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to dismiss him. Perhaps the truest objection to Turner, and the one most often spoken and unspoken, was best expressed in a study of the Midwest where the authors wrote: "We need our own story."[38] As an iconoclast, Turner would not find that idea objectionable. As he wrote, and put in italics, in his essay on "The Significance of History": after all "*Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time.*"

Frontier Democracy: The Turner Thesis Revisited

Lacy K. Ford, Jr.

The one-hundredth anniversary of Frederick Jackson Turner's presentation of his pathbreaking essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," to the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago provides a propitious occasion for a brief reassessment of the "frontier thesis" and its lingering influence on the historiography of antebellum America. Turner's frontier thesis, with its emphasis on cheap western land and abundant economic opportunity, captured the popular imagination more than any other sweeping explanation of how the American national character was formed.[1] The two chief rivals of Turner's frontier thesis—Charles Beard's theme of recurring economic conflict between agrarian interests and commercial capitalism and Louis Hartz's contention that the principal formative influence on American character was a longstanding "liberal" consensus on the efficacy of political democracy and free-market capitalism—have both earned as much attention from scholars as has

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[38] *Ibid.*, 126.

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[1] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, D.C. 1894), 197-228. For a recent reevaluation of Turner, see William Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 18 (Apr. 1987), 157-176.

Turner's interpretation; but neither challenger has so captured the public mind.[2] Hartz's argument for pervasive liberalism proved to be a period piece heavily influenced by the solid anti-communist front of the 1950s as well as that era's vanilla image of Americans as "Ike"-voting, "Lucy"-watching, middle-class conformists. Hartz's liberal consensus position, which had always strained to explain away the Civil War, easily was shattered by the contentious decade of the 1960s, with its raucous challenge to established mores.[3] Beard's economic-conflict thesis, fully articulated by 1930, has demonstrated considerably more staying power among historians. Many active scholars, led by those on the political left, still emphasize economic struggle and class conflict as the chief sources of creative tension in American history.[4] But if modified Beardian interpretations remain visible in American historiography after more than half a century, his influence has always been felt primarily within the academy. The larger reading public remains almost instinctively resistant to any suggestion that their history has been riddled with class conflict. Firmly attached to the idea of American exceptionalism, Americans have searched their history (however superficially) for the source of their nation's singular character, and they have found in Turner's frontier thesis a plausible, and perhaps even compelling, explanation.[5] Very recently, in his inaugural call for American renewal, new President Bill Clinton articulated a thoroughly Turnerian view of Americans as "a restless, questing, hopeful people."[6]

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[2] For Beard's overview, see Charles Beard and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York 1927); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York 1955); and John Patrick Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundations of Liberalism* (New York 1984), 122.

[3] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, Mass. 1988), 320-468.

[4] Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York 1968), 167-346; Lee Benson, *Turner and Beard: American Historical Writing Reconsidered* (New York 1960), 95-2 → John Patrick Diggins, "Power and Authority in American History: The Case of Charles A. Beard and His Critics," *American Historical Review*, 86 (Oct. 1981), 701-730.

[5] David W. Noble, *Historians Against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing Since 1830* (Minneapolis 1965), esp. 37- → Jackson K. Putnam, "The Turner Thesis and the Westward Movement: A Reappraisal," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 7 (Oct. 1976), 377-404; Martin Ridge, "Frederick Jackson Turner and His Ghost: The Writing of Western History," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 101 (Apr. 1991), 65-76.

[6] New York (N.Y.) *Times*, Jan. 21, 1993.

It is hardly surprising that when Americans seek inspiration from their past that they would turn to the cautious progressive, Turner, rather than to the radical Beard.[7] After all, if Walt Whitman was the poet laureate of American democracy, Frederick Jackson Turner was its first professional court historian. But perhaps more importantly, there is arguably something about Turner and his frontier thesis, inspired as it was by the twilight years of the nineteenth century, that speaks directly to our condition in the waning years of the twentieth.

The normally optimistic Turner wrote his celebrated frontier essay in an odd moment of anxiety, as he fretted over a casual observation by a census bureau official that the 1890 enumeration revealed no discernible outer boundary of settlement, no legitimate "frontier."[8] Turner worried that the passing of the frontier marked a point of no return in the steady purchase of urbanization and industrialization on the essentially agrarian republic of the nineteenth century. He feared that the Jeffersonian ideals of the family-farm yeomanry were being sacrificed on the altar of industrial capitalism by Wall Street's high priests of finance. Moreover, even though the nation's population was overwhelmingly rural when Turner was born in 1861, it had become nearly half urban by the time he wrote his frontier essay, and by 1920, when Turner published a book of essays reprinting his much acclaimed frontier piece, a majority of the American people lived in urban areas. As small-farm America disappeared, Turner, an affectionate son of the middle border, saw his worst nightmare realized: a cramped, crowded, "Europeanized" America that was losing its distinctiveness. With the budding Populist revolt of the 1890s providing unmistakable background noise, the provincial Turner wrote his frontier essay to warn of impending decline.[9]

Late twentieth-century Americans labor under a surprisingly similar anxiety. The United States' modern self-image as a powerful industrial behemoth, a nation with "big shoulders," is being tried sorely by the enervating competition of a new global economy. The apparent decline of heavy industry, the flow of jobs overseas, and a per capita income that has fallen out of the world's top dozen have

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[7] Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 87-108.

