

The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy

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ONE OF THE CENTRAL THEMES of American historiography is that there is no American Empire. Most historians will admit, if pressed, that the United States once had an empire. They promptly insist that it was given away. But they also speak persistently of America as a World Power.¹ Whatever language is used to describe the situation, the record of American diplomacy is clear in one point. The United States has been a consciously and steadily expanding nation since 1890. This essay is an initial exploration of one of the dynamic causes behind that extension of varying degrees of American sovereignty throughout the world.

Three continuing and interacting processes produce foreign policy. First, the domestic and overseas activity of the citizenry, and of other countries, which forces a government to take action in the international area. Second, the nature of that official action. And third, the reactions that such policies provoke among its own people and on the part of the foreigners who are affected. The circle is thus closed and rolls on through time. In studying foreign policy it ultimately becomes necessary to break into this continuity and find out, if possible, what the people in question thought they were doing.

One way to do this is to reconstruct the reality with which given men were forced to deal, look at it through their eyes, interpret it with their ideas, and then conclude as to the consequences of such a world view. The argument here, based on such a methodology, is that a set of ideas, first promulgated in the 1890's, became the world view of subsequent

¹ J. W. Pratt, *America's Colonial Experiment: How the United States Gained, Governed, and in Part Gave Away a Colonial Empire* (New York, 1950), and F. R. Dulles, *America's Rise to World Power, 1898-1954* (New York, 1954) illustrate this ambivalence. F. L. Schuman discusses the problem of characterization in *The Commonwealth of Man: An Inquiry into Power Politics and World Government* (New York, 1952), 209-228. J. J. Servan Schreiber, gifted French commentator, tried to end the semantic quibbling with his remarks in the *New York Herald Tribune*, October 1, 1950: "When a nation, at any given period of history, bears the responsibility for the military security and the economic stability of a geographic zone, that nation is in fact—whether it wants it or not—the head of an empire. From then on it does not serve any purpose, moral or otherwise, to deny the facts and pretend that business is as usual." Refreshingly candid is R. W. Van Alstyne, "American Conceptions of Empire," lecture delivered at the University of Chicago, May 5, 1953, and available from the author.

generations of Americans and is an important clue to understanding America's imperial expansion in the twentieth century.²

One idea is Frederick Jackson Turner's concept that America's unique and true democracy was the product of an expanding frontier.³ The other idea is the thesis of Brooks Adams that America's unique and true democracy could be preserved only by a foreign policy of expansion. Turner's idea was designed to explain an experience already ended and to warn of the dangers ahead. Adams' idea was calculated to preserve Turner's half-truth about the past for his own time and project it into the future. Both ideas did much to prevent any understanding of a wholly new reality to which they were applied, and to which they were at best inadequate and at worst irrelevant.⁴ But taken together, the ideas of Turner and Adams supplied American empire builders with an overview and explanation of the world, and a reasonably specific program of action from 1893 to 1953.

Turner's influence began when he was declared the parent of the frontier thesis by a star chamber court—the American Historical Association.⁵ His statement of the idea then became the central, if not the only, thesis of Everyman's History of the United States. His personal influence touched Woodrow Wilson and perhaps Theodore Roosevelt, while his generalization guided subsequent generations of intellectuals and business men who became educational leaders, wielders of corporate power, government bureaucrats, and crusaders for the Free World.⁶

² This approach to the problem of opinion and influence stems from the work of K. Mannheim and W. Dilthey. In addition, it may be ventured that J. A. Schumpeter's concept of the entrepreneur is as useful in studying men in ideas as it is for men in business.

³ This investigation of the role of the frontier thesis in American foreign policy was stimulated by G. Barraclough's long review of W. P. Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Boston, 1952), entitled "Metropolis and Macrocosm," in *Past and Present*, III, No. 1 (Whole Number 5, May, 1954), 77-90. In working back over the voluminous literature on Turner, I found myself most indebted to the work of Charles A. Beard, Lee Benson, Rudolf Freund, James C. Malin, Fulmer Mood, George Wilson Pierson, and Walter Prescott Webb. I also profited from Earl Pomeroy's comments on an early draft of this manuscript. After this manuscript had been completed, my attention was called to L. S. Kaplan, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Imperialism," *Social Science*, XXVII, No. 1 (January, 1952), 12-16: the interpretations diverge at important points. L. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York, 1955), 288-307; and R. Hofstadter, "Manifest Destiny and the Philippines," in *America in Crisis*, ed. by D. Aaron (New York, 1952), 173-200, discuss the general problem but in quite different fashion.

⁴ Here see W. Y. Elliott, *The Political Economy of American Foreign Policy: Its Concepts, Strategy, and Limits. Report of a Study Group Sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and the National Planning Association* (New York, 1955), 42-54, 338, 391-92; E. H. Carr, *The New Society* (London, 1951), 84-86.

