

THE IMPACT OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

- 1 Although the American civilization took over and replaced the frontier more than a century ago, the heritage of the frontier is still evident in the United States today. Many people are still fascinated by the frontier because it has been particularly important in shaping American values. When Ronald Reagan was president in the 1980s, he liked to recall the image of life on the frontier. He was often photographed on his western ranch—chopping wood or riding his horse, and wearing his cowboy hat. More recently, in the 2000s, President George W. Bush reinforced this cowboy image by inviting members of the press to photograph him on his Texas ranch, wearing his cowboy boots and hat.
- 2 For many years, the frontier experience was romanticized¹ in popular movies and television shows that featured cowboy heroes fighting Indian villains. Little attention was given to the tragic story of what really happened to the Native Americans, also known as the American Indians. Today, most Americans are more aware of the darker side of the settling of the continent, when thousands of American Indians were killed and their lands were taken. When the buffalo were hunted and killed off by the white settlers, the Indians' major source of food and clothing was lost, and much of their culture was destroyed. Today, there is a renewed interest in Indian cultures, and the Smithsonian has a museum in Washington, D.C. that is dedicated to Indian culture.
- 3 The frontier experience began when the first colonists settled on the east coast of the continent in the 1600s. It ended about 1890 when the last western lands were settled. The American frontier consisted of the relatively unsettled regions of the United States, usually found in the western part of the country. Here, both land and life were more rugged and primitive than in the more settled eastern part. As one frontier area was settled, people began moving farther west into the next unsettled area, sweeping aside the Native Americans as they went. By settling one frontier area after another, Americans moved across an entire continent that was 2,700 miles wide. They came to believe that it was their destiny to control all the land, and eventually they did. The Native Americans were given small portions of land, called *reservations*, to control, but the United States government broke many promises and created much misery for the Indian nations.
- 4 While most Americans have a more balanced view of the settling of the West, many Americans still see aspects of the frontier, its people, and their beliefs as inspiring examples of traditional American values in their original and purest form. How did the frontier movement, which lasted more than two centuries, help to shape these basic American values?
- 5 To be sure, the frontier provided many inspiring examples of hard work as forests were turned into towns, and towns into large cities. The competitive race for success was rarely more colorful or adventurous than on the western frontier. The rush for gold in California, for silver in Montana, and for fertile land in all the western territories provided endless stories of high adventure. When it was announced that almost 2 million acres of good land in Oklahoma would be opened for settlement in April 1889, thousands of settlers gathered on the border waiting for the exact time to be announced. When it

¹romanticized: talked or thought about things in a way that made them seem more attractive than they really were



The 1889 rush to claim land in Oklahoma

was, they literally² raced into the territory in wagons and on horseback to claim the best land they could find for themselves.

- 6 Although daily life on the frontier was usually less dramatic than the frontier adventure stories would lead one to believe, even the ordinary daily life of frontier men and women exemplified³ national values in a form which seemed purer to many Americans than the life of those living in the more settled, more cultivated eastern United States.
- 7 Individual freedom, self-reliance, and equality of opportunity have perhaps been the values most closely associated with the

frontier heritage of America. Throughout their history, Americans have tended to view the frontier settler as the model of the free individual. This is probably because there was less control over the individual on the frontier than anywhere else in the United States. There were few laws and few established social or political institutions to confine people living on the frontier. In the United States, where freedom from outside social controls has traditionally been valued, the frontier has been idealized, and it still serves as a basis for a nostalgic⁴ view of the early United States, a simpler time that was lost when the country became urbanized and more

² *literally: according to the most basic or original meaning of a word or expression*

³ *exemplified: was a very typical example of something*

⁴ *nostalgic: feeling or expressing a slight sadness when remembering happy events or experiences from the past*

complex. Many people living in the West today still hold these beliefs about freedom from government controls.

