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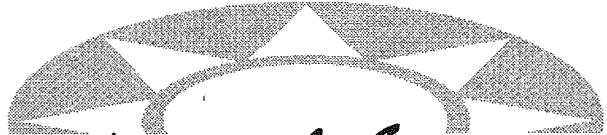
Article Summary: The Ric Burns documentary miniseries *The Way West* leads historians to ask two questions. How should we look on our frontier past? How should television portray the frontier heritage?

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Remarks at the Symposium
"THE WAY WEST"
Lincoln, Nebraska

By Robert M. Utley

Introduction

My role is not to critique the documentary, not to point out that the last spike in the Pacific Railroad was not driven on May 8, 1869, but May 10, not to dispute the particular spin Ric Burns has chosen to give to the various personalities, events, and themes that make up his story. That is for later, when I and the others on the panel and you in the audience will have a chance to pound on Ric if you want. Instead I have been asked to define some of the issues that I believe are raised by this documentary and to stimulate you to confront my issues or to inject into the discussion your own.

As background for my assignment, however, I should briefly make a few points about what this documentary is and is not. I may thus stray from strict neutrality into the realm of opinion, but it cannot be helped. It is a stunning collage of images, both landscape and his-

On May 6, 1995, the Nebraska State Historical Society served as host for a symposium related to the six-hour documentary miniseries "The Way West." Produced by Ric Burns and Lisa Aedes for The American Experience, a Public Broadcasting System series, "The Way West" chronicled the story of American westward expansion and the cultural conflicts it generated. Held prior to the series's airing, the symposium, subtitled "Cultures and Conflict," featured many of the subject matter specialists who appeared in the film. One was Robert M. Utley, former chief historian of the National Park Service, distinguished Western historian, and biographer of Billy the Kid, George Custer, and Sitting Bull. Utley's remarks, published here, served as the keynote for the day's presentations and discussions and effectively raised far more questions than could be adequately addressed in one day in that forum.—Editor

toric, expertly merged and edited to create a flow of visual and audible sensations of high excellence, revealing Ric as a producer of rare sensitivity and talent. It *is not* and does not pretend to be a comprehensive history of the American West as a region or of the frontier advance from Atlantic to Pacific or from Mexico north.

The title is "The Way West." The story addresses the white westward movement in the half century following the Mexican War of 1846-48, and it *is* as much about getting there as about what was done after getting there. It *is not* about all the ways west. It hardly touches on the southern transcontinental ways west, the ways across Mexico and the Isthmus of Panama, or the way around Cape Horn by ship. The emphasis is on the Platte Road that split into the Oregon and California trails and on the railroads that followed these routes. Thus the northern Great Plains overshadows other regions. It *is not* about all the things migrants did when they got there. Gold seekers and sodbusters predominate, while stockmen, merchants, timber cutters, and others are not very visible.

Whatever the original intent, the focus is increasingly on the conflict between white and Indian and decreasingly on the way west. Given the emphasis on the Platte Road, the story is largely of the conflict with the Indians of the central and northern Plains, most conspicuously the Sioux and Cheyenne. However circumscribed the story Ric chose to tell, I think his story captures most of the larger themes and raises most of the issues common to the entire

West. Thus the issues I identify may be viewed and discussed in the context of the entire westward movement, not just the Great Plains and their native inhabitants. They may also be viewed in the context not just of Ric's documentary, but of all the documentaries about the West now enjoying such exposure on television.

I see the issues we should tackle today as unfolding under two broad headings: historical interpretation and media interpretation. Under the first heading, how as a people—a people increasingly self-consciously multicultural—should we of this generation look on our frontier past? This issue dips deeply into the work of the so-called New Western historians, who with great zeal and certitude have kicked up a storm—a healthy storm, I believe—in the historical profession. Though shaped by the interpretations of the New Western historians, however, the resolution of this issue is not necessarily ordained by their thought. They have no monopoly on truth. Under the second heading, recognizing the wide popular impact of television and its power to plant graphic images in the minds of a huge lay audience, how should television portray the frontier heritage?

