The Frontier Thesis

Source A

In the 1890s, Frederick Jackson Turner, a young Wisconsin historian, became famous by arguing that it was this constant confrontation with nature in the West that had made America fundamentally different from Europe: "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 points dominating American character." For Turner "the true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West."

David Reynolds, *America, Empire of Liberty: A New History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2009) p. 116.

Source B

The truly enduring note at the exposition[1] was struck by a young college professor lecturing to the American Historical Association, which held its annual meeting in the White City from July 11 to 13. In "The Frontier in American History," Frederick Jackson Turner argued that American exceptionalism was rooted in the individualism and self-reliance of the frontier settler. Jackson pointed to a little-known U.S. Census Bureau pamphlet that had declared in 1891 that the frontier was now "closed" – there was no more land to conquer or settle. What would happen to the best and most distinctive qualities of the American spirit, Turner asked, if there was nowhere left for Americans to go?

Turner's address, though factually a stretch (open space still abounded), would become during the first half of the twentieth century one of the most important and oft-quoted speeches ever made by a historian. At the time, however, it got little attention. The night of July 12 was hot; most historians tried boating or the giant Ferris wheel, or went in search of ice cream. Even Turner's parents failed to show up at his lecture.

But Theodore Roosevelt was paying attention. He wrote Turner, "I have been greatly interested in your pamphlet on the Frontier… I think you have struck some first class ideas, and have put into definite shape a good deal of thought which has been floating around rather loosely." Roosevelt had been thinking about American expansionism. He was writing the third volume of his treatise on the American frontier spirit, *The Winning of the West*. But he also had a more personal agenda. With conquest comes conflict, and the closing of the American Frontier suggested peace upon the land. Roosevelt yearned for conflict – the ultimate conflict of war. …

Evan Thomas, *The War Lovers: Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst, and the Rush to Empire, 1898* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010) pp. 58-59.

Source C

Almost exactly a hundred years ago as I write, Frederick Jackson Turner formulated the Frontier Theory of American history, according to which, as the U.S.A. was formed by the march of settlers from east to west, the frontier became a transmutative influence, not only on the environment it crossed but also on the people who bore it and on their relationships with one another. It opened discontinuities, as metropolitan society was left behind by rebellious spirits, social experimenters,

[1] The Chicago World's Fair of 1893.

and escapees from restrictive worlds. It made space for new forms and practices, for free and expansive gestures, for distinctive identities, and for what we now call generation gaps. Turner's frontier had a Darwinian touch: it changed societies, in part, by selecting the individuals of which they were composed. ...

Today, however, the Turner thesis seems to have been turned out of its own territory. Attacks on Turner – on parts of his thesis, on his particular mistakes – began in the 1920s when he was the incumbent genius of American historiography, and became prolific after his death in 1932. In the early 1960s his reputation still inspired deference, according to an opinion survey among American historians. Yet work since then on the American west is full of repudiations of Turner's influence. His long shadow, which once darkened the west, seems to have been cut short by a gunslingers's high noon, and there are storm clouds in the open skies of Turner's America.

His was a landward-looking America, but today's American historians feel their culture has been produced by odyssey as well as anabasis. Indeed, a colleague of mine at a summer institute of maritime history told me that he had only become interested in the sea when he moved to Kansas. Turner's America, moreover, was pioneer America, from which his frontiers excluded the Indians. Today's substitute is more ethno-sensitive and wears warpaint under the raccoon-skin cap. Turner's America was ecologically incorrect – destroying the "climax community" identified by the ecologists of his day and regretted ever since. He died just before the dust bowls began to blow out of the west over the rest of America. By implication, at least, his America was unique; and although historians of the American west are still in some cases resistant to comparative insights, the image of the frontier now informs and dominates the study of colonial histories all over the world. Turner's has followed a trajectory familiar from the example of other gospels, without honour in its own country but preached in all quarters of the globe.

Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years* (New York: Scribner, 1995), pp. 675-676.

Source D

Inspired by visions of scientific history, American historians initially incorporated into their work the European concern for institutional growth. Early renditions traced the lineage of American liberty and democracy back to the Germanic heritage. Professor Herbert Baxter Adams preached this gospel in his famous seminar at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, locating the "germ" of later developments in the misty Teutonic forests. The idea, rudimentary in form, could not withstand scholarly scrutiny and dissolved under pressure from various sources, including the "imperial school" of colonial history. Scholars such as Herbert L. Osgood, George Louis Beer, and Charles McLean Andrews traced the roots of American democracy not to remote German villages but to English legacies and also to the actual effects of the colonial experience in the New World.