Self-Reliance and the Rugged Individualist

- 8 Closely associated with the frontier ideal of the free individual is the ideal of self-reliance. If the people living on the frontier were free of many of society's rules, they were also denied many of society's comforts and conveniences. They had to be self-reliant. Men and women often constructed their own houses, hunted, tended their own gardens, and made their own clothing and household items.
 - 9 The self-reliant frontiersman has been idealized by Americans who have made him the classic American male hero: the *rugged individualist*. This hero is a man who has been made physically tough and rugged by the conditions of frontier life. He is skilled with guns and other weapons. He needs no help from others and often appears in stories as alone, unmarried, and without children. Standing alone, he can meet all the dangers that life on the frontier brings and he is strong enough to extend his protection beyond himself to others.
 - 10 There are two types of heroic rugged individualists. Each is drawn from a different stage of life on the frontier. In the early frontier, which existed before the Civil War of the 1860s, the main struggle was man against the wilderness. Daniel Boone is probably the best-known hero of this era. Boone explored the wilderness country of Kentucky in the 1760s and 1770s. On one trip, he stayed in the wilderness for two years, successfully matching his strength and skills against
- the dangers of untamed nature and hostile Native Americans. In 1778, Boone was captured by Native Americans who were so impressed with his physical strength and skills that they made him a member of their tribe. Later, he succeeded in making a daring escape. Boone's heroic strength is seen primarily in his ability to master the harsh challenges of the wilderness. Although he had to fight against Indians from time to time, he is admired mainly as a survivor and conqueror of the wilderness, not as a fighter.
- 11 The second type of heroic rugged individualist is drawn from the last phase of the western frontier, which lasted from the 1860s until the 1890s. By this time, the wilderness was largely conquered. The struggle now was no longer man against nature, but man against man. Cattlemen and cowboys* fought against farmers, outlaws, Native Americans, and each other for control of the remaining western lands. The traditions of law and order were not yet well established, and physical violence was frequent. The frontier became known as "the Wild West."
 - 12 It is not surprising, then, that the hero drawn from this period is primarily a fighter. He is admired for his ability to beat other men in fistfights,⁵ or to win in a gunfight. The principal source of his heroism is his physical prowess⁶ and he is strong enough to defeat two or three ordinary men at one time. This rugged individualist is typically a defender of good against evil.
 - 13 This hero of the Wild West is based on memories of a number of gunfighters and lawmen of the time, men such as Jesse

* Cattlemen were men who raised large herds of cattle as a business and needed large areas of land on which their cattle could graze before being sent to market. Cowboys usually worked for the cattlemen. They would spend most of the day on horseback rounding up the cattle or taking them on long drives to market.

⁵ fistfights: fights using bare hands with the fingers curled in toward the palm

⁶ prowess: great skill at doing something

James and Wyatt Earp. The Wild West hero had more impact on the American idea of heroism than Daniel Boone, the hero of the earlier wilderness frontier. It is the Wild West hero who has inspired countless western movies; until the 1960s, 25 percent of all American movies made were westerns.

American Macho Heroes

- 14 Through movies and television programs, this Wild West hero has helped shape the American idea of “macho,” or male, strength. For the most part, almost all American male heroes on television and in movies have traditionally had the common ability to demonstrate their strength through physical violence. Once the western macho hero had been created, the model for this hero was used in other settings—for soldiers in battle, and tough detectives and policemen fighting crime. From the cowboy heroes to the Terminator, Captain America, and Jenko, these heroes can fight with their fists, guns, and other weapons. Although there are movie and TV heroes who are respected more for their intelligence and sensitivity than their physical prowess, these classic macho male heroes still dominate much of American entertainment and video games. There are now also female versions of this macho image, including Katniss Everdeen, who competes in the Hunger Games armed with just a bow and arrow.
- 15 The image of the rugged individualist has been criticized for overlooking many factors that played a central part in the development of the frontier. First, the rugged individualist image overstates the importance of complete self-reliance and understates the importance of cooperation in building a new nation out of the wilderness. Second, because the image has been traditionally masculine, it has

overlooked the importance of pioneer women and their strength, hard work, resourcefulness, and civilizing influence on the untamed frontier.

