Making the White Man's West

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“FOR ITS INCORPORATION IN OUR UNION”

The Louisiana Territory and the Conundrum of Western Expansion

With the stroke of a pen, the United States acquired the Louisiana Territory from France and doubled the size of the nation in 1803. While many Americans, filled with an insatiable hunger for land, obviously wanted to settle the new territory as rapidly as possible, a few worried about the influence of such massive territorial growth on the nation, fearing that democracy could not flourish in such a large expanse. They worried as well about the influence of expansion on America’s dominant white race. Going west into territory held by Indians and the weak but still large Spanish empire meant coming into contact with groups Americans considered inferior. Expansion could therefore undermine democracy and even white racial superiority, for beneath the surface of the young nation, racial tensions strained its unity.

Would going west inevitably weaken settlers, and, if so, could the land be put to better use? Perhaps this new territory could instead be used to racially cleanse the nation and solve some of the pressing racial issues that threatened its survival. It could be used to segregate and relegate free African Americans and eastern Indians to the periphery of the American empire, and
these groups could in turn act as a buffer zone against “savage” Indians and the crumbling, racially impure Spanish empire. Before seeing the West as a white man’s refuge, therefore, there existed an opposite vision of the West as a dumping ground for incompatible and incongruent members of society.

President Thomas Jefferson, aware of his critics’ reservations about Louisiana, used his third annual message to Congress, in October 1803, to answer them and outline an ambitious vision of expansion for the nation. While his message meandered through a variety of foreign and domestic issues, Jefferson focused on explaining the importance of the recently acquired Louisiana Territory and the related issue of negotiating with Indians for their land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, an area still sparsely populated by white settlers. Settlers would come, and the Indians would have to give way.

Of course, Jefferson purchased Louisiana to secure access to the Mississippi River for Ohio Valley farmers, but he saw much more of value in the acquisition of the vast territory. He remarked on “the fertility of the country, its climate and extent.” Its cultivation would “promise in due season important aids to our treasury,” and its vast size would provide “an ample provision for our posterity, and a wide-spread field for the blessings of freedom and equal laws.” The future, Jefferson believed, lay in the West. While his administration had done its part to negotiate the treaty, only the US Senate could ratify it. Deferring to congressional authority, he hoped lawmakers would soon act to provide the necessary measures for the quick and efficient “incorporation in our Union” of the Louisiana Territory. Some Americans had balked at the price and at the possible threat such dramatic expansion portended for democracy in the new republic. Nevertheless, the Senate quickly ratified the treaty by a vote of twenty-four to seven.

During his second inaugural address in March 1805, the president again outlined a vision for the Louisiana Territory. He acknowledged that “the acquisition of Louisiana has been disapproved by some” on the grounds that a larger republic would be unwieldy, but, he asked, “is it not better that the opposite bank of the Mississippi should be settled by our own brethren and children, than by strangers of another family?”

Jefferson’s federalist opponents questioned the benefits of acquiring this new territory and its current inhabitants. The text of the treaty, however, stipulated that the residents of French Louisiana would “be incorporated in
the Union of the United States and admitted as soon as possible according to the principles of the federal Constitution to the enjoyment of all these rights, advantages and immunities of citizens of the United States.” Further, the United States would guarantee “the free enjoyment of their liberty, property and the Religion which they profess.” The treaty, therefore, required that these people be accorded the same rights as citizens in America’s original thirteen states.

