
The Yale Review

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The Strange Case of the Contemporary American Frontier

The West has always been the Great American Place. The mythic heart of the West has always been the frontier, whose finest nineteenth-century historian was Frederick Jackson Turner of the University of Wisconsin. His thesis was simple: the American people were the product of continual, centuries-long westering into the forests, plains, mountains, and deserts. But as the West became settled in the late nineteenth century, the previously abundant open frontier lands were increasingly rare and unavailable. Most of the Oklahoma land rushes, for instance, ended by the early 1890s. When such fertile, cheap, accessible lands disappeared, Turner wondered, what would the American people become? He had no real answer.

His twentieth-century successor as premier historian of the West, Walter Prescott Webb of the University of Texas, agreed that the American frontier was gone. In 1952 he wrote in *The Great Frontier*: "The end of an age is always touched with sadness for those who lived it and those who love it. . . . The people are going to miss the frontier more than words can express. For four centuries they heard its call, listened to its promises, and bet their lives and fortunes on its outcome. It calls no more, and regardless of how they bend their ears for its faint whisper they cannot hear the suggestion of a promise."

I would respectfully argue that the two most authoritative historians of the Western frontier that America ever produced were wrong: the frontier survives to this day as a distinct geographic region—a large remote land area beyond the farthest settlement—across huge stretches of the United States. It is likely to survive for many generations to come. It clearly influences modern-day American policies and attitudes concerning land use, natural resources, and the environment. The frontier never died and shows no signs of dying. I will examine the

curious career of the concept of the frontier and demonstrate how we have misunderstood the winning of the West.

“Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.” These undynamic words are the most famous the Census Bureau ever wrote, for Frederick Jackson Turner used them as the opening lines of his 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” He argued that the frontier, particularly the effort to acquire its land, had made the American people optimistic, energetic, pragmatic, expansionist, inquisitive, inventive, individualistic, anti-intellectual, egalitarian, materialistic, restless, insular, cruel (to the Indians, for instance), and inclined to restrain government and to waste natural resources. The frontier had in fact given Americans all the national personality traits the rest of the world attributed to them (and still does).

Much of Turner’s work focused on the nineteenth-century Midwestern frontier, such as the Wisconsin of his boyhood in the 1860s. He described a sequential settlement process, a predictable progression which began when whites entered the rich Ohio and Upper Mississippi valleys originally occupied only by Indians. The economic succession was increasingly intense: first came fur traders, next cattle raisers, then perhaps miners, then small subsistence farmers, and finally larger farmers who produced cash crops. All the settlers were drawn by abundant, fertile land that was inexpensive or free. As they displaced the Indians and cleared, cultivated, improved, and filled the land, the settlers were initially humbled by the frontier; then they conquered it. They acquired their distinctively American qualities from it; then they closed it. Turner contended that with suitable regional variations this sequence had recurred throughout the white settlement of America, from the Massachusetts Bay Colony to the Far West.

Turner had no true objection to the closing of the frontier. He regarded it as the characteristic process of American history, a shift to a higher level of social development—progress of the kind dear to the nineteenth century. But as the frontier disappeared, he was concerned about what might replace it to shape the character of the American people. He worried about the ways in which Americans might respond to the loss of their accustomed frontier, about how a frontierless America might deteriorate. For almost a century, the frontier thesis has been one of American history’s most influential ideas.

