represented both physical hardship and social opportunity. The West was rough (a geographic factor) and it was empty (a sociological force). Perhaps, then, Turner’s greatest achievement was his successful marriage of these two dissimilar forces in the single phrase: free land. He did not invent the term or the ideas it contains. But he most certainly popularized them.

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A Perverted Reading of American History

Among the voluble critics of Turner’s work was Louis Hacker, a teacher of history at Columbia University. In a 1933 issue of the Nation, he published an outspokenly critical review of Turner’s later writings expounding on the frontier thesis. Hacker believed that in his focus on the shaping of the American character, Turner ignored economic considerations, especially class conflict.

Turner undoubtedly was right in pointing out the significance that free lands played in American development. The free lands of the West were not important, however, because they made possible the creation of a unique “American Spirit”—that indefinable something that was to set the United States apart from European experiences for all time—but because their quick settlement and utilization for the extensive cultivation of foodstuffs furnished exactly those commodities with which the United States, as a debtor nation, could balance its international payments and borrow European capital in order to develop a native industrial enterprise. Thus, in the first place, agriculture, primarily the agriculture of those Western areas of which Turner made so much, was really a catspaw for industry; once having served its purpose, that is to say the capitalist development of the nation, it could be neglected politically and ultimately abandoned economically. In the second place, the presence of the frontier helps to explain the failure of American labor to preserve a continuous revolutionary tradition: class lines could not become fixed as long as the free lands existed to drain off the most spirited elements in the working and lower middle-class populations—not only as farmers, of course, but as small merchants and enterprisers, too—and to prevent the creation of a labor reserve for the purpose of thwarting the demands of organized workers.

If this sounds like a defense of Turner, it is intended rather as a clearer definition of his special materialism, which remains objectionable. And it remains so—even disregarding the untenable variations in his definition of frontier—because too much is attributed both to the land and to the fact that it was easy to ac-
quire. A number of Turner’s ablest friends and admirers regard his free land doctrine as a contribution of extraordinary insight and importance, and unquestionably it does seem impressive. Yet the modern observer cannot but be disturbed by the failure of some non-English groups, and even of a tremendous number of native Americans, to heed this call. The open spaces do not seem to have acted as a solvent on the Pennsylvania Germans or the habitants of Lower Canada, and the migratory New England groups were only partially disintegrated, while an increasing number of farm boys gravitated to town and city (an even stronger solvent?) instead. It will bear repeating that Turner perhaps exaggerated the importance of “free land.”

Perhaps it is unreasonable to suggest that the North American Indians ought to have profited in the same fashion from so much free land. Yet what about the Spaniards, who had the run of the whole hemisphere? Did the Mississippi Valley make them democratic, prosperous, and numerous? In a word, do not the level of culture, and the “fitness” of a society for the wilderness, matter more than the wilderness? Employing again the comparative vista, were there no unoccupied forests in medieval France? And if today a new continent were to rise out of the Pacific Ocean, are we so sure that it would encourage small freeholds, not corporation or governmental monopolies?)

On the other hand, I cannot but feel that too small a role is allowed to man’s own character and ambitions, to his capacity for change, and to the traditions and momentum of the society which came to use this free land. Thus the continent masters, destroys, commands, and creates—while man is surprisingly passive. Where many of us are inclined to regard the physical environment as permissive, or limiting in its influence, Turner in his essays tends to make it mandatory. Vice versa, where sociologists are today coming to recognize the factor of tradition and habit as very powerful, and where a man’s ability to master circumstance is at times conceded to be extraordinary, the frontier hypothesis tends to ignore human origins and peculiarities, at least in the composition of American traits and American institutions. Thus first causes are made to lie in real estate, not state of mind. Hence, again, the first Colonial settlers are not examined with any care, but are treated as if they were average Europeans. And the later developments and changes in coastal society are handled as if they could have had only two sources: either a fresh migration or influence from Europe, or the powerful influence of an innovating frontier. Native invention in New England? Improvement in New York without the stimulus of the West? Apparently not.

