

Frontier Theory and the Omission of Native Americans

by

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The purpose of this paper is to highlight the issues and implications of Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Theory" proposed at the 1893 World Fair, and research the long-term effects that this theory has carried into the modern century. Through content analysis, this paper will examine the role that Native Americans currently and historically have in American Textbooks and literature, as well as the differential treatment of Native Americans at the hands of this thesis. This paper will examine the retelling of American history and the United States' involvement with Native American tribes during the expansion of the nation. This paper will use this content analysis to effectively describe and detail the aftermath of Turner's assertion, and if the Frontier Thesis played a role in scrubbing Native American contributions from the face of United States history.

The principle to which my paper is being based upon is the Frontier Thesis, proposed by Frederick Jackson Turner at the 1893 Chicago World Fair. Turner proposed that the establishment of American democracy and the continued settlement of the United States was spurred by the conquering of the wild frontier. This lends to the belief that America was forged on the backs of pioneers and settlers heading west, ultimately conquering the rest of the continent in a campaign fueled by Manifest Destiny and the taming of the 'Wild West'. Consequently however, this attributed to the history of the United States bearing an ethnocentric focus on white males, and often skipping over contributions made by minorities, especially Native Americans. It also unintentionally helped reform lower schools of education to often omit significant Native American events in history, aside from those directly dealt out by the United States such as the Indian Removal Act or the continued conflict between U.S. military forces and Native Americans during the Indian Wars. This paper will examine reference material to see if Turner's

assertion has carried true to the world of academia, and if Native Americans have gotten fair representation in the text, or have become the victim of ‘whitewashing’.

My own motivation for researching this topic stems from my initial reading of *Empire of the Summer Moon*, by S. C. Gwynne. Upon reading the novel, it became apparent to me at the time how often high school level textbooks often gloss over any significant mentions of Native Americans in the scope of United States history. At the time, I went to the high school resources that had been made available to me and analyzed the textbook to find much of Native American history in relation to the United States often omitted, which to me was a startling result. This paper, in essence, will serve to see if college textbooks omit non-white contributions as much as high school text books did. I’ll also be taking a look at various editions of *America: A Narrative History*, an entry level U.S. History college textbook, to see how the treatment of Native Americans in the text have changed over time, and what events may have been added, or even what may have been omitted at a later date.

I’d like to start with a brief review of the reference material and readings that I had initially compiled while preparing for this paper. The initial scope of this paper was much larger, encompassing the entire history of relations between Europeans (later Americans) with the Native Americans of the North American continent. Upon analysis of the content, I realized that such a paper would take much longer than the project had allocated, and settled on the topic regarding the Frontier Thesis. The literary resources to follow are what helped contribute to narrowing down my topic, as well as a brief summary of how Native American relations have played out with colonialists and the newly formed United States of America.

The long standing intertwined history present between European descendants and Native Americans has often been marred by retellings and revisions to either suit the agenda of those writing history or to gloss over the rougher patches. Much of what has been told regarding the conflicts of Native Americans and the United States has fallen victim to revisionist history or the consequential influence of popular media and culture. Movies and books often portrayed American Indians as war mongering savages who set off to war at a moment's notice, or as a dim-witted, uncultured sub-human. These ideas unfortunately held standing in American culture, and helped perpetuate stereotypes regarding the lives of the American Indians and the scrutiny they would fall victim to.

S. C. Gwynne writes and details much of the Comanche culture and lifestyle in *Empire of the Summer Moon* (2010). Gwynne provides insight and explanations to offer a greater understanding of the most dominant Native American tribe in the United States who had cut out an empire that ranged from the Dakotas down to South Texas, and goes in depth to highlight the Comanche's interactions with Americans encroaching on their frontier. Gwynne provides historical context to the Comanche's actions as well, detailing a short explication of the political situation in the Republic of Texas and the expanding United States that was beginning its first foray into the Great Plains amidst the rolling plains filled to the brim with buffalo and the mounted Native warriors that controlled those plains. *Empire of the Summer Moon* also details personal accounts of white settlers who had witnessed the actions of the Comanches first hand, particularly Cynthia Ann Parker and her early abduction as a young child by a Comanche war band. While chronologically this is considered one of the later and more recent periods regarding American interaction with roaming Native American tribes, it stands as a testament to the will of the Comanche tribe, and how such a powerful and feared force would eventually crumble as the

borders of Comancheria shrank day by day. It also details Quanah Parker's role in Native activism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite the efforts often being snuffed out by federal opposition.