⁵ L. Benson, "The Historical Background of Turner's Frontier Essay," *Agricultural History*, XXV, No. 2 (April, 1951), 59-82.

⁶ It should be emphasized that this is not primarily a study of Turner's personal foreign policy. It is an attempt to gauge the nature and extent of the impact which his frontier thesis had on American foreign policy.

Adams preferred direct ties with the policy-makers. He did not achieve Turner's fame among laymen, but he passed his ideas on to Theodore Roosevelt and others who guided American expansion at the turn of the century. Fifty years later he was discovered by two groups of intellectual leaders. Scholars awarded him intellectual biographies and estimates of his influence. Those more immediately concerned with public policy, like columnist Marquis Childs and foreign service officer George Frost Kennan, introduced him to the public and applied his ideas to later problems.

Turner and Adams first offered their ideas on the marketplace of opinion and influence between 1893 and 1900, the years of crisis at the end of three decades of rough and rapid progress. American society had undergone, in the space of a generation, an economic revolution in each of four critical areas: steam, steel, communications, and agriculture. The coincidence and convergence of these upheavals produced a major crisis.⁷ Bewildered by its quadruple triumph, the United States momentarily panicked. Then, reassured by illusions of ideological purity and international omnipotence, it embarked upon a second industrial revolution. But in that frightening pause between culmination and renewal Turner and Adams looked out upon a harsh and disturbing reality.

The basic steel industry and transportation system of the country were completed. The rate of national economic growth was falling off. New technological advances had yet to be applied in wholesale fashion. Instead, it seemed that the giants of the economic community had turned aside from their conquest of nature to despoil their own kind. Trusts, holding companies, and corporations began to wolf down the individual business man in a feast of consolidation and concentration. Farming was ceasing to be a family affair. Development of the public domain was coming more and more to be controlled by large capital. The Census Director emphasized the sense of foreboding when he announced, in April, 1891, that "there can hardly be said to be a frontier."

This, to Turner and Adams, was the most dangerous omen of all. Both men grew up believing in the traditional conservative philosophy that the key to American democracy was the dynamic competition between men and groups who had a stake in society. They shared the conviction,

⁷ My understanding of the 1890's has been extended and sharpened by E. H. Phelps Brown with S. J. Hanfield-Jones, "The Climacteric of the 1890s: A Study in the Expanding Economy," *Oxford Economic Papers (New Series)*, IV, No. 3 (October, 1952), 266-307; and B. Weber and S. J. Hanfield-Jones, "Variations in the Rate of Economic Growth in the U. S. A., 1869-1939," *Ibid.*, VI, No. 2 (June, 1954), 101-131.

or more probably the assumption, that this stake had been, for capitalist and farmer alike, the readily available and extensive supply of land. Railroads, steel plants, and wheat production were all similar in being based on control of landed resources and wealth. Now the life blood of American democracy was gone.

The consequences seemed appalling. Men looked to be making capital out of each other. Real estate speculation rapidly collapsed, even in the South. Wheat prices declined steadily. But the rate of interest seemed immune to the laws of economic gravity. Men were no longer going west as hired hands and becoming land owners. Tenancy, not ownership, seemed the institution with a future. One hundred eighty thousand people retreated eastward from Kansas. Those who stayed raised more cain than corn. Even the cowboy went on strike in parts of Texas.

Workers were no happier. The relative rate of increase in real wages slacked off, and then, from 1889 to 1898, wages lost ground in an absolute sense. "Strike!" became the rallying cry. Miners came out of the ground in Idaho, Colorado, and Virginia. Switchmen became pickets in Buffalo. Eugene V. Debs led his American Railway Union to the relief of the industrial peons of the Pullman Company. The Army of the United States countermarched with fixed bayonets against American civilians in Chicago. Debs saw in the polished steel of those bayonets the vision of American socialism. But other men were too preoccupied with the mirage of a square meal. They roamed the country looking for jobs. Their wives stayed home to scavenge the garbage cans. And in Pennsylvania the heroes of Homestead could not buy shoes for their children.

In the molten flux of this crisis, on July 12, 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner undertook to explain what was happening to America.⁸ His interpretation also contained an implicit recommendation for action. His famous paper on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" was Turner's application of his philosophy of history to American problems. History, for Turner, was nothing if not utilitarian. "Each age," he had emphasized two years earlier, "*writes the history of the past anew*

⁸ Of Turner's writings, I returned again and again to the following items, from which all quotations are taken (in sequence). "The Significance of History" (1891), "Problems in American History" (1892), "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), all in *The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner*, ed. by F. Mood (Madison, 1938); "Address on Education in a United States without Free Lands" (January 1, 1896), ed. by F. Mood, *Agricultural History*, XXIII, No. 4 (October, 1949), 254-259; "The Problem of the West" (1896), *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXVIII (September, 1896), 289-297; "Contributions of the West to American Democracy" (1902), *Ibid.*, XCI (January, 1903), 83-96; and Turner to Dodd, October 7, 1919, ed. by W. H. Stephenson, *Agricultural History*, XIX, No. 4 (October, 1945), 249-253.

with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time." For Turner his was the "age of machinery, of the factory system, and also the age of socialistic inquiry." Present-minded concern with the crisis which coincided with his intellectual maturity conditioned Turner's entire frontier thesis.

