

The End of the Myth — From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America

A Book Review

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Theme: [History](#)

*Much of current political news swirls around President Trump and his persistent and somewhat pathological prevarications about the Mexico-U.S. border and the need to build a border wall. While Greg Grandin's *The End of the Myth* leads up to this current preoccupation it goes well beyond it, surveying the whole of the empire and its history to reveal the foundational myth of the U.S. empire.*

And it is done superbly. This is a wonderful work of history, drawing the reader in through anecdotal stories and comments combined with a strong factual research background. Grandin's style of writing avoids the pitfalls of a dry history, creating a theme and a storyline that consistently exposes the creation, reworking, and alterations to the imperial myth as it crosses time and place.

The frontier

In a single word, the myth is that of frontier. It is one word that carries cartloads of baggage and contains many other subordinate but necessary mythical structures that support and extend the idea. The idea of 'frontier' necessitates the idea of boundaries and borders. As the frontier moves, so do the boundaries – mythological, psychological as well as physical.

It carries along with it the whole mythology most frequently recognized in our modern era with Ronald Reagan, Ayn Rand, Clint Eastwood, Margaret Thatcher and others of their ilk as "rugged individualism" and individual liberty unconstrained by governments and rules of society.

Another important associated idea is that of a safety valve. This idea was recognized early by the political leaders of the day – and still in use today – where the frontier served as a release for antagonisms created by the massive influx of immigrants into the already crowded and frequently poverty laden regions of the burgeoning east coast cities as well as antagonisms aimed more directly at their own lies and misdeeds.

Superimposed on it all is racism. This invokes more than the racism of slave labour, more than the racism of Indian 'removal' then military slaughter, more than the racism of incoming migrants from many different homelands, more than the racism concerning religion and nationalities. It is a synergy of them all into a white "anglo saxon" supremacist ideal, where the 'other' really does not matter, extending from the rugged individual to corporate internationalism and then, yes, the wall.

Features of the frontier

The frontier and its myths are explored through history of actions and ideas combined. It is a fixed physical construct with forts, rivers, trails and transportation routes and maps to identify them; but it was also a “blurry, indistinct place where white settlers fled to escape routinization,” a place that goes on forever. It is a multistoried affair where the Royal Proclamation of 1763, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and the conflicts with slavery and abolition pushed the boundaries of the frontier into Mexican territory and the invasion of 1846. All these wars “came to be both valve and throttle, with each conflict simultaneously venting the hatreds produced by the last while creating the conditions for the next.” And as war begets war, a state “born out of ceaseless expansion...could only be maintained through ceaseless expansion.”

1898 marks a redefinition of the frontier. The frontier reached a physical limit in North America and by necessity expanded overseas creating an “American history...fast turning into an endless public parade of war and more war....Overseas war had the effect of unifying the country, this time not some sections against others but the whole nation.” The military became “the primary means of social mobility, allowing both whites and...blacks shelter from the capitalist market.”

Grandin’s history continues through the Roosevelt era and into the New Deal pre-war era. After the Second World War the frontier was rejuvenated as a “future that might be obtained.” It involved a U.S. security frontier, already established in the western hemisphere, now expanded to a global position. A major part of that was linking the Cold War and its anti-communism to a “new politics of expansion” in particular the global economy as a new frontier – globalization in all its manifestations.

This expanded with Reagan with his promises of freedom “from restraint” with “no limits to growth.” Individual and economic rights – markets – overpowered human and social rights. The violence and racism ongoing along the Mexican border was redirected to Cold War counter insurgencies, leading to many more immigrants. The U.S. was still “a beacon...a magnet for all the pilgrims from all the lost places....” Reagan’s successor, GWH Bush expanded on the frontier idea, “In the frontiers ahead, there are no boundaries.”

NAFTA

One of the big surprises in the book – and if I had thought about it carefully, should not have been – was the emphasis Grandin placed on the North American Free Trade Agreement. Even before the agreement was enacted there were already 1925 work plants in Mexico taking advantage of the low wage labour and the lack of labour and environmental regulations.

With the huge increase in interest rates in 1980 to an average of seventeen per cent many U.S. businesses and farmers lost their livelihoods. Those same interest rates created a huge debt repayment problem in Mexico leading to the IMF shock doctrine of austerity – privatization, cut spending, lax foreign investment controls, weaken labour laws, and stop land reform. In short, even before NAFTA Mexico had succumbed to U.S.economic expansion and control.

NAFTA affected the poor farmers as subsidized U.S. corn, dairy, and pork killed their subsistence living. They were forced into cheap wage labour for U.S.corporations, into drug trafficking, and into the urban sprawl of Mexico City. The “corporations had their new

frontier.”

The blowback to this was increased immigration and the rapid rise in border patrol actions. The border patrol was “a frontline instrument of white supremacist power.” The U.S. became a country “that increasingly defines itself by what it hates.” A decade of free trade “neither created an international community of prosperous, peace loving nations nor overcome domestic political divisions.” With the administration of George Bush, the 9/11 attack “offered a chance to turn away from the border and look out at the world anew,” now clarifying the mission as “We will extend the frontiers of freedom.”

Turning inwards

But as with the Vietnam War and the many other smaller counterinsurgencies, foreign wars produce domestic disruption as the “struggle turns inwards.” “The backlashes to decades of disastrous policies piled up, one after the other, until the backlash to the backlashes came,” Trump.

The Mexican border wall fits into the underlying racism of U.S. culture. It is a “valve” that needs to be turned off or on as convenient for political purposes. It is also a valve for the many war vets to release their frustrations against a targeted ‘other’. Along with the veterans it allows many others to practice their rugged individualism as vigilantes along the border, expressing their racist white supremacism against groups of aliens created in the most part by U.S. imperial actions.

Trump’s new freedom is freedom from constraint, his cruelty and hedonism giving permission to many others to accept those actions and also to practice them.

Still more frontiers.

While Grandin focuses on the image of the Mexican border wall as a sign of the closure of the frontier, he does not delve into contemporary U.S. military actions around the world. The imperial frontier is faltering in many respects as events in Ukraine, and Syria, and the failure of past actions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya have well demonstrated. But it is still there, perhaps more as bluster and rhetoric as witnessed with Venezuela than a true frontier, a rhetorical ideological rant to redirect domestic concerns and attempt to somehow keep the empire alive and its frontiers still an active zone.

The strength of *The End of the Myth* is that it does not take any imagination to extend the myth into other areas of U.S. foreign policy. Grandin has explored the myth very effectively, highlighting the idea of frontier as it changed over time, leaving us with Trump as the ultimate characterization of the state of the union at this point in time. A fascinating work, it defines the psychological/mythical constructs of the U.S. imperial mind very well.

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