The pro-federalist Gazette of the United States warned, “Two Spaniards from New-Orleans [would have] the same influence in the Senate with two Senators from Virginia, Pennsylvania or Massachusetts.” The Gazette doubted if such people “with their ignorance of our constitution, language, manners and habits [were] qualified” for citizenship. The federalist Gouverneur Morris complained, “I always thought that, when we should acquire Canada and Louisiana it would be proper to govern them as provinces, and allow them no voice in our councils.” In a January 1804 letter, Morris again argued that the denizens of Louisiana lacked the qualifications for citizenship: “The stipulation [in the treaty] to admit the inhabitants into our nation will prove injurious to this country” and to democracy, since they would be easily swayed by those seeking to create a dictatorship or a monarchy. In the end, Morris declared, “No man without the support of at least one thousand American bayonets can duly restrain the inhabitants of that region.” Implicit in these statements was a belief in the inferiority of Louisiana’s residents. These peoples, indeed many of whom were of mixed race and ethnicity, could be too easily swayed and led by power-hungry tyrants, detractors asserted. Further, such degraded peoples could not comprehend the complexities and nuances of the American system and thus made fit pawns for would-be tyrants and demagogues. Fears of such “mobocracy” had long simmered in the nation, but acquiring Louisiana added a racial and ethnic dimension to these concerns. Surely, as the United States expanded, participation could only be extended to Anglo-American Protestants, with lesser peoples controlled as imperial subjects. Bestowing citizenship and whiteness—since the two were inextricably linked—on these peoples seemed too high a price for the land, in Morris’s view.

Morris’s criticism, as he conceded, mattered little, and in time new states would be carved from the region and admitted on equal footing with the rest of the nation. Before new states could be added to either Louisiana or the
lands immediately east of the Mississippi, though, something had to be done about the presence of Indians. Thomas Jefferson, in his second inaugural address, argued, “Humanity enjoins us to teach them [the Indians] agriculture and the domestic arts; to encourage them to that industry which alone can enable them to maintain their place in existence, and to prepare them in time for that state of society, which to bodily comforts adds the improvement of mind and morals.” Civilization for Jefferson meant giving up the ways of the hunter and becoming farmers. Converting Indians to farming and then getting access to their supposedly excess lands had been an ongoing strategy of Jefferson’s administration. In a confidential message to Congress on the western lands, written in January 1803, Jefferson argued that the government should encourage Indians to become farmers rather than hunters “and thereby prove to themselves that less land and labor will maintain them . . . the extensive forests necessary in the hunting life will then become useless, and they will see advantage in exchanging them for the means of improving their farms and of increasing their domestic comforts.” Here, then, was Jefferson’s iron hand of imperialism wrapped in kid gloves. Better to convince the Indians to willingly give up their land instead of taking it, but, regardless, the result would be the same. The president’s western policy encouraged settlement by whites while simultaneously, as he saw it, helping the Indians adapt to the realities of the modern world. The acquisition of the Louisiana Territory later in 1803 opened up another possibility: moving Indians from the Ohio River Valley and the Southeast to some location west of the Mississippi. Despite his interest in and appreciation of Indians and their cultures, when Jefferson looked West he did not see the frontier filled with Indians but instead envisioned an opportunity to realize his dream of an agrarian, utopian society of independent Anglo-American farmers.

The moral and hardworking farmer metaphorically stood in sharp contrast to the Indian or even the rough-and-tumble frontiersman. Settled rather than transient, the pioneer farmer represented civilization itself. The farmer, in reality and also mythology, would help remake the West, planting crops where previously only wilderness existed. This, in the historian Henry Nash Smith’s estimation, evoked a myth that had deeper meaning and resonance with Americans than the frontier as a violent land of Indians and frontiersmen. The settling of the garden epitomized a “collective representation, a poetic idea . . . that defined the promise of American life” and encapsulated a
variety of meanings, including “fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth.” Jefferson, in his 1785 book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, argued that the yeoman farmer personified the most moral and desirable figure for the settlement of the West and the perpetuation of democracy. Crowded Europe needed manufacturing to feed its population, but wage labor in factories led to the loss of freedom and the destruction of democracy because “dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.” Worse, it would only be a matter of time before the same conditions applied to the United States.

Agriculture, however, promoted morality and virtue, traits that were essential to democracy. He wrote, “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.” Americans should not worry about becoming manufacturers, for they could import all they needed from Europe: “While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff.”