In Kevin Kokomoor's writings, we see the early development of relations between the Native Tribes of North America and the United States in its infancy. While relationships with the Natives had for the most part been strained since the outbreak of the French and Indian War, the United States and leaders of the Creek tribe felt that a mutual coexistence would be a beneficial option for both parties (2015). The United States federal government sought to at least mitigate violence that had already broken out along the frontier of the Appalachians, mainly stemming from land claim conflicts in Georgia between American settlers and the Creek tribes that resided there. Kokomoor also writes how early treaties involving the Creeks had created in-fighting and dissent within the tribe itself, as the chiefs and headmen who had signed the treaties years prior were not in representation of the full voice of the Creek, despite the fact that the U.S. federal government treated them as such.

This provides detailing into Native political culture and what their interests were. Kokomoor also details early on that at that time, the United States was interested more in stability and security rather than land expansion, and hoped to prevent the Georgian delegates from sucking the rest of the U.S. into a regional territory war. This journal also provides heavy insight to the period attitude regarding Native tribes on the frontier of an early American nation, and how much of a far cry those attitudes were from those of centuries following. Kokomoor makes apparent the Federalist idea of coexistence between the United States and the Creek tribes, and compares this ideal with the history of documented and detailed maltreatment of American Indians in the years following. He also makes a point to emphasize that this was a

shining of example of the federal government opting to protect Native interests from the reach of U.S. citizens rather than working to coerce the land away from the Creeks for the benefit of the state.

John Munro, in his paper detailed the interwoven economic history between American Indian tribes and the early years of the United States, explains how U.S. economists and historians often suffer a case of “amnesia” regarding the early issues with Natives and the role that they played in forging the U.S. economy (2014). Munro begins by detailing the sentiment that American culture held in regard to the expansion of the American frontier to the West coast, and how a thesis presented by Frederick Jackson Turner brought forth the idea that the United States itself was forged by the will of Americans pushing westward. Turner’s thesis also deals heavily with ethnocentrism, and for the most part deprives any credit from American Indians for the part that they played in American history and the expansion of the nation upon conquering the frontier. Munro explains that even respected members of the historical community who came after Turner would often gloss over the roles that Native Americans held, providing a revised, westernized, and at times romanticized look at America’s views of the “wild west”. Munro often references Alexandra Harmon, Colleen O’Neill, and Paul Rosier in his writings, citing their paper regarding the intertwined history of Indigenous American Indians and the expansion of the United States. Harmon et al. point out that prior to an expansive growth in Native American activism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of American scholars removed American Indians from the equation, often giving way to the subtle pervasiveness that white supremacy facilitated, as well as the unknown influence that Turner’s original thesis had in effectively scrubbing Native influence from the American frontier altogether as if Turner celebrated it. Munro details how the political activism of Native tribes in the 60’s and 70’s provided the first influx of scholars who

looked at the jaded and one sided white retelling of America's founding, providing new and previously unmentioned Native perspectives and influences that American Indians played in establishing the United States.

Joaquin Rivaya-Martinez of Texas State University provides insight and explication of the decline of Native Indian tribes from as early as Columbus' original landing in the Caribbean towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly once again with the Comanches. Martinez states that much of what caused the population decline of Comanche tribes should be attributed to the fact that Comanche war raids provided more casualties than they yielded slaves or workers or horses. Martinez also contends that these findings provide a previously unexplored facet to the history of the Comanches, and attributes the tribe's decline and "domestication" to the spread of major disease outbreaks and open warfare with Americans at the fringe of Comancheria (2014). Martinez details the numerous outbreaks of smallpox and cholera that occurred within the Comanche population, effectively wiping out the Comanche's power and slating their population from that of around twenty thousand to barely two thousand towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Martinez also contributes the Comanche decline to their focus on horses and horse breeding rather than the stabilization of their own population, as well as the state of perpetual warfare that the tribe tended to be in with its neighbors.

C.L. Higham writes regarding Turner specifically, highlighting the fact that Turner's Frontier Thesis helped forge an attitude regarding the west and how it is viewed through a contemporary lens. Higham details how Turner's theories have continually been fostered over the years, despite many attempts to disprove what Turner proposed by countless critics. Higham talks regarding Turner's reputation of a writer on the West, and how those who have attempted to rid the world of his theories have often failed in their ventures (1995).