It remains to add two final comments. They concern contradiction and omission.

However optimistic, nationalistic, one-sided, repetitious, fatalistic, undocumented, or erroneous a number of Turner’s proposals may appear, the curious fact seems to be that one of the most striking weaknesses of the essays as a whole is internal inconsistency. As has been hinted throughout this paper, the frontier theory in its full development does not hang together. The nationalism of the frontier does violence to its sectional tendencies, innovations are derived from repetition, the improvement of civilization is achieved via the abandonment of civilization, and materialism gives birth to idealism. Such inconsistencies do not necessarily condemn the whole theory out of hand. But they do unsettle conviction; they make it hard to remain complacent; they invite the most careful, open-minded restudy.

To this should be added the thought of what Turner did not write. Making all due allowances for the fact that the master’s essays were composed in the period 1893-1920, it remains true that in the single field of economics he slighted the industrial revolution, he didn’t seem to understand the commercial revolution, and he said nothing at all about the agricultural revolution. Yet it might be asserted that the last alone will be found to have produced more changes in American farming in the nineteenth century than all the frontiers put together! Again, it must be clear from our restatement that the frontier essays entirely failed to check the hypothesis by setting American experience against world experience. Because Turner was primarily a Western explorer, his pupils and followers have tended to neglect the all-important comparative approach. When, then, we review the questions with which this paper began, when we remember that the thirteen frontier essays treat the development of “American” and Middle-Western characteristics without reference to Romanticism, to Evangelism, to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, to the scientific discoveries and the secularization of thought that in varying degrees have overtaken all Western peoples since the discovery of America, it may fairly be deduced that for future purposes these celebrated statements leave too much out.

Perhaps a conclusion may be stated in these terms:

In what it proposes, the frontier hypothesis needs painstaking revision. By what it fails to mention, the theory today disqualifies itself as an adequate guide to American development.
"It was the magnitude and the unbroken continuity of the experience that gave the frontier major importance in American life. . . . Here in this movement beat the deep overtone of a nation's destiny, and to it all kept step unconsciously."

**The Turner Thesis Is Universal and Relevant**

Walter Prescott Webb (1888-1963)

Walter Prescott Webb, author of *The Great Plains* and *The Great Frontier*, taught for many years at the University of Texas. The following essay demonstrates not only his fundamental acceptance of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, but, perhaps more importantly, it is an illustration of the original ideas for which Turner was the impetus. Webb argues that the American frontier was part of a much larger phenomenon, the interaction between "European civilization and the vast raw lands into which it moved." First published in 1951, Webb's essay remains a classical defense of Turner.

Since America led the way in evolving the frontier process, and leads the world in the study of that process, we have no choice but to examine the American experience and to note briefly how scholars came to attend it as a field of study. American historians assume that the frontier process began with the English settlement at Jamestown in 1607, and the year 1890 is usually taken to mark the date when there was no more frontier available, when the new land was no longer new. There may be some quibbling about the dates, but they do bracket the three centuries of American frontier experience and experimentation.

It was the magnitude and the unbroken continuity of the experience that gave the frontier major importance in American life. It made no difference what other tasks the Americans had on their hands at a given time, there was the additional, ever-present one of moving into and settling new country. They did it while they fought for independence, before and after; they did it while they hammered out the principles of a democratic government shaped to the needs of frontiersmen; and they did not cease doing it in the period of civil strife. They never reached the limits of the vacancy they owned before they acquired another vacancy, by purchase, by treaty, by conquest, and in every case the frontiersmen infiltrated the country before the nation acquired it. Like locusts they swarmed, always to the west, and only the Pacific Ocean stopped them. Here in this movement beat the deep overtone of a nation's destiny, and to it all kept step unconsciously.