As a lawmaker, Jefferson sought to bring his vision of a West of white yeoman farmers to reality long before he acquired Louisiana. Only by some-how extending the frontier could Jefferson keep the dreaded distaffs at bay. During the Articles of Confederation government in the 1780s, he authored a plan for western expansion that he hoped would prevent both the spread of slavery and the presence of powerful, titled aristocrats, creating the yeoman republic of which he dreamed. Jefferson, in his 1784 “Plan for the Temporary Government of the Western Territory,” wrote that the “respective governments [of new states] shall be in republican forms, and shall admit no person to be a citizen who holds any hereditary title,” and “after the year 1800 of the Christian era there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any of the said States.” Thus, he envisioned a free, white yeoman society in the West. In white male landowners, Jefferson and others felt, lay the keys to the perpetuation of democracy. The Northwest Ordinance, based in part on Jefferson’s plan for the western territory, became law in 1787, remaining even after the US Constitution replaced the Articles of Confederation. Jefferson’s ban on slavery north of the Ohio River also remained a part of it and would in time become a significant border between freedom and slavery.
These motivations compelled Jefferson to acquire the Louisiana Territory because as long as future generations of Americans had enough land, America could remain a nation of free, landholding democrats. In his first inaugural address he wrote that Americans possessed “a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the hundredth and thousandth generation.” In an 1801 letter to James Monroe, however, he imagined a time in the near future when America’s rapid population growth would inevitably result in the United States expanding “to cover the whole northern, if not southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws; nor can we contemplate with satisfaction either blot or mixture on that surface.” His euphemistic “blot and mixture” were references to miscegenation and the presence of non-white peoples, respectively. Despite being a prominent slave owner, he imagined a time when a continental nation would also be a homogeneous nation, a white nation. Here, then, from Jefferson’s formidable pen appeared what is likely the earliest articulation of the white man’s West. The historian Winthrop Jordan observes that, for Jefferson, “America’s destiny was white.” How that destiny could be achieved given the large populations of African Americans and Indians already in the nation appeared problematic—it was one thing to think of a distant time a thousand generations in the future but quite another to plan for settlement in the trans-Appalachian and, later, trans-Mississippi West. Jefferson, like his nation, felt conflicted about the role of Indians in American society, but expansion had continued apace without question—or at least until it met the Mississippi River.

Jefferson’s dream of a West occupied by yeoman farmers seemed to evaporate in light of early assessments on the region. Zebulon Montgomery Pike’s report of his 1805–7 expedition across the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, and Mexico painted a bleak portrait of the land beyond the Mississippi River. While the lower Missouri River would “admit of a numerous, extensive, and compact population,” farther West it would “be only possible to introduce a limited population.” Aridity was the problem. Of the Great Plains he wrote, “But here a barren soil, parched and dried up for eight months in the year, presents neither moisture nor nutrition sufficient to nourish the timber. These vast plains of the western hemisphere may become in time as celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa.” He crossed a desert “of many leagues,” populated by undulating waves of ever-changing sand dunes “on which not
a speck of vegetable matter existed.” Hoping to salvage some semblance of optimism, Pike opined, “From these immense prairies may arise one great advantage to the United States, viz.: The restriction of our population to some certain limits, and thereby a continuation of the Union.” It would prove an impossible task, Pike implied, to govern a continental nation. Here, then, was a natural limit to western expansion, the spread of agriculture, and the spread of American society: “Our citizens . . . will, through necessity, be constrained to limit their extent on the west to the borders of the Missouri and Mississippi [Rivers], while they leave the prairies incapable of cultivation to the wandering and uncivilized aborigines of the country.”

Like Pike, Stephen Harriman Long asserted that a desert environment dominated this new territory. To describe it, he coined the term “Great American Desert,” tempering Americans’ enthusiasm to settle the lands beyond the Mississippi. Long wrote of a vast sandy desert along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. He noted that the region seemed prone to violent thunderstorms and large hailstones. Inhospitable fluctuations in temperature promised to stymie human habitation. Long observed that the temperature increased by fifty degrees between sunrise and the hottest part of the day. “These rapid alternations of heat and cold,” he concluded, “must be supposed to mark a climate little favourable to health.”

Pike’s and Long’s warnings about the Great Plains seemed to preclude any hope that the area could support traditional Anglo-American agrarian settlement. This seemed, as Pike suggested, to hem in the United States. As the historian William Goetzmann observes, Pike and Long did not offer entirely wrong information. Given the technology of the early nineteenth century, “The Southwestern plains were unfit for widespread settlement.” Lacking communication and transportation infrastructure, irrigation, and dryland farming techniques, the Great Plains were ill-suited to agriculture and therefore to civilization as Americans saw it.