Thus Turner consciously sought a dynamic explanation of America's more happy history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He had the answer by 1891. "The ever-retreating frontier of free land is the key to American development." Then, in 1893, he changed the formulation of that thesis from a negative to a positive construction, and in the process used a vigorous, active verb—expansion. "This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American life." Expansion, he concluded, promoted individualism which "from the beginning promoted democracy."

Expansion, Individualism, and Democracy was the catechism offered by this young messiah of America's uniqueness and omnipotence. The frontier, he cried, was "a magic fountain of youth in which America continuously bathed and rejuvenated." Without it, "fissures begin to open between classes, fissures that may widen into chasms." But he was confident that these dangers could and would be avoided. "American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise." Ultimately he lauded the pioneer as the "foreloper" of empire. And to drive home the lesson he quoted Rudyard Kipling, the laureate of British imperialism. Turner had explained the past and implied a program for the present. Materialistic individualism and democratic idealism could be married and maintained by a foreign policy of expansion.

Turner gave Americans a nationalistic world view that eased their doubts, settled their confusions, and justified their aggressiveness. The frontier thesis was a bicarbonate of soda for emotional and intellectual indigestion. His thesis rolled through the universities and into popular literature as a tidal wave. Expansion a la Turner was good for business and at the same time extended white Protestant democracy. Patrician politicians like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson could agree with railway magnate Edward H. Harriman, financier J. P. Morgan, and the missionaries on the validity of Turner's explanation of America's greatness. Turner's thesis thus played an important role in the history

of American foreign relations. For his interpretation did much to Americanize and popularize the heretofore alien ideas of economic imperialism and the White Man's Burden.

Meanwhile, in that same month of July, 1893, another student of the frontier came to the same conclusion reached by Turner. Within a month he, too, read a paper which stated the same thesis but in a different manner. But Brooks Adams was tucked away in America's ancestral home in Quincy, Massachusetts. The public knew nothing of his work. Astringent and argumentative, he was forty-five and fed up with America's professional intellectuals. He read *his* paper to a peer, brother Henry Adams. Together they shared it with a few of their fellow New England noblemen, like Henry Cabot Lodge, John Hay, and Theodore Roosevelt, who did what they could to translate the implications of its thesis into official American policy.

The paper that Brooks read to Henry was the manuscript copy of *The Law of Civilization and Decay*. It was a frontier thesis for the world. Adams, like Turner, sought meaning and significance for the present from his study of history. "The value of history lies not in the multitude of facts collected, but in their relation to each other." Unlike Turner, Brooks Adams took the world as his subject and studied it with the aid of psychology and economics. He concluded that the centers of world civilization followed the frontiers of economic wealth and opportunity westward around the globe. The route was unmistakable: from the Mediterranean Basin through Western Europe to Great Britain. And to him the crisis of the 1890's was the turmoil incident to its further movement across the Atlantic to New York.

Brooks Adams was confronted with the same gloomy report of the Census Director that had so disturbed Turner. The continental West was filled up. America no longer had a frontier. As with Turner, this was a body blow to his early and easy assumption of steady evolutionary progress. He did not duck the truth. The thesis, he wrote brother Henry, worked out "in such a ghastly way that it knocks the stuffing out of me." He counterpunched with a policy of aggressive expansion designed to make Asia an economic colony of the United States. Russia was the most dangerous opponent; but Japan also needed to be watched. The strategy was to play them off against each other. America would be left as mistress of the vast frontier of Asia. "I am an expansionist, an 'imperialist,' " if you please," he told a Boston newspaper man, "and I presume I may

be willing to go farther in this line than anyone else in Massachusetts, with, perhaps, a few exceptions.”⁹

Thus did Turner and Adams reach the same conclusions in their separate studies of the frontier. Adams said that civilization followed the frontier of economic wealth. Turner agreed. Adams called the frontier the zone between “barbarism and civilization.” Turner used “savagery and civilization.” Adams maintained that American industry’s “liberal margin of profit” had been “due to expansion” across the continent. Turner argued that America’s true democracy was the product of this same expanding frontier. Both men saw the end of the continental frontier as the cause and symbol of crisis. Both dreaded the revolution—be it socialistic or monopolistic—that seemed to threaten at every turn. Adams chimed in that dissolution and decay might also follow. And implicitly or explicitly both men agreed on the program to avert chaos. Further expansion was the Kentucky rifle with which to cut down the night riders of catastrophe—Socialists, Robber Barons, and Barbarians.