[8] Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, 47-83; Benson, *Turner and Beard*, 41-91.

[9] Martin Ridge, "Frederick Jackson Turner, Ray Allen Billington, and American Frontier History," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 19 (Jan. 1988), 4-20. Turner explained why he feared that the closing of the frontier portended decline again in his "The Significance of the Sections in American History," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 8 (Mar. 1925), 255-280.

sparked fears about the coming post-industrial order that closely parallel the fears Americans of the 1890s felt about the emerging industrial order. Moreover, the winding down of America's industrial century has been marked by a demographic shift that parallels the rapid urbanization of the late nineteenth century. In the 1990s, for the first time, the majority of Americans are neither rural nor urban but suburban. Just as the alleged closing of the western frontier signaled Turner that the agrarian republic was losing out to urban, industrial society, deindustrialization and the movement of people to the crabgrass frontier suggest to many late twentieth-century Americans the disconcerting arrival of new, post-industrial, suburban society.[10]

This *angst* of the post-modern era informs our moment for reviewing Turner's old arguments on behalf of American exceptionalism, and particularly his contention that the frontier served as the "sociocultural furnace" in which American democracy was forged.[11] In recent decades, two identifiable trends in American historiography have borne more or less directly on Turner's "frontier democracy" hypothesis. One of these trends involves the rapidly proliferating body of literature labeled as the "new social history" and the "new economic history." These studies employ an array of analytical tech-

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[10] For a brief introduction to these themes, see Lester C. Thurow, *The Zero-Sum Society: Distribution and the Possibilities for Economic Change* (New York 1980); Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for Twenty-First Century Capitalism* (New York 1991); Robert Kuttner, *The End of Laissez-Faire: National Purpose and The Global Economy After the Cold War* (New York 1991); Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York 1988); William Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *The Atlantic*, 270 (July 1992), 33-44; and Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York 1985), 231-305.

[11] Michael P. Malone, "Beyond the Last Frontier: Toward a New Approach to Western American History," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 20 (Nov. 1989), 409-427 (quotation at 410). Turner, a product of his era as well as his region, defined "democracy" in such a way that it applied essentially to males, and usually to white males. Thus he found "democratic" leanings among people who advocated extremely anti-democratic measures regarding women, African-Americans (slave and free), and Native Americans. In addition to the first article cited in this note, these severe problems with Turner's understanding of democracy have been vividly enumerated in Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York 1987); Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review*, 49 (May 1980), 173-213; and Cronon, "The Vanishing Frontier," 173-176. For this essay, I have attempted to examine the effect of the frontier on American "democracy" using Turner's own understanding of democracy as the standard, so that his work might be judged on its own terms.

niques and computerized data bases, borrowed from the social sciences, to study migration patterns, social mobility, wealth distribution, and class structure. These methodologically sophisticated approaches have produced a number of detailed studies of nineteenth-century communities, regions, and social groups and facilitated the first rigorous empirical testing of Turner's safety-valve argument.[12] The other historiographical trend that is especially relevant to any reassessment of Turner's thesis is the recent flurry of state, local, and regional studies of political culture during the American middle period. These studies, heavily influenced by the "republican synthesis" that reshaped our understanding of revolutionary era politics during the 1970s, pay special attention to issues such as suffrage and representation, and hence shed important new light on the social forces driving political democratization in antebellum America.[13]

The recent wealth of scholarship using the methods of the "new social" or "new economic" history still begs for coherent synthesis, but on balance this literature suggests that if "frontier democracy" meant anything like social or economic equality, or even rough equality of opportunity, then western reality fell far short of the Turnerian ideal. As a rule on the American frontier, from Ohio and Tennessee westward to California, settlement was followed quickly by the emer-

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[12] For an introduction to this vast literature, → Howard P. Chudacoff, "Success and Security: The Meaning of Social Mobility in America," *Reviews in American History*, 10 (Dec. 1982), 101-1 → Theodore K. Rabb, "The Development of Quantification in Historical Research," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 13 (Spring 1983), 591-602; J. Morgan Kousser, "The State of Social Science History in the Late 1980s," *Historical Methods*, 22 (Winter 1989), 13-20; Hugh Rockoff, "History and Economics," *Social Science History*, 15 (Summer 1991), 239-264; and Lance E. Davis and Stanley Engerman, "Cliometrics: The State of the Science (or Is It Art or, perhaps, Witchcraft?)," *Historical Methods*, 20 (Summer 1987), 97-106. Bernard Bailyn, "The Challenge of Modern Historiography," *American Historical Review*, 87 (Feb. 1982), 1-24, is perhaps the most prominent of many works that express skepticism about the recent trend toward treating history as a social scien → Richard Jensen, "On Modernizing Frederick Jackson Turner: The Historiography of Regionalism," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 11 (July 1980), 307-322, briefly examines how the community and regional focus of the "new" social science-oriented history has revived interest in Turner's arguments.