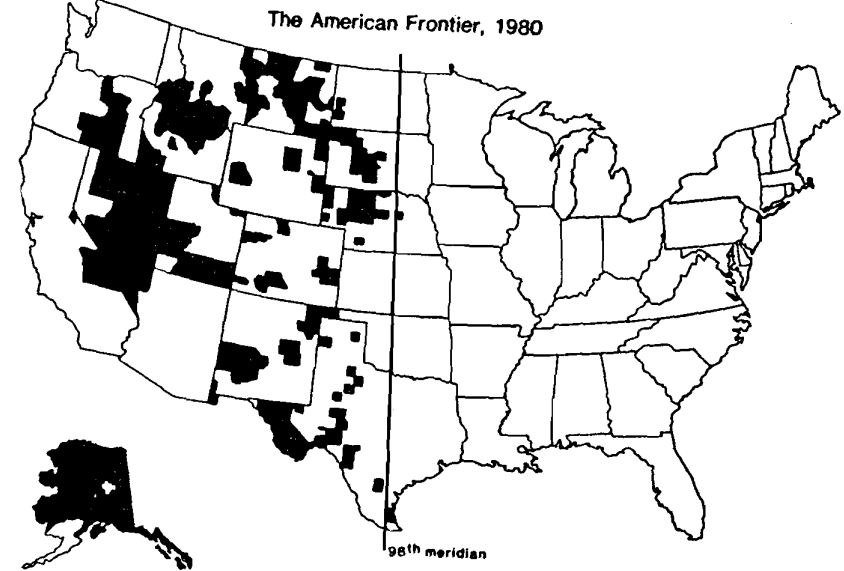
Turner and the Census had a specific demographic concept of the frontier. “An arbitrary line,” Henry Gannett, a Census Bureau geographer, wrote in 1882, “must be drawn beyond which the country must be considered as unsettled, although it may not be absolutely without inhabitants.” By convention the line usually bounded the zone with less than two people per square mile—a population density equivalent to Manhattan having no more than forty-five residents. From 1790 to 1880, the frontier line moved steadily westward, from the Appalachians through the Midwest to the Great Plains. Nineteenth-century researchers followed its progress closely. In 1876 Francis Walker, director of the 1870 and 1880 censuses, calculated that it was moving west and slightly north at a rate of seventy to seventy-five feet a day.

But the 1890 census was the first that could not show a national frontier line. The march of Western settlement, especially growth along the Pacific Slope, meant that the frontier had vanished west of the Sierra-Cascades and was no longer contiguous east of them. The frontier line, said the census, “can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.” Turner interpreted the disappearance of the frontier line as “marking the closing of a great historic moment. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the West. . . . Now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under

the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history." Thus Turner, with the help of the census, declared the frontier dead.

Nearly a century later, however, the declaration looks odd and premature. The idea of a national frontier line as the boundary of a single national frontier zone now seems a vast statistical abstraction, a locally meaningless national average. Suppose we apply the nineteenth-century density standard another way, disaggregating it at the county level, and bring it up to date. The 1980 census shows 143 counties, all in Western states, with fewer than two people per square mile (see map 1). All but one of the counties lie west of the 98th meridian, the boundary Walter Prescott Webb used to define the arid West that averages less than twenty inches of rain a year; the 98th meridian, roughly where the great tallgrass prairies of the Midwest and South meet the shortgrass Great Plains of the West, is also the approximate location of the census's last national frontier line in 1880. All but the Alaskan frontier counties lie east of the Sierra-Cascades. In the 1980 census, the counties have a small total population of 572,000, representing one American in 396. But because they are large, the frontier counties have a total area of 949,500 square miles, over a quarter of that of the United States. For a place that is supposed to have disappeared generations ago, there is a lot of frontier left.

The frontier counties fall mostly in four areas: rural Alaska, the Owyhee-Bitterroot valleys of the Northwest, the Great Basin in Nevada and Utah, and the Great Plains from Montana to Texas. Alaska, whose license plates proclaim it "The Last Frontier," is 96 percent frontier. Nevada is 80 percent frontier, Idaho 44, Montana and Utah 41, New Mexico and Oregon 27, South Dakota 21, Colorado 17, and Wyoming 15. Even California, with four of the nation's sixteen largest cities, has two frontier counties, Alpine and Inyo, constituting seven percent of the state. The frontier counties of the "Lower 48"—the contiguous United States—contain thirteen percent of its total land area.



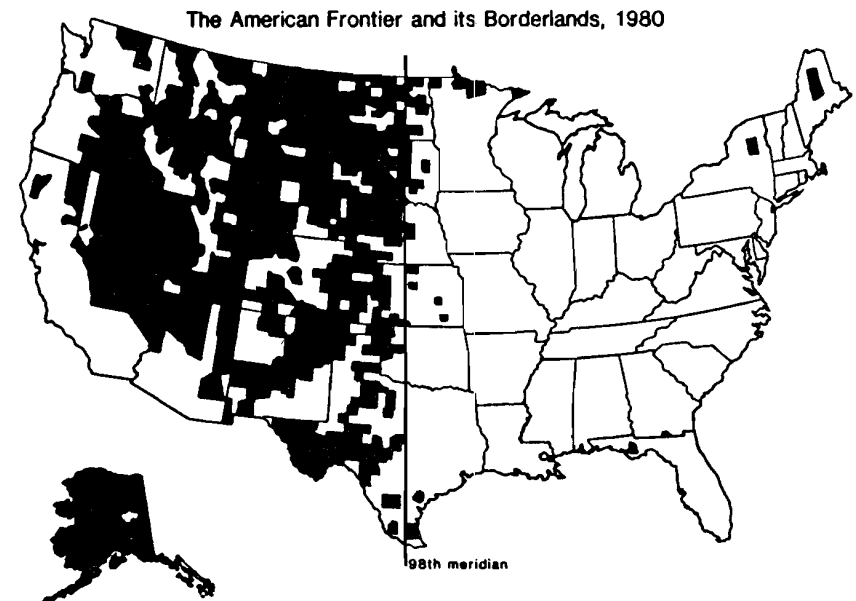
Map 1. Counties with less than two people per square mile. (Maps produced by the Cartography Laboratory of the Geography Department, Rutgers University.)

