

Original Paper

Turner's Frontier Doctrine and Its Impact on American Politics

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Abstract

*Frederick Jackson Turner, a prominent American historian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, published *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* in 1893, which received widespread attention after its publication, creating the Frontier School, which dominated American history for more than four decades. Turner's "frontier doctrine" was informed by an expansionist ideology that profoundly influenced the governing philosophy of American dignitaries and the expansionist policies pursued by the United States.*

Keywords

Frederick Jackson Turner, frontier doctrine, American politics, expansionism, governing philosophy

Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) was a famous American historian who was born in Portage, Wisconsin. This was a place where Indians and pioneers lived in mixed communities, and it was here that Turner saw the pioneers make their fortunes on the American frontier. At the end of the 19th century, at the end of the Westward Movement, Turner presented "The Importance of the Frontier in American History" at the annual meeting of the American Association, in which, in a departure from the traditional view of American history, Turner stressed the importance of the frontier and the Westward Movement, causing a great deal of reaction in American historiography and dominating it for more than 40 years.

1. Context of Frontier Doctrine

The frontier is a multifaceted, emotionally charged, and contested term in American socio-political discourse. (Waechter, 2019, p. 12) In the late 18th century, the United States began a westward

movement of territorial expansion, with a steady flow of people from the east heading west. Through the expansion of the westward movement, the United States gradually extended its territory to the Pacific coast and the role of the “frontier” grew. The Second Industrial Revolution led to a major increase in productivity in the United States, with marked advances in production methods and production technology. The expansion of territory and the increase in population in the West expanded the domestic market for the United States, and the increased production of crops not only provided for domestic use, but also more than half for export, contributing to the growth of the American economy.

1.1 Westward Movement

At the end of the 18th century the United States embarked on a westward movement and continued to expand to the west. “Through migration, settlement and development of the West, Americans of many ethnicities formed a common economy in the West. ... Until now, much of American history can be described as the history of the colonization of the Great West.” (Yang, 1984, p. 3) As can be seen, as a result of the westward movement, the United States continued to expand its territory. For the US economy, the growth of the western economy has led to an expansion of the domestic market. The West became an integral part of the United States as crops were grown in large numbers in the West and industries from the East began to move there.

The development of the West drove the development of American society and had a profound impact not only on the politics and economy of the United States at the time, but also played a pivotal role in the development of American history as a whole.

At the end of the westward movement at the end of the 19th century, the role of the west became increasingly important. The idea that the frontier contributed to the development of American history is also reordered in Turner’s published article. The end of the Westward Movement led to a gradual decline in “terra nullius”, a phenomenon that created a certain amount of land anxiety in the United States. Turner published his acclaimed essay. The Importance of the Frontier in American History at this time, which was a powerful response to social anxiety.

Turner’s frontier theory, with its emphasis on cheap western land and abundant economic opportunities, has captured the popular imagination more than any other comprehensive explanation of how the American national character was formed (Ford, 1993, p. 156). As the US economy grew and the westward movement came to an end, the US needed a wider market and Turner’s “frontier doctrine” met the needs of the US to expand abroad. So it was not only supported by the public, it was also given full play as a theoretical basis and a tool of public opinion for American foreign expansion.

1.2 The Second Industrial Revolution

In the 1870s and 1880s, the second industrial revolution was in full swing. It was marked by the invention and application of electricity and its rapid expansion into all areas of production. And the first and second industrial revolutions in the United States were almost linked, both of which gave the United States a leading position in terms of productivity and production technology. The US economy has also entered a period of rapid growth.

During the course of the Westward Movement, the US government used coercive means such as forced purchase, bullying and war plunder. The United States took possession of the British and French colonies in America and a large amount of land in Mexico. "In 1900, the United States produced 16.32 million tonnes of wheat, 23% of the world's total, making it the largest wheat exporter; corn production was 68.58 million tonnes and cotton production was 2.17 million tonnes, most of both for export." (Chi Wencen, 1998, p.14) The United States could not have achieved such proud success in western agriculture without the facilities brought about by the Second Industrial Revolution.

At the same time the boom in agricultural production led to the development and improvement of transport in the west. "In 1850 its railway line was already 9,021 miles long, making it the longest in the world." (Chi, 1998, p. 18) The development and improvement of transport has led to closer and closer contact between the east and west, a narrowing of the economic gap between the east and west and an increasingly rational division of labor between the east and west.