Pike and Long, however, concerned themselves with the suitability of the Great Plains not only to agriculture but more generally to Anglo-American settlement, for agriculture was the handmaiden of American civilization. If agriculture could not thrive on the plains, then neither could Americans. Both explorers and other early visitors to the West returned with dire warnings about the dangers of potential settlement there. Should Anglo-Americans be foolish enough to venture into North America’s heart
of darkness, they could expect to degenerate into half-civilized, semi-nomadic bandits.

The image of the Great American Desert lodged in the American consciousness. Visitors from the East, touring the West, invariably described the Great Plains as a trackless wasteland for hundreds of miles, populated by savage Indians and desperadoes forced from the more civilized lands of the American frontier and the Spanish empire. Washington Irving, among the first writers with a distinctively American voice and arguably its most famous man of letters, saw little to recommend in the plains, concluding that no good could come from owning such a place. Only recently returned from a long sojourn in Europe, he set out on a tour of America in 1832. The writer soon met Henry Leavitt Ellsworth on a Lake Erie steamer. Ellsworth, a government official bound for the newly created Indian Territory, convinced Irving and his two European companions to join the expedition as gentleman explorers. They agreed and soon lit out for the frontier.

The Ellsworth party arrived at Fort Gibson in Indian Territory in early October 1832. On October 10 they made their way to the trading post and Osage Indian agency a few miles from the fort. There, Irving encountered the frontier in microcosm. He was not impressed: "Besides these [Creek and Osage Indians] there was a sprinkling of trappers, hunters, half breeds, creoles, negroes of every hue; and all that other rabble rout of nondescript beings that keep about the frontiers, between civilized and savage life, as those equivocal birds the bats, hover about the confines of light and darkness." His metaphor spoke of boundaries between light and darkness, civilization and savagery, good and evil. The bat’s strange position as a creature of neither daylight nor darkness symbolized the mixed races he saw. His “nondescript beings,” neither black, white, nor Indian, seemed the manifestation of one of America’s darkest fears.

The mixture of races and cultures portended potential dangers for whites, of course, but also for Indians. Thus it was with pleasure that Irving described the Osage as still wild and romantic, “like so many noble bronze figures” dressed in “their simple Indian garb” and practicing “the habits of the hunter and warrior.” Irving viewed his mixed-race cook and jack-of-all-trades, Antoine or “Tonish,” however, as far less noble or romantic. Over the course of the journey Antoine would prove his worth time and again (once by swimming across
the Arkansas River, a rope clenched in his teeth, while towing the rather effete writer in a makeshift raft), but Irving refused to see him as anything other than a “braggart and a liar of the first water.” Applying his experience
with Tonish to all French Creole trappers in the West, he concluded that they came dangerously close to degenerating into savages. In his work *Astoria*, he described such trappers as having “separated almost entirely from civilized life . . . [becoming] so accustomed to the freedom of the forest and the prairie that they look back with repugnance upon the restraints of civilization.”

Francis Parkman, who toured the Great Plains in 1847, agreed with much of Irving’s assessment. He described a group of trappers he encountered on the Platte River as “uncouth” and “half-savage,” and their faces “looked out from beneath the hoods of their white capotes with a bad and brutish expression, as if their owners might be willing agents of any villainy. And such in fact is the character of many of these men.” Contact with the wilderness could have a corrosive effect on civilization, making savages out of civilized people.

To writers like Irving and Parkman, separation from civilization and giving in to the base desire to mix with inferior peoples led to racial degeneration. Savagery and miscegenation flourished in conducive natural environments, and the western frontier was just such a place. Americans regarded trees as indicators of a soil’s fertility and suitability for agriculture. The plains lacked trees and therefore the civilizing influence of agriculture. Thus, savagery thrived on the Great Plains.

