The Turner Thesis and the Role of the Frontier in American History

by Julian Pleasants

In July, 1893, at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, a young professor from the University of Wisconsin, Frederick Jackson Turner, read a paper on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” This paper, according to historian Charles A. Beard, was “destined to have a more profound influence on thought about American history than any other essay or volume ever written on the subject.” While Beard somewhat overstated his case, there is no question that Turner’s thesis has been extraordinarily important in interpreting American history. No other historical analysis has created so much controversy.

In general the Turner thesis can be summed up in one sentence. “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.” In his writings Turner expanded on this seminal idea by underscoring his central points of American growth and adaptation. When man came in contact with the frontier, “the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” there was a reversion to “primitive conditions” on a “continually advancing frontier line.” Settlers had to adapt to the wilderness environment in order to survive. This constant evolutionary contact with the raw frontier led to new opportunities, modifying individuals and institutions so significantly that the process created unique American character traits.

Turner strongly disputed the common 19th century interpretation of American history, the so-called “germ theory,” which insisted that European germs, i.e., ideas, institutions, laws and values, were planted and grew in American soil. Therefore, Americans owed their character and culture to European influences. Turner’s studies indicated that the germ theory provided too little emphasis on the demands of the environment since the frontier obviously disciplined and changed the settlers to a marked degree. The frontier, according to Turner, took a man with European habits and dress, stripped off the garments of his civilized past and put him on a par with the “savage” Indian. The settler slowly adapted to and transformed the wilderness, and in the process became a new individual who was distinctly American. Turner theorized that since the frontier experience Americanized individuals as well as institutions, the frontier played the vital role in the making of an American national character and in the shaping of American democracy.

Turner also concluded that the frontier had a significant impact on nationalism as the frontier by necessity formed a composite nationality (melting pot) out of many immigrants. The frontier forced the national government to develop the power and the bureaucracy to deal with the disposition of public lands, defense against the Indians, development of the trans-continental railroads, and the proper use of natural resources. The surge of nationalism created by the frontier experience unified the people and helped overcome sectional differences.

The most important effect of the frontier, argued Turner, was in promoting democracy. The frontier produced a fierce individualism which opposed outside controls and promoted a pure form of democratic action. The West, according to Turner, had done more to develop self-government and to increase democratic suffrage than any other section of the country. For example, frontier mining camps, within two days of their formation, elected a government and used jury trials to settle disputes, and wagon train travelers immediately chose a wagon master to lead them across the plains. Because of the influence of the moving frontier, Turner saw America as the most democratic society of free and equal individuals in the world. Turner did not claim that democracy was born in America, but that democracy became unique in America because it was workable, idealistic, and opposed domination by one class. For Turner, democracy in America owed its spirit and ideals to the frontier.

Mobility and opportunity were also keys to the frontier experience. Turner saw that the accessibility of large quantities of underdeveloped
lands gave great economic opportunity to the individual and ultimately secured the political independence of the American people. Had there been no lightly-populated land mass of enormous potential in the West, no place where ambitious or disadvantaged individuals or families could try to establish a new life or earn a fortune, then the history of the United States might have followed the pattern of Europe.

Turner admitted that the frontier influence had some negative elements such as apathy toward intellectual ideas, excessive economic speculation, and bigotry, but he was primarily optimistic about its lasting impact. He also accepted the fact that most of the religious and intellectual ideas in America came from Europe, but he believed that the most striking characteristics of Americans came from the frontier. These characteristics included coarseness as well as strength combined with inquisitiveness and a practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients and masterful in the grasp of material things. Americans on the frontier displayed a dominant individualism and enjoyed the exuberance and optimism which came with freedom.

Turner closed his essay by repeating that America was another name for opportunity. 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 ideas; and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier."

Turner's ideas, as he had intended, created great controversy, discussion and dissent. Turner's critics usually challenged specific facts or accused him of the sins of inconsistency, over-emphasis, omission, and rhetorical vagueness. Obviously Turner had an overly romantic and unrealistic view of the frontier since the frontier experience was a liability as well as an asset. Turner, charged his critics, ignored the excessive violence and lynch laws of the West, the near extermination of American Indians and their culture, the harshness and crudeness of life, the eventual development of an aristocracy of wealth (cattle barons, mine owners), and rampant racism and bigotry on the frontier. Other detractors constantly referred to Turner's loose terminology. His explanations for the meaning of democracy and the frontier were hazy and shifting concepts riddled with contradictions. Not only that, but Turner referred to the frontier only in geographic terms and never explored the social implications of the frontier or the fact that the frontier was a process as well as a state of mind.