To say that the people were unconscious of the force that moved them, and of the medium in which they moved, is to state a fact which is easy to prove but hard to explain. It may be said that they were emotionally aware of the frontier long before they were intellectually cognizant of it. People could not have as their main task for three centuries working with raw land without getting its dirt under their nails and deep into their skins. The effects were everywhere, in democratic government, in boisterous politics, in exploitative agriculture, in mobility of population, in disregard for conventions, in rude manners, and in unbridled optimism. . . .

**Part of a Larger Phenomenon**

What happened in America was but a detail in a much greater phenomenon, the interaction between European civilization and the vast raw lands into which it moved. An effort will be made here to portray the whole frontier, to suggest how it affected the life and institutions of Western civilization throughout the modern period; and as a basis for this exposition four propositions are submitted for consideration.
(1) Europe had a frontier more than a century before the United States was settled.

(2) Europe's frontier was much greater than that of the United States, or of any other one nation; it was the greatest of all time.

(3) The frontier of Europe was almost, if not quite, as important in determining the life and institutions of modern Europe as the frontier of America was in shaping the course of American history. Without the frontier modern Europe would have been so different from what it became that it could hardly be considered modern at all. This is almost equivalent to saying that the frontier made Europe modern.

(4) The close of the Great Frontier may mark the end of an epoch in Western civilization just as the close of the American frontier is often said to have marked the end of the first phase of American history. If the close of the Great Frontier does mark the end of an age, the modern age, then the institutions designed to function in a society dominated largely by frontier forces will find themselves under severe strain.

If we conceive of Western Europe as a unified, densely populated region with a common culture and civilization—which it has long had basically—and if we see the frontier also as a unit, a vast and vacant land without culture, we are in position to view the interaction between the two as a simple but gigantic operation extending over more than four centuries, a process that may appear to be the drama of modern civilization.

To emphasize the unity of Western Europe, and at the same time set it off in sharp contrast to its opposite, the frontier, we may call it the Metropolis. Metropolis is a good name, implying what Europe really was, a cultural center holding within it everything pertaining to Western civilization. Prior to 1500 the Metropolis comprised all the "known" world save Asia, which was but vaguely known. Its area was approximately 3,750,000 square miles, and its population is estimated to have been about 100 million people.

There is no need to elaborate the conditions under which these people lived, but it should be remembered that by modern standards the society was a static one with well-defined classes. The population pressed hard on the means of subsistence. There was not much food, practically no money, and very little freedom. What is more important, there was practically no means of escape for those people living in this closed world. The idea of progress had not been born. Heaven alone, which could be reached only through the portals of death, offered any hope to the masses of the Metropolis.

Then came the miracle that was to change everything, the emancipator bearing rich gifts of land and more land, of gold and silver, of new foods for every empty belly and new clothing stuffs for every half-naked back. Europe, the Metropolis, knocked on the door of the Great Frontier, and when the door was opened it was seen to be golden, for within there was undreamed-of treasure, enough to make the whole Metropolis rich. The long quest of a half-starved people had at last been rewarded with success beyond comprehension.

Frontier Democracy

One of Turner's most ardent supporters, historian Ray Allen Billington ascribes to the populist interpretation of the West. In this excerpt from his book America's Frontier Heritage, Billington emphasizes social democracy on the frontier. He quotes a British visitor: "You may be a son of a lord back in England, but that ain't what you are out here."

Basically, frontier individualism stemmed from the belief that all men were equal (excluding Negroes, Indians, Orientals, and other minority groups), and that all should have a chance to prove their personal capabilities without restraint from society. This seemed fair in a land of plenty, where superabundant opportunity allowed each to rise or fall to his proper level as long as governments did not meddle. Faith in the equality of men was the great common creed of the West. Only an understanding of the depth of this belief can reveal the true nature of social democracy on successive frontiers.

To European visitors, this was the most unique feature of Western life and thought: the attitude that set that region apart from Europe or the East. "There is nothing in America," wrote one, "that strikes a foreigner so much as the real republican equality existing in the Western States, which border on the wilderness."