In summary, it can be seen that the Westward Movement provided the conditions for the development of the frontier doctrine and that the Second Industrial Revolution led to the economic development of the West. And this was a period of transition from American capitalism to imperialism, with a small domestic market and increased class tensions, and the need to explore overseas markets and sources of raw materials. Faced with the realities and social tensions of the time, many scholars began to appreciate the importance of the "frontier".

2. Role of Frontier Doctrine

In 1893, Turner published *The Importance of the Frontier to American History*. In his article, he analyses the 1890 census and suggests that 'the history of the United States is the history of frontier change'. In his article, Turner suggests that "until now, much of American history can be said to be the history of the colonization of the Great West." (Frederick, 1961, p. 34) In the following decades, Turner published intermittent articles and monographs on the subject, resulting in a more systematic "frontier doctrine". The three main claims are as follows.

2.1 Frontier Colonization for the Improvement of American Democracy

The Westward Movement extended the boundaries of the United States to the Pacific coast, and the expansion was conducive to the establishment and improvement of democratic politics. The development of the West provided economic support for the development of American democracy and contributed to its refinement. The concept of democratic politics was raised and the spirit of freedom and democracy became an integral part of the development of American society.

Turner argues that the frontier had an indelible influence on the formation of American democracy. "The most important influence of the frontier, however, was in the development of democracy in the United States and Europe, and from the time the United States encouraged migration from the East to the West, the frontier has exerted a steady influence on democracy." (Frederick, 1961, p. 36) Therefore, we can explore the impact of the frontier on American democracy in the following ways.

Firstly, the creation of new states in the West became the perfect place to experiment with democracy in the United States. The creation of new frontier states created opportunities for political experimentation, and the newly developed West was more receptive to democratic institutions than the entrenched ideas of the East.

Secondly, because of the expansion of the frontier, the population of the United States rose and many social realities ensued, all of which made building a democracy increasingly important. The newly created states on the frontier attracted immigrants from the east through the expansion of democratic rights, and the east needed to improve its democratic institutions in order to maintain their political supremacy. This is why Turner suggests that the “frontier” is the birthplace of American democracy.

2.2 Management of the Frontier Maintains the Stability of the US Federation

After the establishment of the United States of America, the powers of the US federal government continued to expand. With the completion of the westward movement and the expansion of the frontier, the frontier increasingly needed the support of the federal government. Turner argues that the frontier contributed to the increased power of the US federal government.

Firstly, the settlers to the west needed to acquire land from the Indians. In one war after another, the Indians were plundered of their lands and driven from their original homes. So the frontiersmen who colonized the west from the east needed the support of the federal government to drive the Indians out through a series of wars. These have led to an increase in the status of the federal government.

Secondly, the rapid development of the west at that time could not have been achieved without the gradual improvement of the transport network. The industrial and agricultural products of the West need roads, railways and ships to get them out. The construction of a railway linking the east and west was not enough for the states alone, so it was necessary for the federal government to coordinate with the states and to allocate funds to help. In the process, the federal government not only gained in status, but also used state-to-state conflicts to nationalize the land.

2.3 Frontier Exploitation Leads to Cultural Diversity across America

Turner encapsulates the frontier spirit of the American people.

First and foremost is the spirit of courageous conquest and initiative. The colonists expanded and developed the western region with a courageous and enterprising spirit. Self-reliance became a symbol of the frontier regions of the time. On the frontier, all the inhabitants of the frontier have to overcome the challenges of survival. They build houses using the most natural materials and try to survive in the face of the harsh and inhospitable conditions of the West. This spirit of self-reliance has driven the spirit of innovation and enriched the culture and character of the United States.

The second is the individualism of the frontiersmen. The “frontier” represents freedom in the American mind, and when the frontier was first developed, it was less fettered by the Union and the State. This is why Turner believes that the frontier brings with it an identity that “highlights individualism and a love of freedom”. (Frederick, 1961, p. 41) During this period, “freedom” was given high priority. Because the legal and political institutions were not yet well established in the new frontier, the political

constraints of the east had less impact on the new frontier. To this day, Americans will refer to the “frontier” as a symbol of freedom and democracy.