Turner’s thesis became America’s explanation of its success and the prescription for its own and others’ troubles. His interpretation of the American experience reassured and then inspired the millions. This is not to say that Turner had no influence on those who sat at the desks of decision. He did. Possibly with Theodore Roosevelt; certainly with Woodrow Wilson, and the generations of business men and bureaucrats whose teachers assured them that an expanding frontier was the cause of America’s democratic success. But primarily he was the apostle of a revival movement that restored the faith of the conquerors of North America and made them international crusaders.

A far-western newspaper editor, writing in the summer of 1955, provided one of the clearest statements of this function and influence:

The idea, our forefathers believed, was to “push the Indians back to the frontier.” Then, with the Indians pushed back to the wilderness, all would be well. . . . Well, remember Kaiser Bill? He rather replaced the Indians. . . . Then, while World War I’s doughboy was still wearing out pieces of his uniform, it became obvious that the woods, out along the frontier, were still full of Indians. The thing to do, we figured, was to push back the Indians.¹⁰

Novelists of the frontier have used Turner’s insight as the central theme of their work. Indeed, their protagonists often seem more Turner-

⁹ As quoted by T. Anderson, *Brooks Adams, Constructive Conservative* (Ithaca, 1951), 61, 75. Anderson discounts, in somewhat ambivalent fashion, the influence of Adams. For another interpretation, upon which this review is based, see “Brooks Adams and American Expansion,” *New England Quarterly*, XXV, No. 2 (June, 1952), 217-232.

¹⁰ Eugene, Oregon, *Register-Guard*, July 17, 1955.

ian than human. Consider, for example, an impromptu speech delivered by one of Ernest Haycox's Oregon pioneers:

We grew up in the American notion that we could start from nothing and become rich or get elected president. That's our religion, much as any we've got—that we could turn a dream into beefsteak and prosperity and happiness, leave our children more than we had, and so on. When we got older we saw that it wasn't that sure a thing. But we couldn't admit the dream was bad, for that would be saying hope is an illusion. So we saw empty land out here and we've come here to make a fresh start, hoping that what was wrong back East won't be wrong here.¹¹

Such examples suggest that the history of Turner's thesis may well offer a classic illustration of the transformation of an idea into an ideology.¹²

Adams, for his part, became something of a Marx for the influential elite. He lost much of his direct personal significance after Theodore Roosevelt stepped down as President in 1909, though he did continue to have the ear of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. But thirty years later Charles Austin Beard revealed that Adams, as well as Turner, was one of the men who had changed his mind. Beard even republished *The Law of Civilization and Decay* with a long introduction praising Adams as a penetrating and original thinker. A bit later Adams was discovered by a new group of policy-makers. State Department officials, columnists and commentators, and other advisors to the powerful began to cite him in footnotes and—more often—to paraphrase his ideas as their own. One even reissued his foreign policy recommendations of the 1890's as a guide for the United States in the Cold War.

Adams always exercised his more personalized influence within the mainstream of Turnerism. He caught Theodore Roosevelt after the last battles of *The Winning of the West*. Turner had meanwhile encouraged Roosevelt to continue his interpretation of the westward movement as the civilizing conquest of the savage by the Anglo-Saxon democrat. He also may have sharpened Roosevelt's uneasiness about the close of the frontier. Roosevelt was "very much struck" by Turner's essay on the significance of the frontier. He thought it contained "some first class ideas" which came "at the right time." Turner's ideas were "so interesting and suggestive" that Roosevelt wrote a blind letter to open the correspondence.¹³ But Roosevelt's great awakening came in his seminars with Brooks Adams.

¹¹ E. Haycox, *The Earthbreakers* (New York, 1952), 19.

¹² Here, among others, see H. N. Smith, "The West as an Image of the American Past," *University of Kansas City Review*, XVIII, No. 1 (Autumn, 1951), 29-39; and H. Schein, "The Olympian Cowboy," *American Scholar*, XXIV, No. 3 (Summer, 1955), 309-320.

¹³ Letters from Roosevelt to Turner, in *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. by E. E. Morrison, et al. (Cambridge, 1951-1954), I, 440, 363, 438.

Fellow aristocrat though he was, Adams rudely frightened Roosevelt. The strenuous life connected with destroying the Indian and winning the West had been fun. Not so with the battle to break down the powerful arguments and demolish the dreary logic of *The Law of Civilization and Decay*. Perhaps Roosevelt never quite forgave Adams for having written and published the book. And once, probably in a moment of anger with him for having thrown human nature into the perpetual motion machinery of evolution, he went so far as to call Adams "half-crazy." But the best that Roosevelt could do with *The Law* was to admit that it would be hard work to repeal it and ask Adams for advice on strategy and tactics.