Many of the frontier counties consist principally of federal lands—the holdings, for instance, of the Bureau of Land Management (44 percent of the land in states from the Rockies westward), the Forest Service (16 percent of such land), the Fish and Wildlife Service (8 percent), and the National Park Service (6 percent). But a noticeable number of frontier counties lack large amounts of federal land. Sixteen percent of Texas is in frontier counties, but only two percent of the state is in federal holdings. Twenty-four percent of Nebraska is frontier, but only one percent is federal. Conversely, forty-four percent of Arizona and twenty-nine percent of Washington are federal, but neither state has any frontier counties. Thus many frontier counties are mainly in private or state holdings.

The nineteenth-century investigators sometimes drew a less stringent frontier line that delimited areas with less than six people per square mile (the equivalent of Manhattan having no more than 135 residents) rather than those with less than two. If one includes counties with this higher density, the surviving American frontier becomes truly impressive (see map 2). East of the Great Plains, nine counties join the list, mostly in large national and state parks and forests: four of them lie on Minnesota's Canadian border, and there is one each in Florida, Georgia, Maine, Michigan, and New York. The Great Plains states themselves have four frontier counties totally east of the 98th meridian, seven straddling it, and 127 totally west of it. Starting with the Great Plains and going west, every state but Hawaii adds at least two counties, for an overall Western total of 251 new ones in eighteen Western states. States that previously had no frontier counties acquire substantial amounts: Arizona adds 4 counties covering 42 percent of the state, Kansas 28 covering 29 percent, and Washington 6 covering 16 percent.

The total population of the 394 Western frontier counties with less than six people per square mile is 2.239 million, around one percent of the American population. Their area is 1.614 million square miles, or forty-five percent of the United States. They cover thirty percent of the Lower 48 states. They are almost entirely contiguous, and come close to forming a nineteenth-century-style unified zone. On this map the national frontier line has still not crossed the Great Plains, just as it had not in 1880. Many of the contemporary West's large cities—for instance, Albuquerque, Anchorage, Boise, Denver, and Salt Lake City—amount to urban islands in a frontier sea.

The frontier, it turns out, never disappeared at all. Just beyond the West's peopled areas, it survives on a huge scale. It is a coherent place that seems in no serious danger of diminishing in coming generations. We have misunderstood the settlement of nearly half of America: we have thought of it as past history when much of it is still history to come.



Map 2. Counties with less than six people per square mile.

There is a great deal of other evidence of the frontier's survival, in the frontier counties and elsewhere, that does not depend on nineteenth-century density standards. According to the Bureau of Land Management, 379 million acres of federal public land—all in the West, amounting to more than seventeen percent of the country—have never even been surveyed, and over fifty million more acres were surveyed inadequately over a century ago. Large chunks of Western territory have yet to be fully explored—for example, the northern Snake River Plain in Idaho, the Wah Wah Mountains in western Utah, Monument Valley in northern Arizona, the Wrangell Mountains in southern Alaska, the Brooks Range in northern Alaska, and the Owyhee River Canyons near the intersection of Idaho, Nevada, and Oregon. The Alaskan mountain ranges contain hundreds of peaks over ten thousand feet high that have never been named, much less climbed.