The social dislocations of the age and the ensuing reform movements called forth new approaches in academic scholarship, particularly in the areas of law, philosophy, social science, and history. Seeking to promote progress through reform and conscious planning, historians during the Progressive era in the United States developed what became known as the "New History." Characteristically skeptical in tone and iconoclastic in approach, the "new historians" regarded lofty, public statements of high-blown and idealistic purpose with suspicion, perceiving in them a subterfuge for material or selfish interests.

An early version, really a precursor, of New History appeared in the works of Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1893, he read before the American Historical Association a paper on the significance of the frontier in American history. His seminal idea, "the frontier thesis," retained great influence within the historical profession for over half a century and profoundly shifted the focus of study in U.S. history. First, Turner repudiated the view of Herbert Baxter Adams, his

teacher, that American institutions had germinated in the Teutonic woods. Turner saw liberty, democracy, and individualism as homegrown traits, the products of the frontier experience. Second, he shifted attention away from the eastern seaboard and New England toward the West, where in his view successive acts of settlement had engendered the laudable qualities of which he spoke. Oftentimes elusive and poetic in formulation, Turner's sparse writings never made clear whether the author understood the frontier as a place, a process, or a state of mind. Nevertheless, the Turner thesis captivated many historians because, in a single stroke, it accounted for American uniqueness and put ordinary white people, the settlers, at the center of things. It had less to offer native peoples and other victims of westward expansion.

Another among the new historians who shaped the consciousness of the times, Charles Austin Beard developed an economic interpretation of U.S. history. More indebted intellectually to James Madison and *The Federalist Papers* than to Karl Marx, Beard, a committed activist and reformer, first directed his attention to the founding fathers. In 1913, the publication of *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* set forth daring views. Emphasizing the impact of class conflicts, Beard disparaged the supposed effects of altruistic impulses and providential design by underscoring the complex interplay of material concerns. Indeed, he characterized the clash as a contest between a popular party based on paper money and agrarian preoccupations and a conservative party founded on urban, financial, mercantile, and personal property interests. For Beard, the adoption of the Constitution, a triumph for the latter, really amounted to a kind of counterrevolution against the alleged democratic excesses under the Articles of Confederation. In a later work entitled *The Rise of American Civilization*, first published in 1934, Beard and his collaborator, his wife Mary, gave special prominence to economic causes and argued that U.S. history had consistently pitted the selfishness of the business classes against the well-being of the people.

Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction,* 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003) pp. 111-113.

Source E

From 1890 to 1920, as we have seen, was the era of the Turnerian synthesis. Encouraged by a responsive public, a small and homogeneous cohort of professional historians (two or three hundred strong at the most) hailed the frontier as "an ineradicable influence" for good. Defining it as the engine that powered the rise of an exceptional people, they lamented the frontier's closing, rejected European antecedents, excluded minorities, and ignored environmental costs. Bred to mounting complexity and disillusioned by the rise of industrial urbanism, world wars (hot and cold), the Communist revolution, the depression, and environmental woes, the generations that followed became increasingly pessimistic, questioned the role of the frontier, or, indeed, saw it as a destructive force. According to Richard Hofstadter's *The Progressive Historians* (1968), the very vagueness, impressionism, and overstatement that had given Turnerian doctrines "their plasticity and hence their broad acceptance" came under heavy attack in the decades after Turner's death in 1932. Also increasingly outmoded were his "assumptions about cultural transmission," his view of the West as "safety valve," and the "crippling isolationist implications" his theory had for foreign policy.

Temporarily checked by the affluence and professional opportunity of the years after 1945, pessimism among historians resurged sharply during and after the Vietnam conflict. Western history professionals, who by then numbered perhaps two thousand, hailed from a wide variety of backgrounds. Western history shifted its center of gravity to the Far West, setting up the Western History Association (1961) as the Mississippi Valley Historical Association became the Organization of American Historians (1965), and traditionalists refined nineteenth-century themes

and worked to restructure Turner. In time many came to see the West as defunct, its history as passé, and the people attracted to its standard as second rank.