The end of the Westward Movement saw the disappearance of “terra nullius”. The rapid expansion of the United States stopped, and the surging waves of immigration subsided. But the “frontier” spirit to which Turner referred became a hallmark of the American nation, inspiring Americans to be challenging, aggressive, optimistic and courageous.

3. Impact of Frontier Doctrine

Turner was the founder of the frontier school, and his “frontier doctrine” has been a key part of American history and has influenced the philosophy of American politicians. In particular, the expansionist ideas underlying Turner’s “frontier doctrine” continued to influence US foreign policy. The Frontier Doctrine had a profound impact on American politicians and was shared by the American public, which in turn influenced the formulation and implementation of American political policy.

3.1 Turner’s “Frontier Doctrine” Contributed to the Improvement of American Democracy

In *On American Democracy*, the American historian Alexis de Tocqueville put forward the “American Exceptionalism”, highlighting the advantages of American democracy as distinct from that of Europe and emphasizing the spirit of American liberal democracy. The introduction of the Turnerian frontier theory added new evidence to the exceptionalism theory.

The American historian John Higham has said, “The Turner Doctrine...wants historians to turn their attention...to the search for the meaning of American history in the activities of ordinary civilians.” (Hurtado, 2012, p. 17) It emphasizes that the history of American colonization has created the spirit of American freedom and democracy. Turner also suggests that “democracy learned to deal with huge problems in the West, whereas the old historical democracy could only be implemented in small countries under primitive economic conditions.” (Frederick Jackson Turner, 1961, p. 90) The opening up of the frontier created the opportunity to improve the democratic system.

3.2 The Influence of Turner’s “frontier doctrine” on the American Public and American Dignitaries

Turner’s “frontier doctrine” was supported by public opinion at the time and had a profound impact on many American dignitaries. The spirit of the Frontier is one of challenge, courage and fear. This spirit represents the American nation. And many literary works and films have been produced to promote this ‘frontier’ spirit through the media such as newspapers, radio and film. As a result, the concept of the ‘frontier’ was embraced by a large number of Americans. The “frontier” became a synonym for American civilization.

Turner’s frontier theory was adapted to the context of American development and was well received by the American public. The “frontier doctrine” has been widely welcomed since its inception. So much so that the American public “accepted his doctrine as soon as they read the newspapers”. (Hayes, 1946, p. 207) And successive US presidents would draw directly on Turner’s theories in their political mobilizations and in their political campaigns. This rapidly transformed Turner’s theory of the frontier

from an academic theoretical discourse to a political one.

US President Theodore Roosevelt had a close association with Turner and the scholars of the Frontier School. He had a very strong interest in frontier theory. While he was still a historian, Turner published *The Importance of the Frontier in American History*. His approval of Turner's theory of the frontier can be seen in his praise of Turner for 'summarizing a large body of ideas that have long been in vogue in a haphazard manner'. When he became president, he also had historians who supported the frontier doctrine on his unofficial staff, advising on policies, especially foreign policy. In a State of the Union address he borrowed directly from Turner's frontier doctrine "to use economic and military power to extend America's frontier westward into the Chinese interior." (Roosevelt, 2018, p. 45)

Turner's theories had a profound impact on both the political theory and political policy of US President Woodrow Wilson. In his later years, he admitted that his interpretation of American history "all came from Turner's mind". Wilson had been a student of Turner's and was influenced by Turner's theories in the course of his explorations. From the later direction of Wilson's research, Prior to 1893, Wilson's doctoral thesis was *The Congressional System of Government: A Study of American Politics*, that focus on political figures and governments. After that it was all about American history and American democracy. These views were influenced by elements of Turner's theory such as the relationship between the frontier and democracy.

In his article published in 1893, Turner suggested that the 1890 census report revealed the growing scarcity of unclaimed land after the general end of the westward movement, so the United States needed to find new frontiers to sustain economic and political development. In addition, Turner argued that "the flourishing of democracy depends on society providing sufficient economic opportunities for each individual". (Frederick, 1961, p. 23) This idea is also reflected in Wilson's Fourteen Point Plan. During his time in office, he worked for the development of American democracy and established good order in American foreign trade.