Irving wrote that the barren wasteland of the far West “apparently defies cultivation, and the habitation of civilized life . . . it is to be feared that a great part of it will form a lawless interval between the abodes of civilized man, like the wastes of the oceans or the deserts of Arabia; and like them be subject to the depredations of the marauder.” The western frontier was even more dangerous than Arabia because men from civilized societies lived alongside savages, and in time a “mongrel” society like the one near Fort Gibson would emerge that alloyed the ferocity of the Indian with the superior intellect of the civilized Anglo-American—a volatile combination. Irving wrote: “Here may spring up new and mongrel races, like new formations in geology, the amalgamation of the ‘debris’ and ‘abrasions’ of former races, civilized and savage; the remains of broken and almost extinguished tribes; the descendants of wandering hunters and trappers; of fugitives from the Spanish and American frontiers; of adventurers and desperadoes of every class and country, yearly ejected from the bosom of society into the wilderness.”

Americans could, he felt, easily sink to the level of the inferior peoples around them, victims of miscegenation and uncultivable environments. Most other
visitors to the plains endorsed the prevailing notion of aridity and its attendant savagery. Even as late as 1857, US Army lieutenant Governeur K. Warren could report that Anglo-American settlement in Nebraska had reached the 97th parallel, the limit of agriculture and civilized settlement. These settlers “are, as it were, upon the shore of a sea, up to which population and agriculture may advance, and no further,” he claimed.

Irving’s and Parkman’s belief in the rapid degeneration of whites in the West reflected the dominant cultural belief in the contingency of race. According to the best scientists of the day, it was alarmingly easy for whites to become less white. Given Samuel Stanhope Smith’s analysis of race and environment, the Great American Desert seemed to indeed present a formidable impediment to the spread of civilization. The belief in the West as hostile to white settlement played into the larger debate on race and ethnicity in the early republic. Certainly, the Indians and half-civilized people of the plains threatened democracy and perhaps even the stability of the nation itself. Writers like Irving and Parkman readily warned of the dangers of an American version of the warlike Tartars and Bedouins attacking isolated outposts. But such external threats comprised just one of the myriad racial challenges facing the nation. Anomalous and undesirable racial groups already lived inside the boundaries of the United States. These complex racial questions vexed the young nation, but the West offered a possible solution.

If sending Anglo-American settlers into the West would undermine democracy and compromise the racial purity of the nation, what, then, to do with the lands acquired in the Louisiana Purchase? Some advocated using the region as a kind of racial dumping ground and thereby racially cleanse the United States east of the Mississippi. The two most anomalous groups in the nation, and therefore the most likely candidates for removal, were American Indians and free African Americans. The Cherokee and other semi-civilized Indians could be moved west of the Mississippi where, their alleged defenders argued, they would have time enough to adapt to the ways of the white man’s world and give up title to their lands in the East. The Jefferson administration first minted this idea, and it remained in circulation throughout the ensuing decades. Similarly, free blacks, occupying a strange borderland between slaves and free whites, could be evacuated to the West. Together, these groups could provide a buffer against the savage and warlike Indians farther west.
Removing “civilized” Indians and free blacks seemed acceptable since Americans considered neither group capable of participating in American democracy. Indeed, the law excluded both groups from citizenship on the grounds that their instincts and base passions enslaved them. Democracy required rational thought and self-control, characteristics that neither Indians nor free blacks could supposedly possess. Without these traits, neither group could attain an understanding of republicanism or civic virtue.³⁸ Similarly, the legal system extended true citizenship only to white men (and not even all white men at first), while African American slaves occupied the lowest rung of the social order.³⁹ American leaders felt it vital to exclude African Americans (both the free and the enslaved) and American Indians for the good of the nation’s survival. Blacks and Indians had been denied real participation in society, but even their continued presence in the nation remained a lingering problem. Removal might offer a practical solution, and the open lands of the Louisiana Territory beckoned with possibility.

The desire to colonize freed slaves somewhere outside the country appeared earlier than Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia, but his work attracted the most attention to the scheme in the late eighteenth century. Jefferson argued that young blacks should be “colonized to such a place as the circumstances of the time should render most proper, sending them out with arms, implements of household and of the handicraft arts, seeds, pairs of the useful domestic animals, etc. to declare them a free and independent people, and extend to them our alliance and protection, till they shall have acquired strength.” To make up for the loss of their labor, America could “send vessels at the same time to other parts of the world for an equal number of white inhabitants.”⁴⁰ Jefferson, as an advocate of white settlement of the West, preferred to send these freed slaves out of the country, but others thought a destination closer to the United States would be more practical.