[13] For analysis of this trend, → Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History*, 79 (June 1992), 11- → Joyce Appleby, "Republicanism and Ideology," *American Quarterly*, 37 (Fall 1985), 461-473; Sean Wilentz, "On Class and Politics in Jacksonian America," *Reviews in American History*, 10 (Dec. 1982), 45-63; a → Robert E. Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 39 (Apr. 1982), 334-356.

gence of powerful local elites, often composed of successful land speculators who quickly stamped their influence on their locale. Some members of these elites were self-made men, but most drew heavily on family wealth and connections back in the East.[14] Upward mobility rates in frontier areas as different as Chillicothe, Ohio, in the early 1800s and San Francisco in the 1850s suggest a degree of opportunity only slightly greater than that available in long-established eastern cities, and if opportunity to move up was slightly greater in frontier towns than eastern cities, so too was the possibility of going broke.[15]

The boom or bust economies of frontier towns so frightened newly formed elites that fierce competition among aspiring banking and mercantile leaders often grudgingly gave way to a spirit of voluntary cooperation. Frontier entrepreneurs quickly realized that their individual fortunes depended heavily on the larger economic fate of their towns, and that the towns themselves competed with nearby rivals for population, trade, and government favor. Thus the relentless quest for economic growth, some authors suggest, turned frontier towns into centers of bourgeois cooperation and boosterism rather than the testing ground of rugged individualism suggested by Turnerian lore.[16] Of course, as Don H. Doyle has rightly reminded us, any model of frontier towns that emphasizes only entrepreneurial collaboration is as unbalanced as Turner's emphasis on unfettered individualism. Despite the harmonious images projected by boosters, frontier towns witnessed violence and conflict with "southerners caning Yankees, vigilante mobs chasing abolitionists, Christians squabbling over the doctrine of infant baptism, police raids on Irish grog shops," and other types of internecine quarrels.[17] Frontier elites reluctantly

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[14] For an historiographical overview, see Ralph Mann, "Frontier Opportunity and the New Social History," *Pacific Historical Review*, 53 (Nov. 1984), 463-491.

[15] Peter Decker, *Fortunes and Failures: White Collar Mobility in Nineteenth Century San Francisco* (Cambridge, Mass. 1978); Jeffrey P. Brown, "Chillicothe's Elite: Leadership in a Frontier Community," *Ohio History*, 96 (Summer/Autumn 1987), 140-156; Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge, Mass. 1973); Clyde and Sally Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers: The Ordering of Opportunity in Mid-Nineteenth Century Poughkeepsie* (Cambridge, Mass. 1978).

[16] This frontier-as-incubator-of-cooperation argument was pioneered by Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, "A Meaning For Turner's Frontier, Part I: Democracy in the Old Northwest," *Political Science Quarterly*, 69 (Sept. 1954), 321-353; and Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York 1965), esp. 113-168.

[17] Don Harrison Doyle, "Social Theory and New Communities in Nineteenth-Century America," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 8 (Apr. 1977), 151-165 (quotation at

acknowledged the futility of eliminating such conflict, but they embraced the idea of containing these conflicts within acceptable boundaries as the key to social stability and economic growth.

The instruments for controlling inevitable conflict, according to Doyle, were the civic, religious, and political institutions that eventually came to dominate frontier towns. These churches, political parties, and business clubs served to institutionalize conflict, thereby diverting sectarian disputes, political grudges, and business rivalries into channels where rational, if heated, debate displaced violent physical assault. These voluntary institutions, Doyle emphasizes, did not eliminate conflict so much as routinize it, but in so doing they provided venues and organizations through which like-minded members of frontier communities pursued common goals. Thus frontier towns were sustained not by the individual self-assertion celebrated by Turner nor by the neighborly cooperation touted by his early critics, but by the rapid evolution of the unglamorous social bureaucracies of churches, schools, civic clubs, and political parties. If frontier towns defined American democracy, then the latter is better understood as the product of pious "joiners," sociable women, and "clubable" middle-class men than the heroic egalitarians of Turner's imagined West.[18]

Recent studies of the rural frontier, in both North and South, also present an ambiguous picture of opportunity and social mobility. The rural North, where commercial agriculture predominated but the scarcity of labor limited farm size, boasted a more even distribution of wealth than either the rural South, where slaves provided the plantation labor force, or the urban North, where propertyless free laborers constituted a significant portion of the population. But even in the rural North, as Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman have pointed out, the distribution of wealth hardly fit the "classic egalitarian" model. By 1860, the richest 20 percent of all households in the rural North controlled over 60 percent of the wealth.[19] This distribution was markedly more even than that of the cotton South, where the wealthiest

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157). Earlier works that emphasize conflict on the frontier incl Allen G. Bogue, "Social Theory and the Pioneer," *Agricultural History*, 34 (Jan. 1960), 21-34; and Robert R. Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (New York 1968).

[18] Don Harrison Doyle, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois, 1825-1870* (Urbana 1978), 62-91, 156-193.

Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, "The 'Egalitarian Ideal' and the Distribution of Wealth in the Northern Agricultural Community: A Backward Look," *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 63 (Feb. 1981), 124-129.

Figure 2. Professor Turner, University of Wisconsin, 1881

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

10 percent of households owned over 60 percent of the wealth, or that of northern cities such as Boston or New York, where the richest 5 percent of the population controlled nearly two thirds of the wealth.[20] But within the rural North, once adjustments are made for the differing age structure of the populations, wealth was only marginally more evenly distributed on the "frontier" (one fifth owning 64 percent) than it was in the older Northeast (one fifth owning 67 percent).[21]

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[20] Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York 1978), 24-→ Edward Pessen, "The Egalitarian Myth and the American Social Reality: Wealth, Mobility, and Equality in the 'Era of the Common Man'," *American Historical Review*, 76 (Oct. 1971), 989-1031.