Turner, as mentioned above, emphasizes the importance of economic opportunity and economic development. This also had a strong influence on the New Deal introduced by Franklin Roosevelt. Turner's idea of America's frontier disappearing (referring to the diminishing amount of terra nullius in the United States) was the basis for the implementation of the National Industrial Recovery Act in Roosevelt's New Deal. As American socio-economic and foreign trade developed, Roosevelt increasingly endorsed Turner's frontier theory. As a result, Turner's theories were reflected in the political policies designated by the Roosevelt administration.

Based on the Westward Movement, a national group movement, Turner emphasizes the role of the people. Turner proposes that the "frontier" is good for the development of American democracy and government. It is because this doctrine has a high degree of acceptance among the public that it has been invoked by almost several subsequent US presidents in their election campaigns. Wilson included Turner's description of the spirit of the West in his presidential campaign speech, a speech that garnered him broad popular support. After World War II, Turner's theories declined in stature in

historiography, but had a profound impact on American politics.

3.3 The Influence of Turner's "Frontier Doctrine" on American Expansionist Policy

The history of territorial expansion in the United States shows that expansionist policies have been consistently implemented. When the United States first became independent the territory was only 13 states in size. After British recognition of American independence, the territory of the United States was only 30 per cent of what is now the United States. The United States expanded its territory to three times its previous size in just over a hundred years through the seizure of colonies from European countries and the westward movement. But as the westward movement largely came to an end, with less and less "terra nullius" and the frontier lines disappearing, America's land anxiety grew. In 1893 Turner proposed an answer to this question-expansion. In relation to expansion, Turner argues that "for nearly three centuries, expansion has dominated American life. ... All this suggests that the campaign will continue." (Yang, 1983, p. 68) It can be seen that expansionist policies have been one of the fundamental laws of the past, present and future development of the United States.

The transition of American capitalism to imperialism after the Second Industrial Revolution required a broader market. Turner's frontier doctrine was adapted to the social circumstances and governmental needs of the United States at the time and provided the theoretical basis for the expansionist policies of the United States.

Theodore Roosevelt is famous for his expansionist activities and expansionist rhetoric. He once said, "I am an expansionist, ... and I cannot fathom ... being anything other than an expansionist." (Roosevelt, 2018, p. 46) So he subscribes to Turner's theory of expansion. After the Westward Movement, the United States had taken control of the resources of the West at home to promote its further development. That is why the focus should be on the Far East after the 20th century, to participate in the world politics of the Pacific. After occupying Hawaii, the Philippines and Guam, the US set its next target on China.

Prior to the Spanish-American War, the United States and China were more of a commercial affair. At a time when China could provide the United States with a vast overseas market and source of raw materials, the United States began to orient its expansion towards China. By the time, the United States began to realise the importance of China, the Western powers were already dividing it up. The United States developed an "open door" strategy in the context of the situation. Through this policy, the United States could divide the benefits of China with other powers on an equal opportunity basis.

This policy was formulated with the aim of bringing greater benefits to the United States and was fully consistent with the expansionist policies of the United States. The implementation of the "Open Door" policy was a new beginning of American aggression against China and a "milestone" in the expansion of the United States in the Pacific. And after the next president, William H. Taft, came to power, he continued his expansionist policy and introduced the Golden Dollar foreign policy. He proposed "gold dollars instead of bullets" and an economic policy instead of a military one for the expansion of China and the Caribbean. The Golden Dollar policy was more effective in meeting the diplomatic needs of the

expanding United States, and opened up overseas markets for the rapid growth of the American economy. These policies are in line with Turner's statement that "the flourishing of democracy depends on society providing adequate economic opportunities for each individual." (Frederick Jackson Turner, 1961, p. 64)

Turner suggests that the decline in terra nullius created land anxiety in the United States, and that this land anxiety then prompted the United States to explore new frontiers. The United States thus began to develop a policy of overseas expansion, and Wilson agreed that the issue of land anxiety was an opportunity for the United States to strengthen its global expansion and begin to set its ambitions on the world.