- 16 Finally, the rugged individualist image is criticized because of its emphasis on violence and the use of guns to solve problems. On the frontier, men did use guns to hunt and protect themselves and their families, but western movies romanticized and glorified gunfights in the Old West. The good guys and the bad guys “shot it out” in classic westerns such as *High Noon*. Incidentally, the classic old western movies always featured the “good guys” wearing white hats, while the “bad guys” wore black hats. Gradually, however, the western hero was largely replaced in the movies by the soldier or the crime fighter—guns still blazing—and the violence in movies, and later on TV and in video games, increased.
- 17 Some Americans worry about the impact of these entertainment heroes on the lives and imaginations of young people. At the very least, many young people have become desensitized⁷ to the sight of violence and killings. In the twenty-first century, guns became a critical issue when there were shootings in several public schools and universities. It is all too easy for teenagers to get guns, and they are much more at risk of being killed by guns than adults are. The problem is particularly bad in the inner cities, where a number of young gang members carry guns. However, several of the most shocking incidents occurred in normally peaceful suburban communities, and now many schools require students to pass through metal detectors as they enter school buildings. Other recent mass shootings in public places included the wounding of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in

⁷ desensitized: made emotionally insensitive

2011, and the killing of people in a movie theater and children in an elementary school in 2012.

- 18 Americans have a long history of owning guns, and many people strongly believe having a gun in their house is an important right. In fact, the right to bear arms is even guaranteed by the Second Amendment of the Constitution, although there is debate about what the founding fathers meant by this:

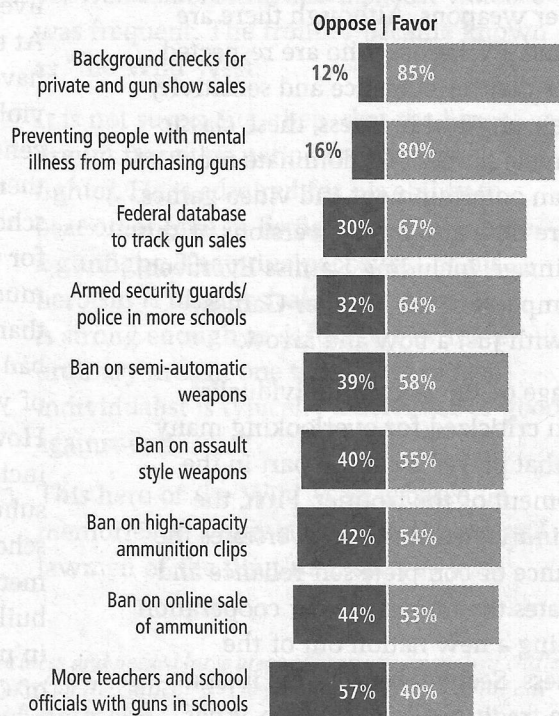
A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.

Today, there are well over 200 million privately held guns in the United States, enough for every adult to own one, and most estimates range from 270 to over 300 million. These are guns held by private citizens and do not include those possessed by the military or the police. Most firearms (rifles, shotguns, and hand guns) are owned by Americans who enjoy hunting, target practice, or gun collecting, and these individuals usually own more than one gun. Some firearms are owned by people who want their own gun for protection of their homes and families. For example, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the sale of guns rose. Estimates are that anywhere from 25 percent to 45 percent of U.S. households now have at least one gun.

- 19 How Americans reacted to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, reveals another legacy of the frontier: Americans' willingness to take the law into their own hands to protect themselves and their families. This tendency usually appears when Americans believe the police cannot adequately protect them. For example, when the passengers fought with the terrorists on the 9/11 flight that crashed in Pennsylvania, they were hailed as heroes.

- 20 The issue of gun control is very controversial in the United States, and people on both sides of the issue have strong opinions. Many Americans favor stricter government controls on the sale of guns, and they would not consider having a gun in their home. Others who oppose gun control feel strongly enough about the issue that they have created powerful political pressure groups, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), which has worked to prevent most gun control legislation from passing. They argue that limiting gun sales will keep law-abiding citizens, not criminals, from owning guns. On the other side are gun-control organizations such as the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence named after Jim Brady, who was shot and became paralyzed when a man tried to kill President Ronald Reagan, and a new organization founded by Gabrielle Giffords

BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR MANY GUN POLICY PROPOSALS



Source: Pew Research Center Jan. 9-13, 2013.

and her husband Mark Kelly, Americans for Responsible Solutions. These groups are especially concerned about the sale of handguns and automatic assault rifles. They argue that American homes, particularly where there are children, are safer without guns. Interestingly, public opinion about gun control has remained about the same for over a decade, with Americans equally divided for and against it. After each mass shooting, the sale of guns rises, while those who oppose firearms (particularly automatic weapons) call for stronger gun control.