Even in the era of Turner's greatest ascendance there had been alternate voices. Some, like Charles Beard and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., respectively economic and urban scholars, foreshadowed a move away from Turner and the West. Among the founders of what the historiographers Rodman Paul and Michael Malone have termed the "classic tradition in western historiography," and few "operated outside the Turnerian nexus."

Charles S. Peterson, "Speaking for the Past", in Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss (eds), *The Oxford History of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp. 760-761.

Source F

The Last of the Frontier.—When Horace Greeley made his trip west in 1859 he thus recorded the progress of civilization in his journal:

"May 12th, Chicago.—Chocolate and morning journals last seen on the hotel breakfast table.

23rd, Leavenworth (Kansas).—Room bells and bath tubs make their final appearance.

26th, Manhattan.—Potatoes and eggs last recognized among the blessings that 'brighten as they take their flight.'

27th, Junction City.—Last visitation of a boot-black, with dissolving views of a board bedroom. Beds bid us good-by."

Within thirty years travelers were riding across that country in Pullman cars and enjoying at the hotels all the comforts of a standardized civilization. The "wild west" was gone, and with it that frontier of pioneers and settlers who had long given such a bent and tone to American life and had "poured in upon the floor of Congress" such a long line of "backwoods politicians," as they were scornfully styled.

Free Land and Eastern Labor.—It was not only the picturesque features of the frontier that were gone. Of far more consequence was the disappearance of free lands with all that meant for American labor. For more than a hundred years, any man of even moderate means had been able to secure a homestead of his own and an independent livelihood. For a hundred years America had been able to supply farms to as many immigrants as cared to till the soil. Every new pair of strong arms meant more farms and more wealth. Workmen in Eastern factories, mines, or mills who did not like their hours, wages, or conditions of labor, could readily find an outlet to the land. Now all that was over. By about 1890 most of the desirable land available under the Homestead act had disappeared. American industrial workers confronted a new situation. …

Conservation and the Land Problem.—The disappearance of the frontier also brought new and serious problems to the governments of the states and the nation. The people of the whole United States suddenly were forced to realize that there was a limit to the rich, new land to exploit and to the forests and minerals awaiting the ax and the pick. Then arose in America the questions which had long perplexed the countries of the Old World—the scientific use of the soils and conservation of natural resources. Hitherto the government had followed the easy path of giving away arable land and selling forest and mineral lands at low prices. Now it had to face far more difficult and complex problems. It also had to consider questions of land tenure again, especially if the ideal of a nation of home-owning farmers was to be maintained. While there was plenty of land for every man or woman who wanted a home on the soil, it made little difference if single landlords or companies got possession of millions of acres, if a hundred men in one western river valley owned 17,000,000 acres; but when the good land for small homesteads was all gone, then was raised the real issue. At the opening of the twentieth century the nation, which a hundred years before had land and natural resources apparently without limit, was compelled to enact law after law conserving its forests and minerals. Then it was that the great state of California, on the

very border of the continent, felt constrained to enact a land settlement measure providing government assistance in an effort to break up large holdings into small lots and to make it easy for actual settlers to acquire small farms. America was passing into a new epoch.

Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The History of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1921) pp. 445, 449, available at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16960/16960-h/16960-h.htm

Source G

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 legend of one kind or another have now so permeated American thoughts 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 to what cultural influences must we henceforth look for its preservation?

George Wilson Pierson, "The Frontier and American Institutions: A Criticism of the Turner Theory" [1942] in George Rogers Taylor (ed.), *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*, 3rd ed. (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972) pp. 70-71.

Source H

…in the 1980s, a number of younger historians – some of whom first watched Walt Disney's "Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier" on television as children but later came of age politically and intellectually when John Kennedy's "New Frontier" policies led the United States deeper into war in Vietnam – began a much more extensive rethinking of the significance of the frontier. To be sure, the frontier, and especially the West, had become encumbered with ahistorical myths, but it was still, as Turner had noted, "a fertile field for investigation." All the issues that engaged "mainstream" historians – war and peace, political and social conflict, race, class, and, more recently, gender – were manifest in frontier regions. Yet in order to revive the frontier as a field of serious study, they had to free themselves, as historian Susan Armitage has put it, from "the dead hand of Frederick Jackson Turner." In a sense, recent scholars of frontier regions, especially the so-called New Western Historians, have resurrected the Turner thesis only to make sure it is buried again.