[21] Atack and Bateman, "The 'Egalitarian Ideal,'" 125-126.

Even if the frontier did not produce an egalitarian distribution of wealth, recent scholarship suggests that prospects for upward mobility were reasonably good in antebellum America, and especially good on the frontier. Life-cycle models of wealth accumulation presume that households grow wealthier as their heads grow older, with accumulation levelling off as the head approaches "retirement" age. Such models neatly explain the economic career of the typical antebellum rural white American.[22] Roughly two thirds of rural antebellum householders owned land (though the percentage varied widely from locale to locale and may have been slightly lower in the plantation South than elsewhere), and the majority of landless householders were young tenants whose chances were reasonably good for acquiring land as they grew older.[23]

Throughout the antebellum era, this "agricultural ladder" remained a viable instrument for upward social mobility in both the North and South. Young tenants, lacking capital and perhaps expertise, worked as renters for several years until profit, inheritance, or propitious marriage allowed them to purchase land. In the rural North, for instance, over 60 percent of all tenant farmers were under age forty. While over 23 percent of young farm operators (under the age of twenty-five) were tenants, fewer than 7 percent of those over age 50 still worked on rented farms.[24] A similar pattern held in the rural South, where over 60 percent of all tenants had yet to reach age

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Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, "Egalitarianism, Inequality, and Age: The Rural North in 1860," *Journal of Economic History*, 41 (Mar. 1981), 85-93.

[23] The list of local studies documenting this point is far too long to be cited here, but for a sampling, see Donald L. Winters, "'Plain Folk' of the Old South Reexamined: Economic Democracy in Tennessee," *Journal of Southern History*, 53 (Nov. 1987), 565-586; Randolph B. Campbell, "Planters and Plain Folk: Harrison County, Texas, as a Test Case, 1850-1860," *ibid.*, 40 (Aug. 1974), 369-398; Donald Schaefer, "Yeoman Farmers and Economic Democracy: A Study of Wealth and Economic Mobility in the Western Tobacco Region, 1850-1860," *Explorations in Economic History*, 15 (Oct. 1978), 421-437; Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North* (Ames, Iowa 1987); Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth Century New England* (Cambridge, Mass. 1984); Robert P. Swierenga, "Quantitative Methods in Rural Landholding," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 13 (Spring 1983), 787-808; a Jeremy Atack, "Tenants and Yeoman in the Nineteenth Century," *Agricultural History*, 62 (Summer 1988), 6-32.

Jeremy Atack, "The Agricultural Ladder Revisited: A New Look at an Old Question with Some Data for 1860," *Agricultural History*, 63 (Winter 1989), 1-25; Donald L. Winters, "Agricultural Tenancy in the Nineteenth Century Middle West: The Historiographical Debate," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 78 (June 1982), 128-153.

forty, and where roughly 30 percent of all farm operators under age thirty were tenants while all but 12 percent of those over age forty owned their own land. Moreover, preliminary study reveals that nearly three fourths of all southern tenants in 1850 who remained in the same county until 1860 were successful in acquiring land.[25] Thus, in both the slaveholding and non-slaveholding sections of the pre-Civil War United States, prospects for both realizing the Jeffersonian dream of land ownership and of steadily increasing one's family wealth over a lifetime were quite good even though the overall distribution of wealth remained highly uneven in all parts of the country.

Modern scholarship appears to confirm the popular Turnerian perception that from the microeconomic vantage point of individual households, whether North or South, a decision to move to the frontier in search of a better life stood a good chance of proving correct. Nevertheless, as Harold Woodman has suggested, the aggregate or macroeconomic impact of the frontier on the antebellum economy and living standards was characterized by ambiguity and important regional variations. Between 1840 and 1860, a period of heavy westward migration, the national economy grew at an impressive rate. Due largely to the cotton boom of the 1850s, per capita income in the South grew even more rapidly than it did in the North, where personal incomes grew by a robust 30 percent during the twenty year period. Most of the apparent increase in per capita income in the staple-dominated South, however, owed to the movement of people out of older cotton and tobacco regions and into the virgin lands of the southwestern frontier. Without this movement out of the comparatively low income South Atlantic region and into the flush environment of the cotton frontier, personal income in the South would have grown more slowly than that of the North, notwithstanding the high cotton profits of the 1850s.

In the cotton South, the availability of agricultural land on the frontier may have enhanced inequalities of wealth among whites in the region, but it contributed mightily to overall economic growth. In the antebellum North, however, the Northeast had both a substan-

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25 Donald L. Winters, "The Agricultural Ladder in Southern Agriculture: Tennessee, 1850-1870," *Agricultural History*, 61 (Summer 1987), 36-52. For a comprehensive discussion of the methodological problems involved in studying tenancy in the Old South, see Frederick A. Bode and Donald E. Ginter, *Farm Tenancy and the Census in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens 1986); and John T. Houdek and Charles F. Heller, Jr., "Searching for Nineteenth-Century Farm Tenants: An Evaluation of Methods," *Historical Methods*, 19 (Spring 1986), 55-61.