Adams thus became something of the chairman of an informal policy-planning staff for the executive department in the years from 1896 to 1908. His was not, of course, the only influence brought to bear on President Roosevelt, Secretary of State John Hay, and other leaders. Exporters of cotton, capital, and kerosene all demanded that the government open the door to consumers around the world. Protestants and Populists wanted to export their respective brands of Americanism to the emotional and intellectual markets of colonial areas. But Adams, even more than Alfred Thayer Mahan, offered an interpretation of such pressures and a program for using them to control Asia.

For the foreign policy section of his first presidential message, Roosevelt borrowed a magazine article written by Adams and paraphrased it for the Congress. The recommendation was an Adams classic: use economic and military power to expand the frontier of the United States westward to the interior of China. Quite in keeping with Adams' plan, Roosevelt backed Japan in its war against Russia. But the maneuver went awry. Russia threatened to retaliate with social revolution. Adams feared this possibility more than anything else. He was afraid that such a revolution would turn into a secular reformation that would halt American expansion. Roosevelt and Adams frantically did what they could to prop up the old regime and left the problem for their successors.

Woodrow Wilson was ultimately to try his hand at controlling such a revolution in Russia. But first he had to contend with Mexican and German challenges to American democracy. Throughout these years Turner was an unseen intellectual roomer in the White House. Wilson and Turner had been close friends as well as visiting professor and student at Johns Hopkins University in the 1880's. Long walks after classes gave them a chance to learn from each other. Wilson knew and loved the

aristocratic South. Turner told him about the West, and explained how it had made America democratic. And they talked about "the power of leadership; of the untested power of the man of literary ability in the field of diplomacy."

Wilson relied extensively on Turner's frontier thesis in presenting his own interpretation of American history. "All I ever wrote on the subject came from him." A comment overgenerous, perhaps, but not misleading. Read Wilson on American expansion after 1896: "The spaces of their own continent were occupied and reduced to the uses of civilization; they had no frontiers. . . . These new frontiers in the Indies and in the Far Pacific came to them as if out of the very necessity of the new career before them."

Wilson did not miss or fail to act on the economic implications of the frontier thesis, but he was the very model of Turner's crusading democrat. Indeed, Wilson's religious fervor called him to this duty even before the First World War. Earlier Americans had taught the Mexicans the meaning of Manifest Destiny and Dollar Diplomacy. Later, in the midst of revolution, the Mexicans seemed to forget American ideas about constitutional government and property rights. Wilson stepped in and became an enthusiastic tutor in moral imperialism. Vigorous though this instruction was, the President's former pupil was a bit critical of his old professor. "I hadn't his patience with Mexico," admitted Turner.

He likewise felt that Wilson was a bit too slow to act against the Germans. But he recognized the need for a perfect moral posture before the world. He devoutly supported the war to make the world safe for democracy. Fourteen years earlier Turner had observed that America's duty was "to conserve democratic institutions and ideals." Small wonder that he was "warmly in favor" of Wilson's Fourteen Points and the League of Nations. Wilson called his own proposals the "only possible program for peace" which "must prevail." Even more than in the case of Theodore Roosevelt, the policies of Woodrow Wilson were classic Turnerism.

It has been suggested that so also were the early policies of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Professors Curtis Nettels, James C. Malin, and Richard Hofstadter advance strong arguments in support of this view.¹⁴ Roosevelt's speech at the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco

¹⁴C. P. Nettels, "Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Deal," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XVII, No. 3 (March, 1934), 257-265; J. C. Malin, "Mobility and History," *Agricultural History*, XVII, No. 4 (October, 1943), 177-191, an interpretation unchanged in *Essays on Historiography* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1953), 36-37; R. Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York, 1948), 325-327, 342. D. M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago, 1954), 156-157, seems to go along with Malin's view.

during the campaign of 1932 is the basis of this interpretation. "Our last frontier has long since been reached," Roosevelt announced. "There is no safety valve in the form of a Western prairie. . . . equality of opportunity as we have known it no longer exists. . . . Our task now is not discovery or exploitation of natural resources, or necessarily producing more goods. It is the . . . less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand, of seeking to reestablish foreign markets for our surplus production . . . of distributing wealth and products more equitably."

The extent to which Roosevelt wrote and understood what he said is debatable, but immaterial to the discussion at hand. One group of his advisors certainly acted within this framework. The N.I.R.A., the A.A.A., and other similar legislative measures were clearly based on the idea that the frontier was gone. But this relationship does not mean that Turner was the intellectual father of the New Deal's regulatory legislation. The fact of the frontier's disappearance was not the burden of the Turner thesis, but rather of the Census Director's dissertation. Turner's frontier thesis made democracy a function of an expanding frontier. The idea that the national government should use its power to rationalize, plan, and control the corporate development of the country had been Americanized and promoted by Herbert Croly, not Frederick Jackson Turner. Croly's *Promise of American Life* would seem more the intellectual handbook of the New Deal than Turner's essay on the frontier.