Inventiveness and the Can-Do Spirit

21 While the frontier idealized the rugged individual as the great American hero, it also respected the inventive individual. The need for self-reliance on the frontier encouraged a spirit of inventiveness. Frontier men and women not only had to provide most of their daily life essentials, but they were also constantly facing new problems and situations that demanded new solutions. Under these circumstances,

they soon learned to experiment with new ways of doing things.

22 Observers from other countries were very impressed by the frontiersman's ability to invent useful new farm tools. They were equally impressed by the pioneer woman's ability to make clothing, candles, soap, and many other items needed for the daily life of her family. Lord Bryce, a famous English observer of American life, believed that the inventive skills of American pioneers enabled them to succeed at tasks beyond the abilities of most ordinary men and women in other countries. Although Americans in the more settled eastern regions of the United States created many of the most important inventions in the new nation, the western frontier had the effect of spreading the spirit of inventiveness throughout the population and helping it to become a national character trait.

23 The willingness to experiment and invent led to another American trait, a "can-do" spirit, or a sense of optimism that every



A nineteenth-century frontier family in front of their sod house

problem has a solution. Americans like to believe that a difficult problem can be solved immediately—an impossible one may take a little longer. They take pride in meeting challenges and overcoming difficult obstacles.⁸ This can-do spirit has traditionally given Americans a sense of optimism about themselves and their country. Many have said that if the United States can land a man on the moon, no problem on earth is impossible. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville said that no other country in the world “more confidently seizes the future” than the United States. Traditionally, when times are hard, political leaders have reminded Americans of their frontier heritage and the tough determination of their pioneer ancestors; the can-do spirit is still a source of pride and inspiration.

to the United States in the early 1800s observed that if Americans experienced disappointment or failure in business, in politics, or even in love, they moved west to make a new beginning. The frontier offered millions of Americans a source of hope for a fresh start in the competitive race for success and for a better life. On the frontier, there was a continuing need for new farmers, skilled laborers, merchants, lawyers, and political leaders.

Equality of Opportunity

24 The frontier is an expression of individual freedom and self-reliance in its purest (and most extreme) forms, and it is also a pure expression of the ideal of equality of opportunity. On the western frontier, there was more of a tendency for people to treat each other as social equals than there was in the more settled eastern regions of the country. On the frontier, the highest importance was placed on what people could do in their own lifetimes. Hardly any notice was taken of their ancestors. Frontier people were fond of saying, “What’s above the ground is more important than what’s beneath the ground.”

25 Because so little attention was paid to a person’s family background, the frontier offered a new beginning for many Americans who were seeking opportunities to advance themselves. One English visitor

26 There were fewer differences in wealth between rich and poor on the frontier than in the more settled regions of the nation. People lived, dressed, and acted more alike on the frontier than in other parts of the United States. The feeling of equality was shared by hired helpers who refused to be called “servants” or to be treated as such. One European visitor observed, “The clumsy gait⁹ and bent body of our peasant is hardly ever seen here. . . . Everyone walks erect¹⁰ and easy.” Wealthy travelers to the frontier were warned not to show off their wealth or to act superior to others if they wished to be treated politely.

27 The American frontier may not be *the key* to American development, as Frederick Jackson Turner said, but it is certainly one major factor. The frontier provided the space and conditions that helped to strengthen the American ideals of individual freedom, self-reliance, and equality of opportunity. On the frontier, these ideals were enlarged and made workable. Frontier ideas and customs were continuously passed along to the more settled parts of the United States as newer frontier regions took the place of older ones during a westward march of settlers which lasted more than two centuries. In this way, many of the frontier values became national values.

⁸ *obstacles: things that make it difficult for someone to succeed*

⁹ *clumsy gait: walking in an awkward way*

¹⁰ *erect: in an upright position*