Following the publication of Jefferson’s Notes, several others offered proposals for colonization as a solution to the vexing question of how best to end slavery and prevent miscegenation. In 1788 “Othello,” supposedly a free black from Baltimore, asserted that slaves should be freed and sent to a territory in the West.⁴¹ In 1795 an anonymous New Hampshire writer argued in Tyrannical Libertymen that “a portion of our new territory be assigned for the purpose [of colonization]; and let the great body of negroes be sent to colonize it.” The author imagined “a large province of black freemen, industrious
and well regulated,” who could develop some section of the West, provide revenue and strength to the nation, and act as a place where Christianized blacks could be recruited to spread “light, liberty, and benevolence” to the darkest corners of Africa.  

By regulated, he no doubt meant controlled by laws but also through means that would smother the base passions and dark desires blacks supposedly harbored.

Thomas Branagan, a prolific anti-slavery writer, similarly felt that ending slavery and removing free blacks represented the best solution to the race question. Branagan asserted in *Serious Remonstrances* that slaves would eventually rise up and claim their natural rights as human beings. This would happen, he felt, at the most inopportune moment, most likely during a war with a foreign nation. Ending slavery peacefully was far better, he felt, than fighting both a foreign invader and a slave insurrection. While some had advocated the forced removal of free blacks, Branagan instead proposed a plan “for the accommodation of the blacks” that offered land as an incentive. Branagan claimed, “I would . . . joyfully embrace [such an incentive] myself and consider it as the most advantageous circumstance of my life to have the offer made me.” This advantageous offer would “allow them [blacks] a certain number of acres of land for a new settlement . . . Thus many an honest family would be provided for comfortably.” Branagan admitted that the South would not agree to his scheme (at least not for some time), but morally it fell to the North to do so as the right thing: “We have like true Christians and patriots, relinquished our ill-gotten slaves [in the North]; we have made them free virtually, but not politically; let us then from motives of generosity, as well as self-preservation, make them free and happy in every sense of the word, in a republic of their own.” All the plan required, he asserted, was a few hundred thousand acres of land in the Louisiana Territory that “will not be worth a cent to [our] government this five hundred years.” In a footnote he added, “The new state might be established upwards of 2000 miles from our population. It is asserted that the most distant part of Louisiana is farther from us than some parts of Europe.” In essence, northerners (and perhaps someday southerners) could exculpate themselves for the sin of slavery, strengthen the frontier by sending settlers to the West, and spatially segregate free blacks thousands of miles away.

Even Jefferson entertained the idea of sending freed slaves to the Louisiana Territory (although he preferred locations in Africa or the Caribbean, since
he dreamed about settling the Louisiana Purchase lands with white settlers). In a late 1803 letter to Virginia governor John Page, the president wrote, “The acquisition of Louisiana may also procure the opportunity” to colonize blacks outside of the eastern United States. He warned, however, that such decisions ultimately rested with Congress.

The hope for a mass manumission and relocation of freed slaves proved chimeric. By 1806, several factors had doomed the idea of a black territory in Louisiana. The growing crisis with European powers, for example, focused the nation’s attention on international matters. The official end of the African slave trade, as specified in the US Constitution, and a temporarily flagging interest in abolition stopped the momentum for some sort of black expatriation—which could have been achieved through colonization. Yet as hope for colonizing blacks in the trans-Mississippi West faded, the colonization of eastern American Indians became more likely. The creation of Indian Territory, as historian James P. Ronda has argued, rested on “a set of assumptions about race and geography, national sovereignty and cultural identity.” Once again, Jefferson figured prominently in the early debate over the Louisiana Territory and its settlement. Certainly, he felt that much of the land should be dedicated to his white yeoman farmers, but within such a massive amount of land some territory could be set aside for Indians as “a means of tempting all our Indians on the East side of the Mississippi to move West,” he explained in a letter to General Horatio Gates. This territory would give Indians time to fully assimilate into American society and allow their former lands to be opened to white settlement. Jefferson never acted on the idea, but it remained in circulation throughout the early 1800s.