Above all, the new scholarship has challenged Turner's notion of the frontier and the perspective from which he viewed it. Most historians would now agree (and the Turnerian die-hards, perhaps, reluctantly admit) that Turner's notion of the term "frontier" was an ethnocentric, or Eurocentric, concept that had meaning only from the perspective of the colonizing culture. His

description of the frontier as "the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization" made clear his preconceptions, even prejudices. It was European "civilization" that met Indian "savagery" at the farthest point of European penetration in the New World wilderness. The land beyond was uncharted, uncontrolled, and therefore threatening.

But for the New World natives – the people the Europeans called Indians – there was no such notion of a frontier. To them the land was not a howling wilderness, but home. By the same token, they were not savages, but civilized people. They had well-established territories, stable social systems, and extensive trade networks. Like Europeans, they often made war on their enemies, but they never set out to annihilate other tribes. It was only with the arrival – or as some scholars now describe it, the invasion – of Europeans that Native Americans faced a threat to their very existence. The advance of the newcomers, with their diseases and desires for land, ultimately forced natives into long-term retreat. Indeed, when seen from the perspective of Native Americans, the westward movement of Euro-Americans was hardly the positive process Turner described. Rather than freedom, opportunity, and democracy, it brought displacement, destruction, and death.

If nothing else, the record of Indian-European relations in North America has rendered terms like "savagery" and "civilization" essentially meaningless, or certainly made it impossible to apply either term exclusively to one culture or the other. One might well revise Turner's definition to describe the frontier as the meeting point where otherwise civilized people often exhibited savage behavior. A better approach is to define "frontier" in terms that are less loaded in favor of Euro-American culture. In recent years, post-Turnerian scholars have begun to use terms like "contact zone," "zone of interpenetration," or "middle ground," thus suggesting an area of interaction between two or more cultures in which no one culture is assumed to have an altogether superior position. The recognition of this interaction helps us redefine the frontier not just as a place, or even as a frequently repeated, one-dimensional, process of contact, settlement, and development. It involves, rather, a much more complex process of mutual exchange in which neither culture, Native American or Euro-American, could remain unchanged.

Gregory H. Nobles, "Beyond Myth and Master Narrative: Toward a New History of the American Frontier", *Quaderno 6*, pp. 50-51, available at
http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/Quaderno/Quaderno6/quaderno6.html.

Source I

The centrality of the West in the American imagination… goes back… to the nation's very beginnings. America was understood by the earliest European settlers as a land of renewal, and that theme runs consistently through all its subsequent history. The Puritans thought of New England as a New Zion. Thomas Jefferson saw the western lands as the key to the preservation of the nations virtuous "naturalness." Mid-nineteenth-century romantics such as Walt Whitman saw the West as an avenue of escape from the past, and the staging ground for a "newer, mightier world." Historian Frederick Jackson Turner's famed "frontier thesis," which argued that the existence of a western frontier had decisively shaped the American national character, was only the most famous expression of a widely held belief that the West was the most American of the sections, precisely because of its distance, physical and intellectual, from Europe. This is why westerner Mark Twain, rather than easterner William Dean Howells or expatriate Henry James, came to be seen as the greatest and most quintessentially American of nineteenth-century novelists.

This last example perhaps explains why, in the twentieth century, a kind of prairie-populist, wildcatting romance of the western frontier has managed to become so closely associated with American conservatism. That this image is based more on the West's symbolic meaning than its reality does nothing to alter its power. …

And just as important, Ronald Reagan's jaunty cowboy hats were an implicit rebuke to the gloom of historical revisionism, which found in the history of the United States nothing but a dismal swamp of genocide, racism, imperialism, and greed, evils all perpetrated by white male European settlers. Reagan wanted no part of such exercises in national self-loathing, and the conservative movement, as well as the national electorate of the 1980s, was pleased to follow his lead.

Wilfred M. McClay, "West, American" in Bruce Frohnen, Jeremy Beer, and Jeffrey O. Nelson, (eds), *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006) pp. 917-918.