tially higher per capita income and a slightly faster rate of growth between 1840 and 1860 than did the region closer to the frontier, which experienced a 250 percent increase in population during the era. In fact, per capita incomes in the industrializing Northeast were nearly twice as high as those of the agricultural Northwest in both 1840 and 1860. In macroeconomic terms at least, northerners who left the industrial Northeast for the frontier moved from an area of high but very unevenly distributed incomes to an area of significantly lower but somewhat more evenly distributed earnings. In the face of this evidence, the massive relocation of northerners to the free-state frontier appears, on the surface, to represent a curious shift from a high-income area to a lower-income area. But a balanced assessment of the impact of the free-soil frontier on the antebellum northern economy requires an exercise in counterfactual history. Without the frontier as an economic "safety-valve," it is doubtful that the Northeast could have absorbed the large numbers of foreign immigrants it received during the 1840s and 1850s and still maintained its high level of personal income. Thus the frontier probably helped sustain antebellum northern prosperity even if it was not that region's engine of economic growth. Of course, if frontier land had not been available, it is possible that the antebellum North, like the antebellum South, would have attracted relatively few immigrants. In that case, income growth for native-born northerners might have been impressive despite the lack of cheap land, but the character of the nation as a whole, without the immigration, would have been altered dramatically.[26]

Taken together, these studies of individual social mobility and aggregate economic development reveal that antebellum America was a land of remarkable economic opportunity, and that, as Turner hypothesized, the frontier did much to enhance that opportunity.[27] In

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[26] This discussion draws heavily → Harold D. Woodman, "Economic History and Economic Theory: The New Economic History in America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 3 (Autumn 1972), 323-350; but see a → Robert E. Gallman, "Slavery and Southern Economic Growth," *Southern Economic Journal*, 45 (Apr. 1979), 1007-1022; Donald F. Schaefer, "A Model of Migration and Wealth Accumulation: Farmers at the Antebellum Southern Frontier," *Explorations in Economic History*, 24 (Apr. 1987), 130-157; and Richard H. Steckel, "The Economic Foundations of East-West Migration During the 19th Century," *Explorations in Economic History*, 20 (Jan. 1983), 14-36.

[27] James A. Henretta, "The Study of Social Mobility: Ideological Assumptions and Conceptual Bias," *Labor History*, 18 (Spring 1977), 165-178, and other studies

the South, the continued presence of a cotton frontier drove the region's impressive growth. In the North, the dynamics of growth owed more to the bustling commerce and budding manufacturing system of the Northeast than the frontier bread-basket, but the presence of the frontier facilitated northern growth even if it was not its primary cause. Yet for many antebellum Americans, economic well-being probably was not measured in terms of income levels (which were generally improving) or wealth distribution (which was generally worsening), but of personal or household independence. The foundation of independence was ownership and control of productive property, and thus land ownership was often considered a better measure of economic status than income. An impressive outpouring of literature that often disagrees on other matters supports that the notion that, above all else, antebellum Americans loathed the dependence of propertyless wage laborers.[28] And they were generally successful, in the short run, in avoiding what modern scholars, following Marx, call "proletarianization," because the frontier eased the way to property ownership with its abundant and relatively cheap land.[29] In doing so, the frontier "safety-valve" undoubtedly helped sustain the Jeffersonian ideal of independence, much as Turner maintained a century ago.

In recent decades, a number of scholars have argued that politics, not the frontier, served as the true "safety-valve" in American life. The United States, the argument goes, was the only modern indus-

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point out that cliometric work probably overstates the case for upward mobility since it tends to focus on those who "persist" over time in the same locale. These "persisters," it is argued, likely fared better on the average that their more mobile one-time neighbors, who moved often because of their lack of economic success. But even if recent works overstate the case for general upward mobility in antebellum America, the data provides almost incontrovertible proof that there was enough genuine upward mobility to sustain the popular perception of America, and its frontier, as a land of unique opportunity.

[28] For a sample, see Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York 1983), esp. 15-85; J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge 1978), 54-58; Lacy K. Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York 1988), 44-95; Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York 1990), 42-72; Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia 1980); and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York 1984), 61-142.

[29] Gavin Wright, "American Agriculture and the Labor Market: What Happened to Proletarianization?" *Agricultural History*, 62 (Summer 1988), 182-209.

trial nation to experience its democratic revolution before its industrial revolution. As a result, its comparatively inclusive politics muted social antagonism by directing them into legitimate political channels.[30] While Turner never offered such an argument, he asserted vehemently that political democracy was central to American distinctiveness, and that the frontier, more than anything else, fostered democracy. Turner's insistence on this point has been one of the most vigorously disputed aspects of his thesis.[31] Three generations of historians of the Jacksonian working class, from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., through Edward Pessen, to Sean Wilentz, have argued persuasively that artisans, mechanics, and urban laborers pushed as hard for democracy as did sturdy frontier yeomen.[32] Comprehensive studies of suffrage by Chilton Williamson and of representation by J.R. Pole also challenged Turner's frontier democracy thesis.[33] In general, liberalized suffrage requirements and more equitable schemes of legislative apportionment were realized more easily in the frontier states, North and South, because democratic forces there had neither entrenched propertied elites nor difficult-to-amend eighteenth-century constitutions to contend with. Moreover, recent scholarship suggests that pressure for more legislative reapportionment came from areas with underrepresented populations, regardless of their proximity to the frontier. On this issue, the source of the egalitarian impulse was demographic, not geographic.[34] And, in at least one regard, states on

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[30] For a brief introduction to this argument, see Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States," *History Workshop Journal*, 17 (Spring 1984), 57-80.