President James Monroe made Indian removal a priority of his administration. In 1817 the Committee on Public Lands endorsed the creation of an Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River. The current state of frontier development, with its uneven pattern of white and Indian settlement, benefited neither group, the authors of the committee’s report argued, because it exposed whites to savagery and Indians to the worst attributes of American culture, including alcohol consumption. Better, then, to move the Indians into a clearly delineated space. In the words of Ronda, the committee proposed “a geography of race, a geography that promised a sovereign solution to the Republic’s ‘Indian Problem.’”
John Quincy Adams’s administration also sought a way to relocate Indians, but it was under Andrew Jackson that Indian removal began in earnest. Elected in 1828, the new president had a long and checkered association with Indian peoples, having fought alongside them and often simultaneously against them, most notably at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. That battle and the subsequent Battle of New Orleans in 1815 catapulted the Tennessean to national prominence, and following a protracted and circuitous journey he ascended to the presidency in 1828. Jackson announced his interest in Indian removal in his first State of the Union Address in December 1829, calling on Congress to enact legislation to remove eastern Indians. Hugh Lawson White in the US Senate and John Bell in the US House (both Tennesseans) chaired their respective Committees on Indian Affairs and shepherded the bills through both chambers. Despite substantial opposition and close votes in both houses of Congress, the removal bill passed. Jackson immediately signed it on May 28, 1830.52

Jackson claimed that “no one can indulge a more friendly feeling than myself” toward Indian peoples, but a “benevolent policy” of Indian removal provided the best of all possible solutions to the Indian question, enabling “them to pursue happiness in their own way, and under their own rude institutions.” With Indians situated beyond the Mississippi River, a “civilized population [can instead be given] large tracts of country now occupied by a few savage hunters.”53 In other words, drawing on Jefferson’s humanitarian argument, removal would allow Indians the freedom to adapt at their own pace, and their former lands could be opened to settlement by productive white farmers. By 1833 Jackson had abandoned the pretense of removal as chiefly a humanitarian policy, emphasizing instead the Indians’ innate inferiority to whites as justification to spatially segregate them forever. In his 1833 message to Congress the president singled out recalcitrant members of the last remaining southern tribes (most likely the Cherokee and Creeks) and hoped they “will realize the necessity of emigration and speedily resort to it.” He declared that these Indians possessed “neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire for improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition. Established in the midst of another and a superior race . . . they must necessarily yield to the force of circumstances and ere long disappear.”54 The 1836 Report on the Committee of Indian Affairs similarly insisted on the Indians’ irredeemable inferiority to
whites. Celebrating the “successful” implementation of Indian removal, the report exclaimed that Indians “are on the outside of us, and in a place which will ever remain an outside.”

Jackson and his supporters could congratulate themselves on having finally solved the vexing “Indian problem,” but not everyone believed the problem had really been solved. Washington Irving observed that the policy of removal, which he had seen firsthand in his tour of Oklahoma, only added more people to “this singular and heterogeneous cloud of wild population.” Even worse, the removed tribes “consider themselves expatriated beings, wrongfully exiled from their hereditary homes, and the sepulchers of their fathers, and [they] cherish a deep and abiding animosity against the race that has dispossessed them.” Irving warned that the removed Indians felt betrayed by the United States and their jaundiced view of America would likely color encounters with other Indian peoples. Irving’s negative assessment of Indian relocation, however, did not seem to matter. The point, after all, was that the eastern Indians no longer inhabited the eastern woodlands, and it mattered little if they sank to an even lower state of savagery on the isolated plains—or so the proponents of removal argued.

Imagining Indian Territory as remote from the rest of the nation, as being outside and Indians therefore as un-white outsiders, politicians in the 1830s felt they had solved one of the nation’s most pressing issues. Once only socially and politically marginalized, Indian peoples were now spatially marginalized as well, literally on the outside looking in. Jackson, in his 1830 message to Congress, had stated that Indian removal would “relieve the whole State of Mississippi, and the western part of Alabama, of Indian occupancy,” but it could accurately be said that this relief extended to the nation as well.