The Metropolis had a new piece of property and the frontier had a new owner. The Metropolitans were naturally curious about their property, and quite naturally began to ask questions about it. How big is it? Who lives on it? What is its inherent worth? What can I get out of it? They learned that the frontier had an area five or six times that of Europe; that it was practically vacant, occupied by a few primitive inhabitants whose rights need not be respected; that its inherent worth could only be guessed at. As to what can I get out of it?, the answer came in time clear and strong: You can get everything you want from gold and silver to furs and foods, and in any quantity you want, provided only that you are willing to venture and work! And more faintly came the small voice, hardly audible: Something all of you can get as a by-product is some measure of freedom.

The Metropolitans decided to accept the gifts. Instantly the di-
visions in Europe were projected into the frontier as each little European power that could man a ship seized a section of the frontier bigger than itself and tried to fight all the others off. Each nation wanted it all. The result was a series of wars lasting from 1689 to 1763 and from these wars England, France, and Spain emerged as chief owners of the frontier world. Their success was more apparent than real, for a spirit of freedom had been nurtured in the distant lands, and in less than fifty years England had lost her chief prize while Spain and France had lost practically everything.

But their loss, like their previous gain, was more apparent than real. True, by 1820 the Metropolis had lost title to most of the new land, but it had not lost something more precious than title—namely, the beneficent effects that the frontier exerted on the older countries. The political separation of most of North and South America relieved the Metropolis of responsibility and onerous obligations, but it did not cut off the abundance of profits. Europe continued to share in the riches and the opportunity that the opening of the golden door had made visible.

Relationship Between the Metropolis and the Frontier

What was the essential character of the frontier? Was the direct force it exerted spiritual, intellectual, or was it material? The frontier was basically a vast body of wealth without proprietors. It was an empty land more than five times the size of Western Europe, a land whose resources had not been exploited. Its first impact was mainly economic. Bathed in and invigorated by a flood of wealth, the Metropolis began to seethe with economic excitement. . . .

The factors involved, though of gigantic magnitude, are simple in nature and in their relation one to another. They are the old familiar ones of population, land, and capital. With the opening of the Great Frontier, land and capital rose out of all proportion to population, of those to share it, and therefore conditions were highly favorable to general prosperity and a boom. What we are really concerned with is an excess of land and an excess of capital for division among a relatively fixed number of people. The population did increase, but not until the nineteenth century did the extra population compare with the extra land and capital that had been long available. . . .

Capital may be considered in two forms, as gold and silver and as capital goods or commodities. The Metropolis was short of both forms of wealth throughout the medieval period, and the dearth of coin prior to the discoveries was most critical. It has been estimated that the total amount of gold and silver in Europe in 1492 was less than 200 million dollars, less than two dollars per person. Certainly there was not enough to serve the needs of exchange, which was carried on by barter, or to give rise to erudite theories of money economy. Then very suddenly the whole money situation changed.

By 1500 the Spaniards had cracked the treasure houses of the Great Frontier and set a stream of gold and silver flowing into the Metropolis, a stream that continued without abatement for 150 years, and that still continues. This flood of precious metals changed all the relations existing between man and money, between gold and a bushel of wheat or a fanega of barley. That changed relationship wrought the price revolution because temporarily—so fast did the metals come—there was more money than things, and so prices rose to the modern level. This new money was a powerful stimulus to the quest for more, and set the whole Metropolis into the frenzy of daring and adventure which gave character to the modern age. . . .

The boom hypothesis of modern history may be summed up by stating that with the tapping of the resources of the Great Frontier there came into the possession of the Metropolis a body of wealth consisting of land, precious metals, and the commodities out of all proportion to the number of people. . . .