But there was a Turnerism in Roosevelt's speech at the Commonwealth Club. It was the remark about "seeking to reestablish foreign markets for our surplus production." No single phase of the New Deal was pushed harder than Secretary of State Cordell Hull's campaign to expand trade. The real Turnerians among the New Dealers were those who converted a thesis about landed expansion into one about industrial expansion. Thus the inner history of the New Deal, and later administrations, can fruitfully be studied as a three-way tug-of-war between the Croly planners, the Turner inflationists and expansionists, and the Adamites, a group which sought to synthesize the two ideas.¹⁵ The planners lost much of their influence during the recession of 1937-1939. Recovery came only through expanded production for war. And it was during this period that Roosevelt and others began openly to apply Turner's

¹⁵ R. H. S. Crossman seems to sense this in "Towards a Philosophy of Socialism," *New Fabian Essays* (London, 1952), 24. It is also worth recalling, in this connection, that Adams supported the inflationary silverites in 1896.

thesis to the new economic situation. An expanding economy became the dogma of an industrial America.

Roosevelt had always been, at heart, a Turnerian in foreign policy. He was sure, save for a short interlude during the years between the wars, that America's frontier was the world.¹⁶ This attitude does much to explain Charles Beard's attacks on Roosevelt. Beard was a brilliant student of history keenly aware of the consequences of imperial expansion. He also understood, and had written about, the influence of the expansionist ideas of Turner and Adams. His study of these men led him to develop a Beardian antithesis on foreign policy. *In a closed world the attempt to maintain an expanding national frontier, be it ideological, political, or economic, would lead to war and tyranny. Democracy would be negated.*¹⁷ Thus he approved much of the early domestic program of the New Deal while militantly opposing Roosevelt's foreign policy. Self-containment and development comprised Beard's program. His motivation, his logic, and his conclusions were disdainfully dismissed or angrily assaulted until, a dozen years later, the Soviet Union began to manufacture hydrogen bombs.

Roosevelt's Turnerism was meanwhile blended with the *Realpolitik* of Adams. Roosevelt made much of his desire to end nineteenth-century colonialism. The Good Neighbor Policy, developmental projects for the Near East, and the plan to elevate China to the rank of a great power were offered as demonstrations of this democratic purpose. Little was said of the somewhat patronizing attitude and the more materialistic objectives of this approach. While the left hand reformed, however, the strong right was to serve as the mailed fist. Thus at the Atlantic Conference the Four Freedoms were matched by an understanding with Great Britain to police the world after the war. Russia would be admitted to this Anglo-American coalition if circumstances made that necessary. They did. Russia had been rejuvenated by the very revolution so feared by Brooks Adams, and its new strength was essential if Hitler was to be defeated. This fact delimited America's frontier. And to further com-

¹⁶ R. E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations* (Chicago, 1953), 410; Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 316-317, 539; F. Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Ordeal* (Boston, 1954), 238-241; W. L. Langer and S. E. Gleason, *The Undeclared War, 1940-1941* (New York, 1953), 685.

¹⁷ See, for example, the following: *The American Spirit* (New York, 1942), 360-364; "Introduction," for B. Adams, *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (New York, 1943), 3-53; *The Idea of National Interest* (New York, 1934); "A 'Five Year Plan' for America," *Forum*, LXXXVI, No. 1 (July, 1931), 1-11; *The Open Door At Home* (New York, 1934); and *A Foreign Policy for America* (New York, 1940).

plicate the situation the Russians, in Marx and Lenin, had an Adams and a Turner all their own.

At this point, and no doubt unconsciously, Roosevelt took the worst from Turner and Adams. He seemed, from the spring of 1942 to the fall of 1944, to base his plans for the postwar era on the idea of a concert of power. Then, in October, 1944, he in effect reaffirmed the Open Door policy of John Hay. First he gave the impression of accepting Russian predominance in Eastern Europe. But at the same time he claimed "complete freedom of action" in the future.¹⁸ The Russians either declined or were unable to acquiesce in such unilateral reassertion of the frontier thesis. For the leaders of the frontier communities of the world had heard of Marx as well as Turner. And if the doors of the world were to be thrown open in one direction, why not in the other? The temptations and the pressures inherent in that question did much to produce the Cold War.