Yet politicians had not solved the other pressing racial issue—the presence of African Americans and the issue of slavery. As government agents removed Indians from Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, planters increasingly replaced them with slaves as King Cotton became rooted in the southern economy. Indian removal, therefore, created a vacuum soon filled by slaves, further entrenching slavery in the American South and propelling the nation toward civil war. Indians, whose lands were the only things Americans coveted, were easy to separate, but the spread of labor-intensive cotton agriculture made controlling blacks more important and emancipation less likely. Indeed, the development of the American capitalist economy required
their labor. In the North this labor could be provided by immigrants, but in the South the “bio-power” required to make cotton profitable came from the muscles of slaves. Capitalism “would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production,” as Michel Foucault observed, and in few places was that insertion more obvious and more important than in the American South. Southern society existed only if institutions of power and control “ensured the maintenance of production relations.” Put simply, American development required both the Indians’ land and the bodies of slaves, making the former expendable and the latter essential.

For more than three decades American policymakers saw the West as a racial dumping ground, an American Siberia where unwanted Indian peoples could be relocated and forgotten, but renewed expansion smothered this conceit. Little more than a decade after the removal of many eastern Indians to Indian Territory, the annexation of Texas, the acquisition of the Southwest following the Mexican-American War, and the discovery of gold in California put Indian Territory at the heart of a now continental nation. The periphery, stubbornly, would not remain peripheral.

By the late 1840s, Indian Territory and the surrounding Great Plains occupied the center of the country. However, the region still had an image, created in part by Pike and Long, as a desert, and subsequent travelers agreed with these early judgments. Thomas Fitzpatrick, a mountain man turned Indian agent, wrote in 1853 that the heart of the country loomed as “a great and disconnecting wilderness” separating the East from the Pacific Coast. Between the Mississippi River and California, therefore, lay an arid, vast hole dividing the fecund coasts. “That hole,” according to Elliott West, “began suddenly to fill on July 6, 1858, the day a party of thirteen prospectors found gold dust in a small creek flowing from the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains.” Their small discovery set off a frenzied race to the Rockies.

As tens of thousands of prospectors hurtled across the plains, the image of the center, of plains and mountains, began to change. Miners washed gold from nascent towns like Central City and Idaho Springs in the Colorado Rockies, proving the land to be literally valuable and giving credence to those who believed in America’s place as God’s new chosen nation. To feed these miners, farmers began to cultivate along the rivers that poured from the mountains, apparently drowning the memory of the Great American
Desert. To the east, farmers spilled out beyond Missouri into neighboring Kansas and Nebraska. Town boosters and railroads began to extol the virtues of the plains as uncommonly suited to agriculture. Transformed from desert into garden and finally into heartland, the hollow center had been filled.

Yet some fears remained. What of the racial degeneration Irving had warned of in the 1830s, and what would happen to Anglo-Americans and others of Northern European ancestry when they settled in the unquestionably warmer and drier West? Certainly, a new generation of scientists like Aggasiz doubted the environmental determinism of monogenesis, offering polygenesis as an inoculation against fears of degeneration. It was one thing to talk of the immutable nature of race from the safety of eastern universities but quite another to head to the West and apply theory to practice. With more than a little trepidation, settlers set off into the unknown.

Notes


2. Ibid.


5. Ibid.

6. Quoted in Kukla, Wilderness So Immense, 308.


12. Ibid., 123.
14. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
27. Irving, Tour on the Prairies, in Three Western Narratives, 20–22.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 15.
of the American Frontier, 1600–1860 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973);
Smith, Virgin Land, especially chapter 5.
33. Smith, Virgin Land, 175.
34. Irving, Astoria, 359.
35. Ibid.
36. Quoted in Smith, Virgin Land, 178.
37. Ibid., 176–77.
40. Quoted in Jordan, White over Black, 546.
41. Ibid.
42. Anonymous, Tyrannical Libertymen: A Discourse upon Negro Slavery in the United States (Hanover, NH: Eagle Office, 1795), 10.
44. Ibid., 18.
45. Ibid., 23–34.
46. Ibid., 22.
47. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 161.
55. Quoted in Ronda, “We Have a Country,” 164.
60. Ibid., 44.