[31] Early criticisms of Turner on this point are well summarized in two articles by Benjamin F. Wright, Jr.; see his "American Democracy and The Frontier," *Yale Review*, 20 (Dec. 1930), 349-365, and "Political Institutions and the Frontier," in Dixon R. Fox, ed., *Sources of Culture in the Middle West: Backgrounds versus Frontier* (New York 1934), 15-38.

[32] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (New York 1945); Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (New York 1967); Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 172-296.

[33] Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage: From Property to Democracy, 1760-1860* (Princeton 1960); J. R. Pole, *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic* (London 1966).

[34] Pole, *Political Representation*, esp. 281-353. For a sample of more recent investigations, see Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 49-52; Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism*, 106-113; Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge 1983), 11-14, 86-103; Merrill D. Peterson, *Democracy, Liberty, and Property: The State Constitutional Conventions of the 1820s* (Indianapolis 1966); and Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *The Rhetoric of Conservatism: The Virginia Convention of 1829-30 and the Conservative Tradition in the South* (San Marino 1982). An older but still very useful account is Fletcher

the northern frontier lagged behind the free states on the seaboard: five northeastern states permitted free blacks to vote under some circumstances, but all of the states of the Old Northwest, the so-called "valley of democracy," limited suffrage to whites only.[35]

Yet recent historiography has fundamentally restructured our understanding of the meaning of "democracy" in its early national and Jacksonian contexts. Political "democracy," as it was understood through much of the antebellum era, was not a full-blown political creed but rather a crucial component in the larger ideology of republicanism. Republican ideology was part of nineteenth-century America's political and intellectual inheritance from the revolutionary era, and arguably the greatest achievement of the republican founders was their embrace of popular sovereignty, the idea that the ultimate political authority lay with the "people," rather than with a king, an aristocracy, or a supreme Parliament. At the same time, many early Americans feared majoritarian tyranny and democratic excess. The nation envisioned by the founders was not a democracy where simple majorities ruled but a republic whose structure incorporated elaborate checks and balances that could stymie renegade majorities as well as other threats to individual liberty. Moreover, the founders insisted that the success of their republican experiment hinged on the maintenance of a social order where the widespread ownership of productive property sustained an independent citizenry.[36]

In theory, at least, the popular political ideologies of the Jacksonian era continued to cherish independence and fear concentrated power, even that of majorities. But, in practice, within the larger lan-

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M. Green, *Constitutional Development in the South Atlantic States, 1776-1860: A Study in the Evolution of Democracy* (Chapel Hill 1930). Green presents his interpretation as evidence supporting Turner's thesis, but while Green's work supports the case for vigorous democracy in the Old South, his specific findings do not suggest that the frontier was democracy's primary agent.

[35] Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 208-222; Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago 1961), 64-112.

[36] Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing The People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York 1988), 207-306; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Opening of American Society: From the Adoption of the Constitution to the Eve of Disunion* (New York 1984), esp. 22-24; Jack N. Rakove, "The Madisonian Moment," *University of Chicago Law Review*, 55 (Spring 1988), 473-5[illegible]; James T. Kloppenberg, "The Virtues of Liberalism: Christianity, Republicanism, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse," *Journal of American History*, 74 (June 1987), 9-33; Robert E. Shalhope, "Thomas Jefferson's Republicanism and Antebellum Southern Thought," *Journal of Southern History*, 42 (Nov. 1976), 529-557.

guage and existing governmental structure of republicanism, popular political culture in virtually all parts of the United States grew steadily more egalitarian even before Andrew Jackson's first presidential bid in 1824. Informal stump meetings, door-to-door canvassing, barbecues, and the politicization of militia musters, all brought *de facto* democracy to the politics of the early republic well before suffrage liberalization and other reforms formally opened the political process to virtually all white men. Within this democratizing political culture, Jacksonian political parties transformed the republican idea of popular sovereignty into an avowed democratic faith in the wisdom of popular majorities. Majority rule subtly replaced republican equipoise as the political creed of the expanding nation.[37] As William Freehling has aptly noted, this gradual transformation dichotomized republicans into two camps, "elitist republicans" who wanted to retain as much as possible the eighteenth-century traditions of gentry influence, the political prerogatives of property, and minority protection, and "egalitarian republicans" interested in expanding participation, majority rule, and the defense of the "people" against oligarchic power.[38] It is true that frontier states certainly favored the democratic side of this struggle within an evolving republicanism, but the true egalitarian impulse evolved more from the revolutionary heritage of popular sovereignty than from frontier circumstances.

One result of the gradual triumph of egalitarian republicanism over its more elitist rival involved the subtle broadening of the popular definition of "independence." In some areas "householders," heads of households who controlled their own affairs but owned no property, were perceived as "independent." In urban areas, artisans, craftsmen, and even skilled workers defined their work tools and spe-

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[37] For an introduction to these themes, → Steven J. Ross, "The Transformation of Republican Ideology," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 10 (Fall 1990), 323-330; Thornton, *Politics and Power*, 117-162; Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism*, 99-182; Rowland Berthoff, "Independence and Attachment, Virtue and Interest: From Republican Citizen to Free Enterpriser, 1787-1837," in Richard L. Bushman *et al*, eds., *Uprooted Americans: Essays to Honor Oscar Handlin* (Boston 1979), 97-124; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York 1992), 229-369; and Daniel Feller, "Politics and Society: Toward a Jacksonian Synthesis," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 10 (Summer 1990), 135-162.