Source J

Left history of the United States began with the somewhat educated newspaper editor/lecturer/political leader seeking to explain current events against the background of American history. From American socialism's earliest days, opinion sharply divided on the history of the Republic. Had American history, from at least the Revolution onward, been acted out as a class drama in deceptively "democratic" packaging? Or alternatively, had the great advances of American democracy been made but subsequently squandered by the consolidation of a class system? Neither immigrant nor native-born socialist had a monopoly on the alternative interpretations, although immigrants leaned toward the former and native-born toward the latter.

The Socialist Party, shortly after the turn of the century, provided encouragement for book-length efforts. Algie M. Simons, who studied with Frederick Jackson Turner, wrote the most popular scholarly study, *Social Forces in American History* (1911), said to have been used in some four thousand local socialist study classes. Oscar Ameringer's wry *Life and Deeds of Uncle Sam* (1909), translated into some fifteen languages, reached a readership of a half-million. These two works, along with the first socialist history of American labor, James Oneal's *Workers in American History* (which grew similarly, from an agitational newspaper series), leaned heavily upon the muckraking Progressive historians of the era, above all Charles Beard.

Paul Buhle, "American Studies" in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (eds), *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 40.

Source K

Today, few scholars of the Gilded Age would turn to the works of Frederick Jackson Turner as a source for their research. His books and essays clearly identify him as primarily an historian of the early American republic, the founder of Western history, and the initial theoretician of the frontier. Nevertheless, he is an important figure for understanding late nineteenth century America. His remarkable essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," which was presented at the American Historical Association meeting during the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, remains not only an historiographical landmark but also perhaps the most influential piece of historical writing of the past century and deserves to be examined in a much broader context.

Turner wrote at a time when white domination over the non-white world was approaching its zenith. European ideologies established a racial, ethnic, and class hierarchy based on "immutable biological" laws, which mirrored the best science of the period. Unlike the immediate post-Soviet era, when national states began disintegrating and cartographers were forced almost daily to redraw national boundaries into smaller ethnic units, the late nineteenth century was a time when larger national political societies were being "invented" out of a mixture of conflict and carefully constructed myths of cultural identity. In all such nations and empires there were groups that benefitted from the new arrangements, such as those that could readily identify with the myths of national culture. There were also those that were forced to take subordinate places in society, defined by the myth-makers as "other," and often left estranged.

Newer and established nations, based on congeries of older entities, retained power by coercion or by insisting and teaching that historical myth was, indeed, reality. Historians played a critical role in promulgating and reinforcing national myths. Every country had its national historian: England had Thomas Babbington Macaulay; Germany had Leopold von Ranke; Italy had Camillo Cavour; and France had Jules Michelet. Among the historians of the "other" or alienated were Tomas Masaryk, the Czech nationalist, and Hirsch Gratz, author of a *History of the Jews,* who claimed for them a cultural nationhood if not statehood. In addition, this group included Karl Marx and Elie Halevy who viewed nationhood as an historical stage or a mechanism of social control.

The United States was no exception. It, too, developed national and dissenting schools, almost all of whose members focused on the Civil War and Reconstruction as the key events that forged the modern nation. James Schouler, James Ford Rhodes, and John W. Burgess praised the emergence of the post-Civil War United States. All wrote from a Northern point of view, albeit differing in their political partisanship. In a way, their histories were similar to European studies of the unification of Italy and Germany, where force had forged a nation state and historical myth served to sustain it. The failed "separatist" rival of the American Union found expression in the myths of the Southern historical school.

Led by William A. Dunning, it spoke for the defeated Southern whites, who were alienated but who refused to define themselves as "other." These historical studies, written during the Gilded Age, paved the way for the ambiguous rhetoric describing the Civil War and Reconstruction in the school textbooks of subsequent generations.

Traditional historiographers do not associate Turner with nationalist history, identifying him instead with the frontier school, or the progressives, or the scientific empiricists. In fact, he represented a variety of nationalist thinking that had escaped, at least in part, the burdens of his contemporaries. By utilizing the nation's westward expansion rather than the Civil War and Reconstruction as the key to understanding the American past, he posited a cultural unity that offered Americans - both North and South - a sense of special identity comparable to that of any European.

Martin Ridge, “Frederick Jackson Turner: ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, and the Gilded Age” in *Hayes Historical Journal: A Journal of the Gilded Age*, Vol. XII, No. 1, Fall 1993.

Essay Question

Using these sources and your own knowledge, evaluate Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" and assess its influence on U.S. historiography.