Homesteading—the most widespread and symbolic act of trying to people the frontier—continues to a surprising extent more than half a century after the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 supposedly abolished it. Because Alaska's previous territorial status exempted it from the act, homesteading on federal land in the state lasted into the 1960s, and in 1982 the Bureau of Land Management revived it experimentally in central Alaska's Kuskokwim Mountains. On several occasions since 1934 the federal government relaxed its prohibition on homesteading to promote settlement near specific federal projects such as dams; for instance, in the late 1940s homesteaders occupied nearly two hundred thousand acres of irrigated farms in the Gila River project near Yuma, Arizona. Because of long legal delays stemming from clouded titles, multiple claimants, probated wills, and disputed Indian treaties, the federal government is still transferring Western homestead sites to latter-day settlers whose ancestors first filed applications before 1934. Some Western states, notably Alaska, still have widespread homesteading on state-owned land.

Then there is illegal homesteading that, whether temporary or permanent, amounts to frontier-style squatting on the vast Western public lands. At least four thousand Alaskans, almost one percent of the state's population, are squatting on the seventy-eight million acres of state land, many more are squatting on the larger federal holdings, and some are putting up "no trespassing" signs. In 1983 Alaska's governor, Bill Sheffield, was revealed to hold an interest in an illegal duck-hunting camp in a state waterfowl refuge; he publicly renounced his holding, but his opponent in the 1982 election and three state judges, including the chief justice of the Alaska Supreme Court, have not given up theirs. In Southern California's Mojave Desert, a former boomtown of the silver strikes of the 1920s, Red Mountain, is now a remote settlement of 130 retirees who until recently lived year-round as squatters on federal land. "The entire town is in trespass," a Bureau of Land Management official told the *Washington Post* in 1983. Late in 1984, after a twenty-seven-year

squabble, the federal government gave most of the squatters title to their land.

The frontier is not what it was in the 1870s. It is smaller, less contiguous and isolated, more law-abiding and regulated, less rugged, dangerous, and impassable. It has less free land and no longer provides a safety valve for people who are unwanted or unneeded in cities or settled rural areas. The frontier's products account for a smaller proportion of the nation's natural resource economy, which in turn accounts for a smaller proportion of its overall economy. The frontier looks different: the cowboy culture that reached its height during the late nineteenth century has given way to high-tech agribusiness, big mining and timber companies, and large water projects. The highway has replaced the wagon trail, the trailer the sod house, the pickup truck the horse (mostly), the country-and-western station the campfire ballad, the bus and the mail plane the stagecoach, the snowmobile the dogsled. Except for Alaska, the frontier has not for generations been the dream of those who seek a fortune or a new life.

Yet the frontier lives on, protected from large-scale settlement by its climate (Alaska, central Nevada), its terrain (southern Utah, central Idaho, eastern Oregon), its distance from metropolitan areas (central Montana, the western Dakotas, most of Alaska and Wyoming), its lack of water, its frequent lack of exploitable resources, and most federal land policies. Thus much frontier land is almost unlivable, economically unattractive, and abundantly surrounded by more such land.

It seems remarkable that the nation does not acknowledge the unwon West as a huge empty region in our midst, but there are good reasons why we do not know what to make of it. The frontier is off the beaten track. Our governing classes, as well as many of the rest of us, have no reason to notice it except as a place to fly over. Barring occasional episodes such as the Sagebrush Rebellion (the recent unsuccessful attempt by James Watt to sell or give away large quantities of Western federal land to corporations and state governments), the public lands that form

the core of the frontier are rarely a high-priority national issue. Their uses no longer determine the future of the American economy, and their disposal to settlers no longer controls the course of Western expansion. The high growth rate of many Western cities and towns masks the fact that they amount to burgeoning outposts scattered across the far larger frontier. (This clustering of growing urban populations has led to the ironic finding of recent censuses that the West is now America's most urban region.)

Most important, the nation accepted Turner's argument that the frontier was passing, that America was about to become what he called a "closed-room society"—more like what Europe was than what America had been. We therefore have difficulty grasping that the land future of the American West is not yet entirely decided; we assume that the settlement of the West is over. More precisely, we assume that most of the lands which have not been settled already are so useless or (in the less common case of preservation areas such as the national parks and wildernesses) so beautiful that they never will be settled. Thomas Jefferson had a more flexible, expansive view of what the uses of the West might turn out to be: he went ahead with the controversial Louisiana Purchase in 1803 largely because he believed Americans would need a hundred generations to settle the West and discover its uses, but then would be sustained by it for a thousand. Seven generations later, he may have been more prescient than we realize.