After World War I, Wilson proposed the Fourteen-Point Plan in his speech to Congress. In the Fourteen Point Plan, Wilson demonstrated his ambition for world domination. He proposed the creation of the Versailles system with the United States at its center. The Fourteen Points Plan was also the basis for the formation of the Versailles system. This plan was also based on expansionist policies and had far-reaching implications for the future political landscape of the world. The Turnerian frontier doctrine promotes expansionist views and highlights the importance of economics to democracy. In Wilson's fourteen-point plan, economic policies such as the elimination of economic barriers were formulated. These political and economic policies embody Turner's theories. Turner's expansionism was reflected in all the foreign policies formulated by the Wilson administration. Wilson has been described as "the true archetype of the Turnerian democrat who pays his way". (Cronon, 1987, p. 169) Wilson's foreign policy was also known as "classic Turneries".

After the Second World War, Turner's frontier doctrine declined in stature in American historiography. But it continues to have a profound influence on American politics, providing a theoretical reference for foreign policy in the post-World War II period. The Truman Doctrine supposedly says that "the security and happiness of the United States depend on the continued fulfillment of America's unique mission to defend and extend 'the frontiers of democracy throughout the world'." (Ding, 1980, p. 23) This suggests a view of the US-led capitalist camp in the two-tier Cold War landscape as the US frontier.

Militarily, the US united with Europe and other countries to promote the US and European countries as an Atlantic community and to establish the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, at the same time the Marshall Plan was implemented economically. After the Second World War, Europe suffered heavy losses as the main theatre of war. The United States gives economic support to European countries. The Marshall Plan met the US need to control Europe, confront the Soviet Union and maintain hegemony. The expansionist perspective of Turner's theory has had a continuing influence on American politics in the light of the post-World War II policy of establishing a capitalist camp and pursuing an expansionist political, economic and military approach in the United States.

In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy proposed a new frontier policy. The name gives a sense of Kennedy's identification with frontier theory and expansionist policies. In his campaign speech, JFK affirmed the

Fourteen Point Plan implemented by Wilson after World War I and the political policies implemented by Roosevelt in World War II. He also proposed that the United States should continue its policy of expansion at the time and continue to open up new frontiers. Kennedy once said, "I call on all of you to go and be pioneers of the new frontier." (Reeves, 1994, p. 24) Kennedy's foreign policy continued an expansionist foreign policy, consolidating the capitalist camp and maintaining a strategy of hegemony. After the end of the Cold War, the United States has placed greater emphasis on the reorientation of its strategy in the Asia-Pacific region based on its consideration of global strategic interests. The strategy of offshore checks and balances began with the Bush administration. Bush Jr. began pursuing a strategy of checks and balances with China in the Asia-Pacific region. Based on its relative geopolitical isolation and strong national power, the US aims to maintain its hegemonic global dominance and weaken the influence of other countries. The strategy developed by the US was in part an endorsement of the expansionism of Turner's theory. Successive US administrations have drawn on policies that suit US needs when formulating their strategies, and the expansionary foreign policy formulated by George Bush Jr. had a strong influence on the Obama administration at the time. The Obama administration's rebalancing plan for the Asia-Pacific region remains essentially about taking a hegemonic position in the region and weakening China's power. Turner's expansionism satisfied the need for continued US expansion and maintenance of hegemony. The themes of today's world are peace and development, and so the drawing on theory must also be adapted to the times.

Turner has stated his view of history "Each age tries to form its own conception of the past. Each era rewrites the history of the past according to the issues that are most needed at the time." (Frederick Jackson Turner, 1961, p. 43) Indeed, in terms of the history of American expansion, it was in the specific historical context of the need for expansion that Turner's frontier theory was able to work and have some influence on American politics.

4. Conclusions

Turner's 'frontier doctrine' has dominated American historiography for more than forty years since its publication, and has had a profound impact that continues to attract much attention today. Turner's review of the development of American history over two hundred years before the twentieth century suggests that the history of the United States began in large part on the "frontier".

In this process of inheritance and transformation—the frontier areas have emerged and disappeared in succession—Americans have developed a special character characterized by strong individualism, pragmatism and egalitarianism. Thus, as a people, Americans fundamentally transformed themselves, established a commitment to democracy, escaped the dangers of class conflict and conquered an entire continent. In the 1890s the frontier disappeared and a new basis for American life had to be found somehow. (Kane, 1940, p. 391) He describes the importance of the frontier to American history, including its development as a catalyst for American democracy and the consolidation of federal power through frontier settlement. The expansionism embedded in the Frontier Doctrine became an important

principle in the political policies of later American dignitaries.

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