At some hour in the early years of the Cold War someone rediscovered Brooks Adams. Who it was and when it was may remain one of those tantalizing secrets of history. But done it was. Perhaps it was Marquis Childs, a newspaper columnist whose intellectual friends included many New Deal bureaucrats. In late 1945 or 1946 Childs wrote a long, laudatory introduction for a new edition of *America's Economic Supremacy*, Adams' old handbook for empire builders. Childs left no doubt as to the reason for his action. "If Adams had written last year, for publication this year, he would have had to alter scarcely anything to relate his views to the world of today."¹⁹

Or perhaps it was George Frost Kennan, looking into the past for guidance after he became chief of the policy planning division of the Department of State. Kennan, in explaining and defending the policy of containment, mentioned Adams as one of the small number of Americans who had recognized the proper basis of foreign policy. Later, as in one of the few State Department policy discussions of which there is current public record, and in his estimate of the *Realities of American Foreign Policy*, Kennan's analysis and argument was in many respects remarkably similar to that of Adams. Only the as-yet-unopened files in the archives can reveal whether these correlations were initially patterns

¹⁸ W. S. Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy* (Boston, 1953), 73-79, 208-209, 215-216, 219, 227-228; R. E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York, 1948), 834.

¹⁹ M. W. Childs, "Evaluation," for B. Adams, *America's Economic Supremacy* (New York, 1947), 1-60; and Childs to Williams, June 4, 1955.

of causation.²⁰ But it is not unknown for an idea first picked up and used as a rationalization to become an engine of later action.

Turnerism, meanwhile, retained its vigor during these years. The Truman Doctrine seemed an almost classic statement of the thesis that the security and well-being of the United States depended upon the successful execution of America's unique mission to defend and extend the frontier of democracy throughout the world. Another of President Harry S. Truman's major speeches spelling out certain aspects of this obligation was indeed entitled *The American Frontier*.²¹ But there were critics who insisted that the President was too conservative. Perhaps the leader of this group was John Foster Dulles, who was so dissatisfied with the limitations of Truman's formulation that he termed it positively "un-moral." And Dulles might well claim that his plan to liberate all people not ruled according to the precepts of individualistic democracy was the definitive statement of the thesis.

Yet as was the case when the United States liberated the Philippines in 1898, it was sometimes hard, in the years of the Cold War, to determine just what definition of freedom was being used by the Turnerians. A somewhat strange assortment of political theories and social institutions seemed to qualify as individualistic and democratic if they facilitated American expansion. This imperial standard of judgment stemmed in considerable part from the ideological nationalism of Turner's frontier and the nationalistic materialism of the Adams analysis of the world frontier. But these characteristics were synthesized in the concept of an expanding economy, which became the new American credo in the years after 1935, and particularly during the Cold War.

The argument that continually expanding industrial production was the basic remedy for the economic and social ills of industrial society was not, of course, originally advanced by either Turner or Adams. Nor is the idea itself irrelevant to the problem of keeping up with—and ahead of—the increasing minimum demands of a growing population. This essay is not concerned with such a historical and theoretical critique of

²⁰ Perhaps it is significant that Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (Chicago, 1951), 5-6, cited Childs' edition of Adams; though he may have done this as a convenience to his readers. In any event, compare Adams, *Supremacy* (ed. 1947), 168, 173-174 (where he uses the word "containing") with Kennan's article, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct;" with his remarks at the Department of State's "Round Table Discussion of American Policy toward China, October, 1949," *Hearings on the Institute of Pacific Relations* (Washington, 1952), Part V, 1557-1558; and with Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, 1954), 27, 64.

²¹ H. S. Truman, *The American Frontier* (Washington, 1952).

the idea. But it is suggested that the manner in which American leadership accepted the proposition that an expanding economy provided the key to "building a successfully functioning political and economic system," in the words of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, was not unrelated to the milieu established by Turner and Adams.

Walter Prescott Webb has outlined the general nature of this intellectual association in his study of *The Great Frontier*.²² It does seem necessary to recapitulate the evidence which illustrates the manner in which Americans refer to Latin America and other areas as their new frontiers. It is more fruitful to review the discussions incident to the formulation of American foreign policy since 1945. Much emphasis has rightly been placed on the extent to which these programs were conceived within a framework of increasing tension with the Soviet Union. But this is only part of the story. One of the most striking themes to emerge from the multiplicity of hearings on this legislation is the degree to which it was motivated by the effort to solve American and world problems through the medium of an expanding economy.

Dean Acheson outlined this approach very carefully in May, 1947, as background for the forthcoming Marshall Plan. Three years later, after becoming Secretary of State, he emphasized the same idea even more directly. He explicitly denied that the situation of the United States *viz à viz* the Soviet Union was in any sense as desperate as that faced by Great Britain in 1940. "I do not imply," he concluded, "that the only reason for continuing the European recovery program is the threat of further expansion by the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the free world, even if no threat of this kind existed, would face the same hard task of building a successfully functioning system."²³

William C. Foster, an early administrator of the European Recovery Program, provided the neatest statement of the underlying assumption. "Our whole philosophy in the United States," he explained, "is that of an expanding economy and not a static economy to produce more, and not divide up what you have." W. Averell Harriman, who exercised general supervision over this program, shared this outlook. Nelson Rockefeller, another leader in the effort, tied the approach directly to the

²² Webb, *Great Frontier*, 284-302, 338-347.