Because we ignore the survival of the frontier, we repeatedly misunderstand the West. We allowed the Great Plains portion of the West to become dependent on water-intensive farming methods and irrigation practices that cannot be sustained in arid frontier settings, and now are surprised when—just as in the 1890s and 1930s—nature and the economy turn hostile, Dust Bowls loom, and the Plains promise again to become one of the great failure sectors of American agriculture. We regard figures like James Watt and events like the Sagebrush Rebellion as aberrations when they are really the predictable products of the

frontier, having appeared countless times before in the settlement of the West.

Similarly, environmentalists often seek to protect scarce, fragile Western areas that turn out to be neither scarce nor fragile, and developers often seek to exploit different scarce, fragile areas that indeed should be protected. Neither group trusts the other, so each exaggerates its own claims. The results are overuse in some resource situations and underuse in others. Because we do not realize that we still have a vast frontier, we are unlikely to arrive at a balanced or stable policy for it.

Yet the surviving frontier plainly affects Western land use and attitudes toward natural resources, pushing them in directions most Easterners (and people on the West Coast) find hard to grasp or admire. The surviving frontier—particularly its wide-open spaces, endemic poverty, populist conservatism, tradition of geographic mobility, and myth of social mobility—makes much of the rural West receptive to large extractive boom-and-bust developments: big energy projects, copper and coal strip-mining and other mineral enterprises, nuclear waste repositories, and the MX missile system. Such environmentally risky projects, placed elsewhere, would cause far more dismay than they do on the frontier.

The surviving frontier makes much of the rural West hostile to the large federal holdings that seem to hinder the region's economic development. So it makes the rural West sympathetic to once-a-generation divestiture movements such as the Sagebrush Rebellion. And it makes the West hospitable to the more frequent efforts—such as the Reagan-Watt initiatives and other measures sought by large natural-resource corporations with headquarters far from the frontier—to accelerate leasing for oil, coal, natural gas, other minerals, timber, and grazing on federal land. It inclines the West to support comparably motivated initiatives to slow down the acquisition of federal parkland, wildlife refuges, and wilderness, and to give less weight to long-term environmental considerations and more to short-term economic ones.

The surviving frontier also helps explain the West's special resistance to federal and even state regulation of private land. It goes a long way toward explaining why many Western rural localities have never adopted zoning and probably never will. It clarifies why many Western urban areas that were until recently frontier have adopted zoning reluctantly and in the weakest form they could manage, and why Houston and other substantial Texas cities (for instance, Baytown, Pasadena, and Wichita Falls) have never adopted it at all. The surviving frontier is one of the main reasons why Western states and localities are in the forefront of the national search for alternatives to our present land use and environmental regulations.

Turner was not totally in error in 1893 to declare the frontier gone; the lands that were both available and arable were disappearing fast in the late nineteenth century. But the practical implications of his declaration have frequently been misunderstood since. A frontier is often an area that can be cultivated only marginally using the agricultural technologies of the time. Since the 1890s our technologies, especially our means of handling water, have not improved enough to make farming or ranching on the Great Plains, or in northern Alaska or southern Utah, more than intermittently profitable. The true architect of the West has never been governmental or even human—it has been the desert, with its immense expansions and contractions and its pitiless resistance to cultivation. Alaska too, except for the coastal strip south of the Alaska Range, gets less than twenty inches of rain a year; it is a cold desert, as Arizona is a hot one. The few available arable Western lands may not have disappeared precisely by 1890, as a strict reading of Turner and the census would imply, but almost all vanished sometime between the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 and the abolition of homesteading in 1934. After more than two hundred years of frequently obsessive pioneering, the surviving frontier is what remains.

A prodigious amount is left. Consider Alaska, the sixth of America that bulks so large in Western development plans. The state, even after years of extremely fast population growth

(thirty percent between 1980 and 1985, the highest rate for any state), still has an overall density of less than one person per square mile, easily qualifying all of the state, even including Anchorage and Fairbanks, as a frontier by the nineteenth-century standard. Alaska has half of the nation's coal reserves, almost half its supply of fresh water, its most fertile fishing grounds, huge stores of natural gas, and—because the summer's long northern light expands the growing season—a surprisingly bountiful agricultural potential. Alaska's Matanuska Valley has long produced, among other farm commodities, cabbages weighing seventy pounds and fields of wheat and barley eight feet high, all grown commercially, in marketable amounts, and without pesticides.