Historical Interpretation

It is a truism that each generation reinterprets its history. We are probably today in the early stages of the fourth generation since the passing of the frontier at the end of the nineteenth century. Each successive generation has placed somewhat different interpretations on the westward movement, but the differ-

The Way West



Two generations' view of the American West. The 1872 John Gast painting, *American Progress*, unapologetically endorsed Manifest Destiny, which took the guise of a lovely woman. Progress in the form of technology and settlement pushed onto the forces of nature, including the American Indian. Courtesy Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum



In contrast, John Anderson's photograph, "The Water Carrier," bespoke a wistful longing for the innocent days before the conquest of the West was completed. The photograph, taken about 1910, appeared in a book of poems written by the photographer's wife, Myrtle Miller Anderson. NSHS-PC40:2-303

ences between today's emerging perspective and the three that went before are profound, both in content and tone. Today's perspective, as did earlier perspectives, reflects contemporary attitudes, values, and conceptions of morality. I would offer several issues for your consideration that are central to today's perspective and that are embedded in Ric's presentation of "The Way West." With each we have two questions to address: Is the proposition historically valid? If so, how should we view it from the perspective of who we are as a people in 1995?

Why did whites go west in the decades after 1848?

An American dream. I list this motivation first because it was advanced and well articulated by several of the talking heads. Was there some kind of American dream that took form in the American mind, that featured the West as a

utopian land of opportunity, and that powered the westward movement? If so, should we today ridicule, celebrate, marvel at, or simply acknowledge the existence of an American dream?

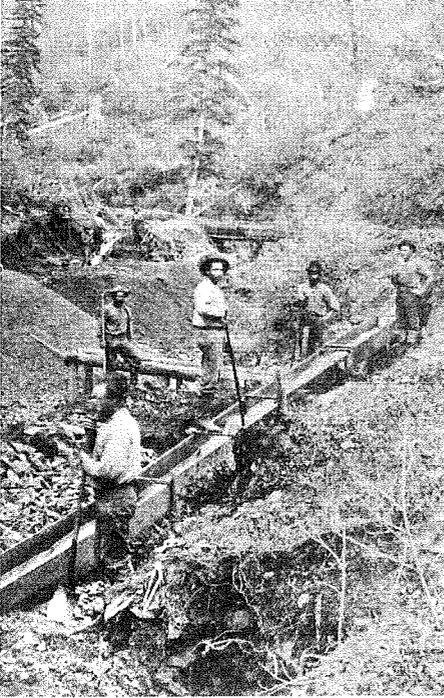
Manifest destiny. Did Americans go west because they truly believed it was the obvious destiny of the United States to overspread the continent and because the scriptures commanded them to subdue the wilderness and make it blossom with the fruits of industry? If so, should we today look on this motivation as an admirable expression of patriotic nationalism and a product of the intense evangelical fervor that swept the country in the 1830s? Or should we see it as a cynical rationalization of the impulse to exploit the supposed riches of the West?

Self-interest. Was the principal propellant of the westward movement economic self-interest, the hope of exploiting natural and human resources in

order to make a fortune or simply to improve one's lot in life? If so, should we now look on this motive as crass, selfish greed or just the commendable human ambition to seek a better life?

What were the consequences of the westward movement?

National character and identity. I list this consequence first because it is national in its implications and because Ian Frazier stated it so eloquently on film.¹ Did the western experience shape the character and identity of the American people? You will recognize this as a variant on Frederick Jackson Turner's unqualified declaration, "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development." If this is true, what traits



Two faces of the American character as shaped by the westering experience. The photograph entitled "Flumes in Black Hills, 1876, Claims No. 14 & 15 in Deadwood Gulch" (NSHS-B774-36) has gold-hungry miners despoiling nature in their lust for riches. The Solomon D. Butcher photograph of "G. B. Greenwood, Spencer Park, 6 miles east of Broken Bow, 1888" (NSHS-PC204-1388) suggests the occidental reverence for land ownership and agriculture.

of American character do we owe to our frontier heritage, and should we be proud or ashamed of them today? If this is not true, should we be actively repudiating the frontier heritage as a contributor to American identity?