The Individual and the Great Frontier

If the opening of the Great Frontier did precipitate a boom in Western civilization, the effects on human ideas and institutions must have been profound and far-reaching. In general such a boom would hasten the passing away of the ideas and institutions of a static culture and the sure appearance of others adapted to a dynamic and prospering society. There is no doubt that medieval society was breaking up at the time of the discoveries, that men’s minds had been sharpened by their intellectual exercises, and that their spirits had been stirred by doubt. The thinkers were restless and inquiring, but what they lacked was room in which to try out their innovations, and a fresh and uncluttered soil in which some of their new ideas could take hold and grow. Their desires had to be matched with opportunity before they could realize on their aspirations, however laudable. The frontier offered them the room and the opportunity. It did not necessarily originate ideas, but it acted as a relentless sifter, letting some pass and rejecting others. Those that the frontier favored prospered, and finally matured into institutions; those it did not favor became recessive, dormant, and many institutions based on these ideas withered away. Feudal tenure, serfdom, barter, primogeniture, and the notion that the world was a no-good place in which to live are examples of things untenable in the presence of the frontier.

Since we are dealing with the modern age, it would be very helpful if we could discover what it emphasized most. Where
was the chief accent of modernity? What has been its focus? Who
has held the spotlight on the stage of history since 1500? There
can be little doubt, though there may be enough to start an argu-
ment, that the answer to all these questions is: the Individual. It is
he who has been emphasized, accented; it is on him that the spot-
light has focused; it is his importance that has been magnified. He
is—or was—the common denominator of modern times, and an
examination of any strictly modern institution such as democracy

Vestiges of Frontier Individualism

Long a supporter of Turner’s frontier thesis, historian Ray Allen
Billington believed that while the closing of the frontier effected sig-
ificant changes in the American character, the frontier’s influence con-
tinues to be seen. In his book America’s Frontier Heritage he com-
ments on the democratic influence of the frontier.

The social democracy and frontier-type individualism that charac-
terized America’s growing period have not persisted unchanged into
the twentieth century. Individualism has retreated before the ad-
vance of social cohesiveness essential in an urban-industrial society.
The nation’s folk hero may still be the rugged individualist, but the
lonely wolves of the past have found that they cannot fight the pack
and that in cut-throat competition all throats are cut. At least since
the 1890s the economic community had grudgingly accepted the reg-
ulation that the pioneer resisted save when it was to his advantage,
and today cooperation and reliance on government are almost as
commonplace in the United States as in the older countries of Eu-
rope. Yet American individualism differs from that of France or Eng-
land in its continued insistence on a degree of economic freedom
that has long since vanished in those countries, and in a glorification
of the individual’s ability to care for himself despite daily proof that
joint effort will succeed in a society increasingly enmeshed.

Just as vestiges of frontier individualism remain to distinguish the
social attitudes of modern America from those of modern Europe,
so do remnants of pioneer democracy. The United States is no
longer a country free of class distinctions and so wedded to egalitar-
ianism that manifestations of wealth arouse public resentment. But
its social democracy does differ from that of older nations, marked
by its relative lack of class awareness, and by the brash assurance of
the humble that they are as worthy of respect as the elite. The house
painter who addresses a client by his first name, the elevator opera-
tor who enters into casual conversation with his passengers, the
garage mechanic who condescendingly compares his expensive car
with your aging model, could exist only in the United States. Their
counterparts are unknown in England or on the Continent partly
because America’s frontiering experience bred into the people atti-
itudes toward democracy that have persisted down to the present.

Did the Great Frontier, which was his contemporary, have any
part in giving the individual his main chance, the triple opportu-
nity of ruling himself, enriching himself, and saving his own soul
on his own hook? These three freedoms were institutionalized in
Protestantism, capitalism, and democracy—whose basic assump-
tion is that they exist for the individual, and that the individual
must be free in order to make them work. The desire for freedom
men surely have always had, but in the old Metropolis conditions
prevailed which made freedom impossible. Everywhere in Eu-
rope the individual was surrounded by institutions which, whether by
design or not, kept him unfree. He was walled in by
man-made regulations which controlled him from baptism to ex-
treme unction.