Alaska could produce as much oil in the next ten years as the rest of the country has since the first well in Titusville, Pennsylvania, in 1859. Alaska contains hundreds of uncharted, untrod mountains and valleys. It has dozens of bush villages that lack electricity, running water, telephones, and paving. The state capital, Juneau, along with scores of other towns, can only be reached by sea or air (or on foot); these are places for which road access from the outside is a project of the twenty-first century, if then. The state has a grand total of fifteen thousand miles of roads, mostly in the Anchorage and Fairbanks areas—fewer than Vermont, which has less than a sixtieth of Alaska's area (but a larger population). In the 1980s there is an American North almost as large, uninhabited, virginal, rich, and environmentally vulnerable as the American West was in the 1870s. In addition, much of the American West has not essentially changed since the 1870s.

It is difficult to predict the fate of the frontier. Coming decades will probably see continued development: more growth of Western cities, vast new mineral strikes, the unexpected (but inevitable) discovery of new kinds of minerals and extractive technologies that would make more frontier land economically attractive, renewed Sagebrush Rebellions, endless extractive boom-and-bust cycles, and perhaps some strengthening of water technologies that would allow agriculture on more of the fron-

tier. These occurrences for the most part represent straight-line continuations of existing trends. They would not come close to filling the empty enormity of the frontier. Thus the happiest, most likely vision is that centuries from now the frontier will be roughly what it is today: the great, mythic, joyous West of big skies and cattle drives, lonesome roads and oasis towns, energy boomers and water shortages, of cactus and steppe and tundra—of purple mountain majesties that lack the fruited plain.

Yet the frontier could someday prove the solution to a national land emergency. The frontier may be thought of as a largely federal reserve, a gigantic bank account put aside to meet America's future land needs. During the energy crisis of 1973–1981, Alaska, of which ninety-six percent was then in federal hands, served this function to some extent, but the performance could become more obvious if the peril were worse. For example, there may come a time generations hence when the nation will rediscover the frontier and again want to settle or use it—after a major earthquake, a nuclear accident, a hazardous waste crisis, or some unforeseen economic, military, biological, or climatic defeat. If the emergency never comes, well enough—there was no active alternative use for much of the land anyway. But if it does come, the frontier will actively reenter American history.

The problem, as ever, is water. The desert, the scorched heart of the American West, is now expanding rapidly, largely because of urban and agricultural development. El Paso is bracketed east and west by two new areas of humanly caused desertification that the Council on Environmental Quality classified in 1980 as “very severe.” A larger area with the same designation appears in the Rio Puerco Basin near Albuquerque and Santa Fe. The desertification of a wide Southwestern strip extending from central Texas and Oklahoma to central California, a tenth of the United States, was designated as “severe.” The Ogallala Aquifer under the arid Great Plains portions of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas—a nonrenewable groundwater source that nourishes more than eleven million acres of agriculture—is being inexorably depleted, notably by center-pivot irrigation. As in Dust Bowl days, farmland has been

abandoned for lack of water in the Pecos Valley in New Mexico and between Amarillo and Lubbock in Texas. Throughout the West, the long-term meteorological outlook is for intensified drought.

The water constraints are probably worst in Arizona, which combines high growth rates, water-intensive agriculture, and an aridity unusual even for the West. Because the state's two-billion-dollar-a-year citrus, alfalfa, and cotton crops use nine-tenths of its well water, Arizona is buying up farmland to remove it from production and discouraging additional farming; the state has also made digging a new well a felony. In 1980 Arizona passed a water management act, the nation's most demanding, that requires all new urban developments to have an assured water supply for at least a century. In 1984 the state's Water Resources Department proposed that Arizona no longer allow the construction of all-grass golf courses or highway medians, large swimming pools, and decorative ponds, lakes, or fountains. (Such artificial bodies of water have been a prestige item in developments like Lake Havasu City, whose builders bought London Bridge, reassembled it block by block on the sandy site, and had to have it overarch something wet.) The department's plan is intended as the first of five that will impose progressively stricter limitations on water use over the next forty years.