Environment. Did westering Americans in their mad quest for riches inflict severe and in some instances irreparable damage on the western environment? Included as objects of exploitation are minerals, timber, grass, water, and soil. Included too are wildlife, such as bison, salmon, and birds and waterfowl. To be considered also is the environmental degradation incident to getting at the resources, such as the trauma to landscape and pollution of water incident to mining and the loss of topsoil incident to stripping the plains sod for farming. If so, do we today celebrate our forebears for their enterprise and industry and regard their actions as an acceptable price for economic development, what we would now call "job creation?" Or do we damn these looters and ravagers of the land and make every effort to repair their damage and

see that it does not happen again? (This question, of course, is not without relevance at this very moment in the Congress of Newt Gingrich.)

Indians. I have saved the Indians for last, both because the issue is more complex and ambiguous and because it is a central theme running throughout Ric's film. I would like to handle this issue by framing the consequence as a statement rather than a question and then directing questions at the process that led to the consequence.

In short, and doubtless oversimplified, the white westward movement shrank the Indian land and subsistence base beyond that essential for the traditional way of life. That made the Indians dependent on the whites and subject to their control. That also destroyed most of what made the old culture viable and inaugurated a period of cultural demoralization and breakdown. A new culture began to unfold, descendant from the old but adaptive to new realities, a process continuing today. That consequence for the Indians poisoned relations between Indians and whites. In

today's setting the poison fuels among Indians outrage, resentment, and demands for restitution, and among whites a gnawing sense of guilt.

Three elements of the process producing the consequence are emphasized in Ric's film, and each may be seen as an issue. These are: military, the wars between the U.S. Army and the Indians; civil, the policies and programs of the U.S. government relating to Indians; and public, the attitudes and actions toward Indians of white settlers themselves and the larger body politic from which they came.

Did the army wage brutal and inhuman warfare on the Indians, warfare inconsistent with the prevailing morality of war and falling with special force on noncombatants? If so, ought we today to single out the frontier army as a force of butchers staining the honorable military heritage of the nation? And if so, ought we to mitigate the offense by holding up the Indian style of war as even more brutal, inhuman, and indiscriminate of noncombatants? If not, ought we celebrate the frontier army for

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doing a tough job under crippling political constraints against an enemy that fought by rules alien to orthodox military thought?

We can divide the civil process into two major stages: diplomatic, before the collapse of Indian resistance; and managerial, after confinement to reservations.

Were treaties deliberately employed by federal officials as a tool for deceiving and defrauding the Indians? If so, should the federal Indian bureaucracy—including the president, who ratified, the Senate, which advised and consented, and the House, which appropriated—be castigated as acting with cynically dishonest intent? If not, can the treaty be seen today as an inappropriate mechanism for regulating rela-

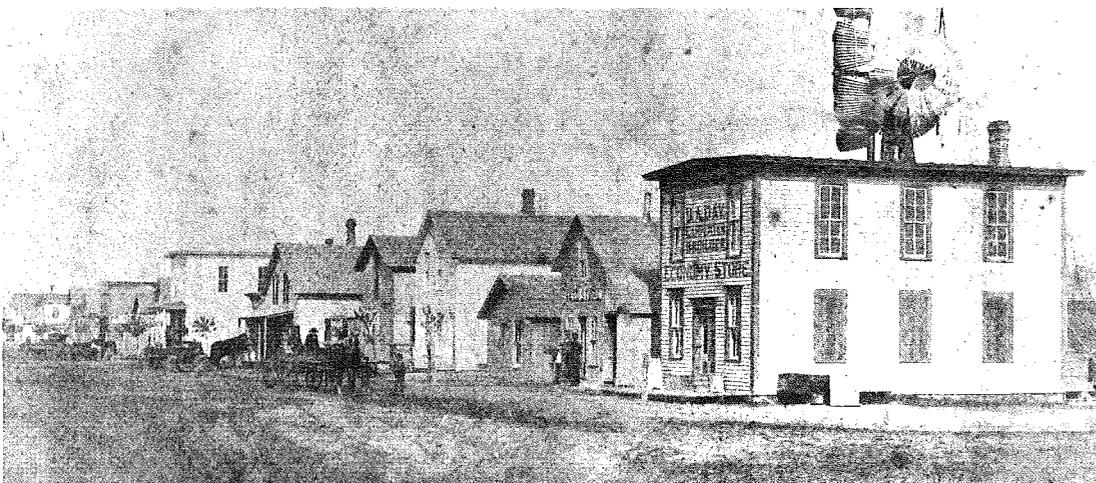
tions between races, the dominant of which controlled the process, the subordinate of which had political traditions and organization unsuited to the process?