Other doubters argued that Turner overestimated the number of people affected by the frontier experience. They pointed out that the frontier, contrary to Turner's claims, was not an orderly and evolutionary process with a uniform impact in every place—the farming frontier was different from the mining frontier.

A major disagreement with Turner's views had to do with his interpretation of American democracy. His opponents claimed that the English heritage of common law and trial by jury, the evolution of Parliament, the American revolution, New England town meetings, manhood suffrage, and social reforms were indeed European or eastern in origin and had far more influence on American democracy than did the frontier. Turner's thesis isolated the growth of American democracy from the general development of democracy in western civilization of which America was a part. Turner had also presented the frontier as mobile, inventive, and materialistic, but these character traits were inherited from the Europeans. Easterners invented the Colt 45, windmills, agricultural techniques, and farm machinery necessary for
adapting to the wilderness environment. The material aspects of the American character could be traced back to the Protestant Ethic and there was vertical mobility in the East (witness the rags to riches success of the immigrant Andrew Carnegie) as well as on the frontier.

Historian Richard Hofstadter criticized Turner for overemphasizing individualism on the frontier. Hofstadter acknowledged that there was a significant amount of self-confidence and freedom for personal development, but real individualism was limited. Collective and cooperative actions such as the Mormons moving west en masse and unified actions such as barn raisings evidenced the importance of community. In addition, government bureaucracy and laws quickly arose to limit private action. Moreover, a decided lack of tolerance for deviance, non-conformity, dissent and privacy existed on the frontier. The frontier was conformist because individuals were vulnerable and insecure in the wilderness.

Finally, many historians rebelled against Turner's view of a single cause to determine the nation's development. Turner omitted vital forces such as industrialization, urbanization, class struggle, race, immigration and capitalism.

In the end, however, even Turner's sharpest critics conceded that his work had a most profound influence on American historical writing in the past century. Supporters of Turner thought that his critics attacked only minor points without giving enough attention to the overall value of the thesis since there was an important and usable core of truth in Turner's ideas. Turner was the first historian to see clearly the importance of western settlement and the frontier and to insist upon their adequate recognition. He therefore oriented the American mind toward the psychological effects of both space (free land) and expansion. He was correct in his belief that the frontier provided Americans with great opportunities and thus affected American attitudes such as optimism, confidence and adaptability. He was the first to deal with mobility as a basic cultural fact in America and his main point, that the continent was settled by ordinary people seeking new opportunity, is irrefutable.

Ray Allen Billington presented thoughtful and accurate assessment of Turner's contributions to historical interpretation. In America's Frontier Heritage, Billington agreed with Turner that Americans had developed some unique traits on the frontier that have been perpetuated to form the principal distinguishing characteristics of the American people today. Contemporary Americans, explained Billington, have a faith in democratic institutions, a belief in equality, and an insistence that class lines should not hinder social mobility. They have a faith in hard work, an inventive practicality, a lack of attachment to place, a wasteful attitude which squanders natural resources, a distrust of intellectuals, and an eagerness to experiment, favoring the new over the old. Billington wrote that it was incorrect to conclude that these characteristics and attitudes were solely the result of a pioneering past since such a conclusion ignored many other forces that have helped shape the American character. Nonetheless, concluded Billington, "to deny that three centuries of frontiering endowed the people with some of their most distinctive traits is to neglect a basic molding force that has been the source of the nation's greatest strength—and some of its most regrettable weaknesses."

Frederick Jackson Turner believed that America, with all its shortcomings, was more democratic and offered more opportunity to the common man than any other nation in the world. Turner's theory explained how the frontier interacted with all the other primary influences to produce a unique democracy and a distinctive American character. Turner's great merit was to be open-ended with his ideas, encouraging inquiry and discourse while emphasizing the signal importance of the frontier in American history.

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Mormon artisans sculpting massive tunnel timbers near the bore of Echo Tunnel, at mile 972, in the bleak hills of Utah. Without the labor of thousands of sturdy Mormons, both the Union and Central Pacific would have been delayed many months.