The water deficit increasingly oppresses the entire West and has even begun to affect relations with Canada. The northern portion of the Canadian West contains even more fresh water than Alaska, and there have been repeated suggestions, American and Canadian, that it be exported south. Other schemes involving Canada have emerged. The North American Water and Power Alliance, proposed by the late California engineer Ralph Parsons, would reverse the present northern course of two large Alaska rivers, the Yukon and the Tanana, and send them south to the American West, with a courtesy diversion to the arid southern portions of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. An even more grandiose scheme, the Grand Canal project advocated by the Canadian engineer Thomas Kierans, would divert the flow from the Eastern rivers that now empty into

James Bay, the large southern inlet of Canada's Hudson Bay. A dike one hundred miles long would separate the two bays, turn James Bay into a freshwater lake, and feed its flow into a canal that would carry the water southwest to the Great Lakes for release to the American and Canadian Wests (and Midwests).

Today such projects are visionary, at or beyond the edge of technological and intellectual respectability. They are extraordinarily expensive; they will cost at least three hundred billion dollars apiece, according to Frank Quinn, director of water planning for the Canadian counterpart of the Environmental Protection Agency. They are likely to have unintended ecological effects that would be devastating and irreversible. They could easily become white elephants before completion, in the manner of many contemporary nuclear power plants. Yet someday they may be possible, or may have to be made so; the Canadian government is now underwriting a long-term feasibility study of the Grand Canal project. "The desert," wrote Walter Prescott Webb in 1957, "is the guest that came to dinner never to go away. It is the great designer of the American West." If continued Western growth is to be practical in decades to come, we will need technical breakthroughs and new institutional arrangements for collecting, transporting, exchanging, conserving, and desalinating water, and perhaps for seeding clouds. An administration that truly wanted to settle the West, to build the Pacific side of America, would need to look no further for enterprises to support.

The administrations of future generations may also want to reconsider our practices of disposing of and retaining public land. The Sagebrush Rebellion is a dead issue today, but the frontier will probably see more land transfers over the next few decades, and the rebellion will have helped make them possible by reviving the sleepy field of public land policy. A number of plausible alternatives have already surfaced in its wake. Dean Rhoads, the Nevada state legislator and rancher who is often considered the father of the Sagebrush Rebellion, now supports allowing cattle and sheep raisers to buy surface rights to public land, keeping the mineral rights in federal hands, and letting the

states take over day-to-day management and regulation. The 1982 report of the President's Commission on Housing advocates "townsteading" on public land. Others have suggested the creation of public/private development corporations, long-term leasing to private interests for terms as long as a hundred years, or, most sensibly, a series of experimental programs on relatively small tracts to test different approaches. The Bureau of Land Management's grazing system originated with such an experiment in the Mizpah-Pumpkin Creek area of southeast Montana in the late 1920s.

We are almost certainly moving into a new phase of America's expansion into its gigantic physical setting. From the Articles of Confederation to the Taylor Act, federal policy essentially was to acquire public land and then dispose of as much of it as possible. The Sagebrush Rebellion marks the transition back to what will probably be a lengthy period of disposal. For fifty years disposal has been interrupted; new land demands, new extraction and construction technologies, have now established themselves, and more will appear. The environmental movement—its laws and its protective technologies—are deservedly here to stay. Many public lands—all the national parks, monuments, and wildernesses, some national forests, and other quality recreation areas—are politically and physically sacred places that cannot and should not be touched. But disposal of lands less distinctive than the national treasures could take place gradually so as not to invite fraud, disrupt local land markets, or overburden states and localities. A key problem will be weaning Western resource-based industries and governments from their present dependence on federal subsidies such as cheap leases on public land, generous payments in lieu of property taxes, and federal assumption of what would otherwise be state and local public services.

A more important problem will be finding better ways to promote slow, small-scale disposal—incremental, tract-by-tract, year-by-year disposal that goes unpublicized but has significant local and cumulative regional consequences. The federal government has continually made small-scale disposals, even in

periods when it opted against large-scale ones. Since 1926, under the Recreation and Public Purposes Act, the Interior Department has conducted an effective program to transfer land to local and state governments. The 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the successor to the Taylor Act as the prime federal statute governing the public lands, permits small-scale transfers and prescribes procedures for them. Modest increases in such disposals for the most part would transfer Bureau of Land Management holdings, especially those near cities and towns. Such disposals, when combined with the remnant homesteading described earlier, the ongoing federal-state land exchanges (for instance, Project BOLD in Utah), and the accelerating Alaska land transfers to the state, would offer a direct and practical way to reduce the federal holdings beneficially. The comparable but smaller state holdings are already being reduced; between 1972 and 1981, the Western states sold 193,000 acres of public land, while the Bureau of Land Management sold only 68,000.