Then the golden door of the Great Frontier opened, and a way
of escape lay before him. He moved out from the Metropolis to
land on a distant shore, in America, Australia, South Africa. Here
in the wild and empty land there was not a single institution;
man had left them, albeit temporarily, far behind. Regardless of
what befell him later, for an instant he was free of all the restric-
tions that society had put upon him. In short, he had escaped his
human masters only to find himself in the presence of another, a
less picayunish one.

Naked in the Presence of Nature

The character of the new master, before whom he stood
stripped of his institutions, was so in contrast with that of the old
one as to defy comparison. Man stood naked in the presence of
nature. On this subject, Alexander von Humboldt said, “In the
Old World, nations and the distinction of their civilization form
the principal point in the picture; in the New World, man and his
production almost disappear amidst the stupendous display of
wild and gigantic nature.” The outstanding qualities of wild and
gigantic nature are its impersonality and impassiveness. Nature
broods over man, casts its mysterious spells, but it never inter-
venes for or against him. It gives no orders, issues no proclama-
tions, has no prisons, no privileges; it knows nothing of
vendange or mercy. Before nature all men are free and equal.

The important point is that the abstract man we have been fol-
lowing did not have to win his freedom. It was imposed upon
him and he could not escape it. Being caught in the trap of free-
dom, his task was to adjust himself to it and to devise procedures
which would be more convenient for living in such a state. His
first task was to govern himself, for self-government is what freedom imposes.

Of course there was not just one man on the frontier. In a short time the woods were full of them, all trained in the same school. As the years went by, they formed the habits of freedom, cherished it; and when a distant government tried to take from them that to which they had grown accustomed, they resisted, and their resistance was called the American Revolution. The American frontiersmen did not fight England to gain freedom, but to preserve it and have it officially recognized by the Metropolis. "Your nation," wrote Herman Melville, "enjoyed no little independence before your declaration declared it." Whence came this independence? Not from parliaments or kings or legislative assemblies, but from the conditions, the room, the space, and the natural wealth amidst which they lived. "The land was ours," writes Robert Frost, "before we were the land's."...

There is an unpleasant logic inherent in the frontier boom hypothesis of modern history. We come to it with the reluctance that men always have when they come to the end of a boom. They look back on the grand opportunities they had, they remember the excitement and adventure of it, they tote up their accounts and hope for another chance. Western civilization today stands facing a closed frontier, and in this sense it faces a unique situation in modern times.

Impact of Frontier's End

If we grant the boom, we must concede that the institutions we have, such as democracy and capitalism, were boomborn; we must also admit that the individual, this cherished darling of modern history, attained his glory in an abnormal period when there was enough room to give him freedom and enough wealth to give him independence. The future of the individual, of democracy and capitalism, and of many other modern institutions are deeply involved in this logic, and the lights are burning late in the capitals of the Western world where grave men are trying to determine what that future will be.

I should like to make it clear that mankind is really searching for a new frontier which we once had and did not prize, and the longer we had it, the less we valued it; but now that we have lost it, we have a great pain in the heart, and we are always trying to get it back again. It seems to me that historians and all thoughtful persons are bound by their obligation to say that there is no new frontier in sight comparable in magnitude or importance to the one that is lost. They should point out the diversity and heterogeneity, not to say the absurdity, of so-called new frontiers. They are all fallacies, these new frontiers, and they are pernicious in proportion to their plausibility and respectability. The scientists themselves should join in disabusing the public as to what science can be expected to do. It can do much, but, to paraphrase Isaiah Bowman, it is not likely soon to find a new world or make the one we have much bigger than it is. If the frontier is gone, we should have the courage and honesty to recognize the fact, cease to cry for what we have lost, and devote our energy to finding the solutions to the problems now facing a frontierless society. And when the age we now call modern is modern no longer, and requires a new name, we may appropriately call it the Age of the Frontier, and leave it to its place in history.