²³ D. Acheson, remarks of February 21, 1950, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives to Amend the Economic Cooperation Act of 1948, as Amended, 1950* (Washington, 1950), Part I, 15-16, 29; remarks of February 21, 1950, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate on Extension of European Recovery, 1950* (Washington, 1950), 14.

frontier thesis. "With the closing of our own frontier," he pointed out, "there is hope that other frontiers still exist in the world." So, too, did Harriman, when he was questioned on the relationship between American aid to European nations and the efforts of those countries to strengthen and maintain themselves in Africa, the Near East, and Asia. "It is, in a sense," he explained, "their frontier, as the West used to be with us."²⁴

Harriman further maintained, completing the analogy, that the United States, in order to sustain its expanding economy, had to support such action and develop its own position in those areas. Point IV assistance was described and defended as "absolutely essential" within this framework. Secretary Acheson agreed.²⁵ And from one "heavily indebted to George Frost Kennan for much stimulation and guidance" came the most candid summary of all. America's interests in colonial territories "coincide with the interests of European metropolitan countries. . . . The best possible situation is a series of 'happy' colonial relationships. . . . We should not let our 'rabbit ears' . . . dominate decisions in which a substantial degree of the national interest is at stake and in which there are no clear moral 'rights' and 'wrongs.'"²⁶

Such testimony offers considerable support for Webb's generalization that Americans viewed the frontier "not as a line to stop at, but as an *area* inviting entrance."²⁷ And this attitude, whether held by the public or its elite, would seem to have been generated in part by Turner's thesis that democracy was a function of an expanding frontier and Adams' argument that the frontier was also the source of world power.

²⁴ W. C. Foster, remarks of July 11, 1951, *The Mutual Security Program: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, 1951* (Washington, 1951), 197; W. A. Harriman, remarks of July 3, 1951, *Ibid.*, 127; N. Rockefeller, remarks of July 17, 1951, *Ibid.*, 376; W. A. Harriman, remarks of June 6, 1950, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives to Amend the Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949, 1950* (Washington, 1950), 167.

²⁵ W. A. Harriman, remarks of March 13, 1952, *Mutual Security Act Extension: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, March, 1952* (Washington, 1952), 8, 48; D. Acheson, remarks of June 11, 1952, *Hearings Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on the Convention on Relations with the Federal Republic of Germany and a Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty* (Washington, 1952), 31-32.

²⁶ P. W. Bell, "Colonialism as a Problem in American Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, V, No. 1 (October, 1952), 86, 101-102, 109. On the broader questions involved see J. Gallagher and R. Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *The Economic History Review, Second Series*, VI, No. 1 (August, 1953), 1-15; and R. Nurkse, "International Investment To-Day in the Light of Nineteenth-Century Experience," *Economic Journal*, LXIV, No. 256 (December, 1954), 745-758. A most useful bibliography is A. Hazlewood, *The Economics of "Under-Developed Areas,"* (London, 1954).

²⁷ Webb, *Great Frontier*, 2; and F. Mood, "Notes on the History of the Word Frontier," *Agricultural History*, XXII, No. 2 (April, 1948), 78-83.

But it began to appear, after 1952, that Turner and Adams had met their match in Einstein and Oppenheimer. The General Theory of Relativity seemed likely to antiquate the frontier thesis. For armed with hydrogen bombs the messiahs become gladiators whose weapons will destroy the stadium. Their battle would make the world a frontier for fossils. Even the Russian followers of Marx and Lenin gave signs of becoming aware that their version of the thesis needed to be revised to accord with this new reality.

Perhaps Charles Beard can now rest easy. He was a better historian than either Turner or Adams. Yet he never found his Roosevelt or Wilson. Beard was always a bit too sharp and tough-minded for America's professional and intellectual politicians. He would chuckle to know that his idea of self-containment was reintroduced to Americans by Winston Spencer Churchill. Churchill's intellectual migration from aggressive imperialism to reluctant coexistence chronicled the demise of the frontier thesis. And Beard might ultimately have an American spokesman. The followers of Turner and Adams remained numerous and influential in the councils of state, but they hesitated to take the awful responsibility for acting on their theses. They seemed dimly aware that the United States had finally caught up with History. Americans were no longer unique. Henceforward they, too, would share the fate of all mankind. For the frontier was now on the rim of hell, and the inferno was radioactive.