Were reservations forerunners of concentration camps, warehousing Indians, subjecting them to the tyranny of corrupt and incompetent overlords, and providing sealed laboratories for the experiments of social engineers who sought to transform them into imitation whites? If so, should we look back with shame on policy makers and managers who inflicted such devastating social and cultural consequences on the victims? And if so, should we instead, or in addition, credit as honorable and humane the intentions of those who

drafted the blueprint and those who put it into effect, however misguided the process and however calamitous the consequences?

White Americans, not only those of the public who immigrated but all those who voted, are the final element in the process—and finally the most decisive. They, not the army or the treaty makers, demanded of their government the policies that constricted the land base and the subsistence base and left the Indians no alternative but submission. There are many issues implicit in this heading, but I will offer only three.

Did any significant portion of the American public or their political and military leaders ever advocate extermination of the Indians? If so, should that



An Indian village purportedly near Fort Laramie (NSHS-R539:7-7), and the main street of Gibbon, Nebraska, (NSHS-B930:1-7) serve as fitting metaphors for the fundamental differences between the native and Euroamerican cultures. The circular, mobile, seemingly randomly arranged dwellings of the native village stand in stark contrast to the rigidly linear, square, and geographically fixed structures of the western town.

horror be openly acknowledged and accepted as a terrible blot on American history? If not, should such inflammatory terminology as “extermination” and especially “genocide” be tolerated as part of the characterization of white treatment of the Indians? But also if not, should modern interpretations recognize the extinction of a culture—cultural genocide—as the explicit aim of U.S. Indian policy?

Did white settlers bring to the West a conception of land ownership and use alien to Indian thought and incompatible with the Indian way of life? If so, how severely should we condemn whites for imposing their own notions of property on the Indian land ethic?

Did the westward movement of Ric’s film proceed in a manner that is repugnant to today’s morality? If so, should we condemn Americans for going west at all, crowding the Indians, consuming

the resources on which they depended, appropriating their land, and forming the voting constituencies that governed both the military and civil arms of government? And if we lay on this condemnation, how would we have reprogrammed these people to do something different and what?

Media Interpretation and Conclusion

My second broad heading springs from the enormous power of the television medium to shape the thought of a large portion of the public. Here I leave you with two brief questions. Should the power of television be used to drive deep into the public consciousness the modern stereotypes of the past, easily understood and retained because they present unqualified verities, feature heroes and villains, and reinforce images already planted? Or should the power of

television be diluted by casting history in terms of life, confusing, ambivalent, contradictory, ambiguous, and with no certain grounds for recognizing hero and villain, good and bad, moral and immoral?

Finally, I leave you with this. Are we warranted in singling out the westward movement as especially illustrative of the moral and interpretive issues we are discussing, or does not all human history in which one group confronts another raise these issues in one form or another?

Notes

¹ Ian Frazier’s observation appears in the first episode, “Westward, the Course of Empire Takes Its Way, 1845-1864”: “[T]he West is the laboratory of identity for Americans. This is the place where we became a people unlike the people we were in Europe. This is the place where we became mythic in our own minds.”