[38] William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists At Bay, 1776-1854* (New York 1990), esp. 39-58. Freehling applies this dichotomy only to the antebellum South. I believe that, with appropriate adjustments for regional diversity, it is a distinction that works reasonably well for the republic as whole during the early national and Jacksonian years.

cific trade skills as their "property," their source of independence, and in much of the South and Old Northwest, mere whiteness of skin seemed to qualify men as independent. These more generous, more inclusive definitions of independence tacitly permitted a fairly thorough democratization of antebellum political culture while leaving the most cherished of republican ideals theoretically intact. Americans continued to embrace "independence" as the essence of republican citizenship even as the prerequisites for independence were significantly redefined.[39]

If the frontier was only one of many factors which played a role in democratizing the political culture of American republicanism, it was clearly a crucial factor in sustaining a republican social order in the face of the "Market Revolution" that followed the War of 1812.[40] As Drew McCoy has emphasized, the availability of abundant western land allowed the young republic to grow economically by expanding through space, producing an ever larger agricultural surplus for market, rather than by developing over time, seeking profit through the intensification of commerce and industrialization. Because of the frontier, the republic sustained a huge and growing population of yeoman freeholders, while others (tenants and farm laborers) held a reasonable expectation of becoming yeoman freeholders, and still others (artisans and mechanics) identified themselves as the "yeomanry of the city." By slowing the process of proletarianization in pre-Civil War America, the frontier permitted egalitarian republicanism, with its insistence on independence as the basis for citizenship, to postpone for a generation its direct confrontation with the market revolution, industrialization, and a large, dependent working class.[41]

The role of the frontier as a "safety-valve" that allowed the republic to postpone crises by diffusing them across space has become a recurrent a theme in recent historical writing. Perhaps the most pro-

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[39] Pole, *Political Representation*, 332-338; Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 26 (Fall 1984), 1-24; Lacy K. Ford, Jr., "Republics and Democracy: The Parameters of Political Citizenship in Antebellum South Carolina," in David R. Chesnutt and Clyde N. Wilson, eds., *The Meaning of South Carolina History: Essays in Honor of George C. Rogers, Jr.* (Columbia, S.C. 1991), 121-145.

[40] Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York 1991), esp. 70-171.

[41] Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill 1980), 185-208, 236-259. See also Major L. Wilson, *Space, Time and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and Irrepressible Conflict, 1815-1861* (Westport, Conn. 1974), 49-72.

vocative modern criticism of Turner's overall thesis was developed by New Left historian Staughton Lynd in the 1960s.[42] Lynd attempted to recast Turner's thesis so that it could adequately explain antebellum sectional differences.[43] Turner, Lynd insisted, not only underestimated the influence of slavery on American life, but also mistakenly included slaveholders in the category of agrarians who championed the expansion of democracy. Lynd countered that southern slaveholders, obsessed with property rights and the defense of minority power, sought an alliance with the large capitalists of the North to preserve a conservative, aristocratic republic.[44] Moreover, Lynd suggested, the Constitution represented not a Beardian triumph of capitalists over agrarians, but an uneasy compromise between capitalists and slaveholders.[45] This compromise, tested periodically over three-score years and ten, eventually disintegrated in a bloody civil war. What is remarkable about the compromise of 1787 is not that it eventually collapsed, but that it lasted as long as it did. Doubtless an overriding desire to see the American experiment in republicanism succeed gave the compromise its strength, but according to Lynd and Barrington Moore, the frontier helped give the compromise longevity by allowing the free-labor economy of the North and the slave-labor economy of the South room to expand on parallel tracks without collision.[46]

To be sure, the "frontier," or the western territories, became in the nineteenth century what the slave trade was in the late eighteenth: the primary point of controversy between North and South.[47] But

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[42] See especia Staughton Lynd, "On Turner, Beard, and Slavery," *Journal of Negro History*, 48 (Oct. 1963), 235-250; and Lynd, "Beyond Beard," in Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Toward A New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York 1968), 46-64. See also Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution* (Indianapolis 1967).

[43] An earlier attempt to revise Turner along these lines was made in 1954 in two companion essays written by Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick. Part I of their essay on democracy in the old Northwest is cited in note sixteen above. See also "A Meaning for Turner's Frontier, Part II: The Southwest Frontier and New England," *Political Science Quarterly,* 69 (Dec. 1954), 565-602.

[44] Lynd, "On Turner, Beard, and Slavery," 237-244.

[45] Lynd, "Beyond Beard," 58-60.

[46] Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston 1966), 111-155; Lynd, "On Turner, Beard and Slavery," 235-250.