Elsewhere on the frontier, the nation may in future generations decide that it wants to expand the federal holdings rather than reduce them. A probable area is the Great Plains (eastern Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico, and western North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas), the area between the Rockies and the 98th meridian that accounts for nearly a fifth of the land area of the Lower 48 states and that Webb in 1957 called “the burnt right flank of the American desert.” Agriculture—whether it involves cotton, cattle, sheep, wheat, or hogs—is dying throughout much of the Plains both for economic reasons and for lack of water. The difficulties of Plains farming have historically been far worse than those of the neighbor region to the east, the Midwest’s Corn Belt; even now, despite the genuine and well-publicized problems Corn Belt farmers face, they at least have water.

No replacement crops, federal subsidies, or foreseeable irrigation techniques are likely to save Plains farming. The Plains could undergo a large-scale 1930s-style depression, complete

with dust bowls and rapid population losses. Much of the Plains is already becoming a place of old people and emptying towns. There will certainly be an uncomfortable number of farm bankruptcies and an unacceptable amount of soil erosion. All these conditions will be distinctly more severe than in the Corn Belt.

The federal government reacted to the agricultural crisis of the 1930s, one that in fact produced less soil erosion than is occurring today, by buying out five million acres of farm holdings, an area the size of New Hampshire. It made them into the national grasslands that are today administered by the Forest Service—locally unusable, nationally unneeded cropland that was turned back into the open prairie the settlers found in the nineteenth century. During the 1930s the Forest Service sought to return seventeen million more Plains acres to national grasslands, and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes urged that the federal government acquire still other substantial areas—including the entire Oklahoma Panhandle, which is larger than three Delawares.

As the Ogallala Aquifer runs dry, as other Plains agriculture succumbs, and as outmigration from the Plains increases, the nation may conclude that this part of America—a strip two hundred to seven hundred miles wide across the country’s mid-section—should never have been farmed or settled in the first place. It might not have been were it on the western edge of America rather than in its center. If Plains agriculture did not exist, the winning argument will go, it would not have to be invented. Nor would the federal government have to heavily and inefficiently subsidize its operation, especially its irrigation. The federal agencies will then offer incentives deliberately aimed at taking land out of cultivation and at speeding the depopulation of the Plains. In effect the federal government will work to enlarge the frontier.

The frontier has not been an issue in American society since the time of Turner. As David Potter suggested in *People of Plenty* (1954), Turner’s frontier thesis, especially his notion

of the closing of the frontier, was a brilliant metaphor for a form of historic American economic abundance that even in Turner's time was clearly being supplanted by other abundances Turner did not mention—those produced by such new industries and technologies as the automobile and television. It is these forms of abundance, Potter contends, that continue to shape American character and development, much as free land once did. But the result is that we have almost forgotten that we still have a land frontier.

Because we think that the West has been totally won, we ignore the immense surviving frontier—the lands that whites never learned to live on, but that centuries from now may have uses we cannot imagine. The frontier's unfilled vastness is still out there in our own time. It is even now a gift of history, an enduring part of our endowment, one of the reasons we remain a lucky country. We need to develop a coherent national idea of what to do with the frontier or at least to acknowledge that something can be done with it.

So progressive public policy has a great deal to contribute to the American frontier over coming generations. It can promote better and more efficient use of water; improving the West's spotty system of reservoirs would be a good place to start. It can find better means of soil conservation. Federal, state, and local governments can determine which public lands should be disposed of and which (presumably the larger part) retained. Conversely, if the federal government chooses to expand its frontier holdings—for instance, by restoring big chunks of the Great Plains to their original prairie condition—it can identify acquisition zones and devise fair buy-out contracts. In all these tasks responsive governments should work to alleviate the frontier's most persistent human problem, its poverty.

Across almost half the United States, the land awaits, as it has for generations and will for many more. The frontier has not disappeared; what Turner called the first period of American history has not ended. The most American of presidents,

Thomas Jefferson, may have been more prophetic than Turner, closer to today's truth, in his assumption that uncountable generations of Americans would need to occupy the frontier before they remotely began to exhaust it, and in his vision that American history would just be getting under way generations after his own time. Gertrude Stein, of all people, may have said it best: "In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is." The frontier has not defined us as a people for nearly a century, but it remains a part of American life and a factor in the American future. We are no longer a frontier nation, but we are still a nation with a frontier.