[47] On this point, see Robert M. Weir, "South Carolina: Slavery and the Structure of the Union," in Michael Allen Gillespie and Michael Lienesch, eds., *Ratifying The Constitution* (Lawrence, Kan. 1989), 201-234.

these controversies over Missouri, Texas, California, and Kansas all were settled, albeit with escalating difficulty, by compromise. The controversy over slavery in the territories often precipitated sectional crises during the antebellum era, yet the territories themselves were the safety-valve which prevented the show-down over slavery from occurring much earlier in the republic's history.[48] King Cotton coveted virgin land, and the frontier provided it. Proletarianization threatened the North's dynamic free-labor economy, but competition from newly settled areas encouraged outmigration from the older rural areas of the North. The "hidden depression" of the 1850s, which drove many former artisans and mechanics into wage labor just as the massive post-1848 wave of foreign immigration glutted the market, only served to make the situation more volatile. Therefore, the frontier loomed larger than ever in the minds of white northerners seeking a "safety-valve" to avoid dependency.[49] The Republican party's rallying cry of "free soil, free labor, free men" assumed a new ring of urgency, and pressure to ban slave competition from all territories intensified. Many northerners worried that the fabled upward mobility that Abraham Lincoln celebrated as the "right to rise" might be jeopardized permanently. Thus, despite impressive macroeconomic growth and rising personal incomes, Americans, North and South, were haunted by fears that their status as independent householders and their prospects for upward mobility were threatened unless they enjoyed continued access to the frontier.[50] By the late 1850s, in both regions, ideas about independence and opportunity had grown inextricably tied to the frontier, and the controversy over free or slave

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[48] Major L. Wilson, "The Controversy over Slavery Expansion and the Concept of the Safety Valve: Ideological Confusion in the 1850s," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 24 (Spring 1971), 135-153.

[49] Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South*, 128-157; Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810-1860* (Cambridge, Mass. 1983); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass. 1976); Sean Wilentz, "Artisan Origins of the American Working Class," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 19 (Spring 1981), 1-22; Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind*, 31-50; Robert W. Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York 1989), 354-380.

[50] Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York 1971); Robert W. Johanssen, *The Frontier, the Union, and Stephen A. Douglas* (Urbana 1989), 249-252; Lacy K. Ford, Jr., "Toward A Divided Union," *Reviews in American History*, 18 (Sept. 1990), 349-356; Major L. Wilson, "The Free Soil Concept of Progress and the Irrepressible Conflict," *American Quarterly*, 22 (Winter 1970), 769-790.

labor—essentially a question of equal access to the frontier—proved the proximate cause of secession and Civil War.

Had the opportunity for parallel expansion across the shared frontier not existed, had not abundant land served as some kind of safety-valve for both North and South, it seems probable that the inherent contradictions between republican ideas and the material reality of both the slave and free labor economies would have been exposed much earlier, producing serious internal crises in both regions. These earlier crises, coming before the democratic revolution had extended full political rights to virtually all white men and established democratic politics as the realm of conflict resolution in the United States, might well have prompted what Barrington Moore has described as a reactionary coalition between northern capitalists and southern planters. This conservative coalition of propertied elites might have worked to stunt the evolution of political democracy and guide the republic down the repressive "Prussian Road" to industrial modernity.[51] Without the yeomanry of the frontier to draw upon, resistance to this reactionary coalition would have likely pushed upward from below, from hard-pressed artisans and the emerging working class, perhaps with some petty bourgeois assistance, in a kind of crude American approximation of the failed European revolutions of 1848.[52] Instead, the frontier delayed the crisis, giving the democratic revolution time to take hold and allowing the plain folk of both North and South time to identify prospects for continued independence and opportunity with the existence of the frontier. By the time the sectional tensions reached new heights late in the 1850s, the democratic revolution—which the frontier aided but did not cause—had done its work. The capitalists of the North knew it was free-soilers and workers they must placate and not southern slaveholders. Southern planters knew it was the tenaciously independent plain folk, not Yankee entrepreneurs, whom they must convince to sustain slavery. Neither propertied elite saw a reactionary alliance as a viable option in the face of intense political pressures from their respective beleaguered yeomanries.[53] The defining struggle of nineteenth-century America was not

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[51] Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 125-141; S.G.F. Spackman, "The Frontier and Reform in the United States," *The Historical Journal*, 8 (June 1970), 333-339.

[52] For a perspective on the European revolutions, see E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (New York 1979), 3-23.

[53] Thornton, *Politics and Power*, 398-461; Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 86-116; Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism*, 338-373; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of*

between a national propertied elite and the producing masses over access to political power, but between sections equally devoted to independence and opportunity, each desperately needing the frontier to remake in their own image. The result of this struggle was the triumph of a liberal bourgeois democracy rather than the producers' republic for which the common folk, Union and Confederate, fought.[54] But in shifting the battle onto this ground, Turner's frontier not only helped save American democracy but pushed it to seek, albeit at a terribly high price in blood, a "new birth of freedom."[55]

Frontier Closure and the Involution of American Society, 1840-1890

Carville Earle and Changyong Cao

Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of frontier closure in 1890 has never quite squared with the facts.[1] All of the consequences that he envisioned for the turn of the century—closed space, sectional tension, labor unrest, and the ascent of central state power—had already surfaced by the middle third of the nineteenth century. On reexamination of the pace of frontier expansion between 1650 and 1890, a

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Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York 1988), 170-201; Bruce Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of the Civil War* (New York 1992), 17-94.

[54] Eric Foner, "The Causes of the American Civil War: Recent Interpretations and New Directions," *Civil War History*, 20 (Sept. 1974), 197-214; Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven 1985).

[55] Garry Wills, *Lincoln At Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York 1992), 121-147; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York 1988).

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[1] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *American Historical Association Annual Report for the Year 1893* (Washington, D.C. 1894), 199-227.