It was in part because of both Highham's writings and Munro's that helped me finally nail down the scope of my topic, and establish the foundation that I would be writing about. Turner provides an interesting perspective on how to view United States history, and it is from this perspective that I believe has fostered an attitude of omitting those not deemed significant to United States history. In Turner's case, this would be Native Americans and minorities.

The first reference material we will be analyzing is the 5<sup>th</sup> Edition of *America: A Narrative History, Volume II* by Tindall and Shi, originally published in 1999. This will serve as a bit of insight to how college textbooks treated Native Americans on the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and how following editions have changed over time. According to the text, the first mention of Native Americans in the text is in reference to controversy regarding the corruption of Ulysses S. Grant's cabinet during his term as president. Even then, they are not directly referenced as Native Americans, but rather 'Indians'. The next recurring mentions of Native Americans deal primarily with their interactions with white settlers, particularly their obstruction to the expansion of the railroad, the military conquest of warring tribes by government forces, and the stark contrast they provided to the farmers and sodbusters who ventured out along the frontier. They are infrequently mentioned in a broader context, often serving nothing more as a disregarded context to some seemingly more pertinent issue.

The first significant mention of Native Americans comes on page 658, regarding the Indian wars that raged on in the west as the United States continued to encroach on Native lands. The reference text details the meeting of tribal leaders at Fort Laramie in 1851, where the tribes had "agreed to accept more or less definite tribal borders and to leave the emigrants unmolested on their trails" (658). The text goes on to reference the continued conflicts that plagued the west during the post-Civil War era as violence between whites and Native Americans escalated due to

encroachment by emigrants moving into Native lands, particularly the Sioux. The text, however, doesn't paint the story as one sided. It mentions the slaughter of natives who had been flying a white flag at a camp along Sand Creek in Colorado that was perpetrated by Colonel J. M. Chivington and his men. It recounts a general's testimony who claimed the Sand Creek Massacre was the "foulest and most unjustifiable crime in the annals of America" (659). This is interesting to note as textbooks and other reference text have historically termed a Native American victory as a massacre, whereas a victory by whites was termed a battle.

Much of the text beyond this point references a few key points of the Indian Wars, events like Custer's campaign in the north, the decision of the U.S. government to move the remaining Native American tribes to reservations, and most notably the "battle" of Wounded Knee. Tindall and Shi detail the misjudgment by white soldiers and the resulting aftermath of the chaos that had ensued, and make a point to mention that the Indians had arrived with peaceful intentions before coming under fire (662). This is one of the few early mentions of Native Americans from a brief non-white perspective, or at least a more comprehensive look at the tribes in question rather than simply lumping them in as Indians. The next few sections deal with America's treatment of the Native Americans under the Indian Policy mandated by the government of the United States, and the whites' attempts to 'Americanize the natives through the Dawes Severalty Act (662). It details the continued encroachment and seizing of native land by the United States government, but from then on not much is to be said for quite some time. The next major mention of Native Americans comes in regard to the romanticized aspects of the 'Wild West', and in particular, Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows. Tindall and Shi describe the shows as prominently including Native Americans in the act, even renowned Native American chief Sitting Bull. According to the text, the natives "were always portrayed as the aggressors, and the

whites as the victims” (725). This short passage provides a bit of insight to the period, and the attitude frequently shared among white settlers regarding the natives. Regardless of whatever actual mannerisms the natives held, they were romanticized and painted as the war mongering savages that popular media and culture have made them out to be.

Much of the period following the Americanization of native tribes appears to be glossed over, with the next prominent mention of Native Americans being on page 964 and 965, describing how Native Americans were adversely impacted during the height of the Great Depression. The text relates that the commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs John Collier pushed for measures to be taken to alleviate the consequences caused by the Dawes Act of 1887. He sought to help change some of the poor living conditions of Native Americans and to give these tribes access to the programs that other Americans were receiving through the New Deal, as well as employing other natives in the service of the BIA. He also pushed for the Indian Reorganization Act, which would have overturned some of the actions carried out by the Dawes Act in an attempt to shoot new life into the culture and traditions to tribes to create a sense of unity among them (965). While Collier’s ambitions were intensely muddled by Congressional affairs, this is one of the first mentions of white Americans advocating for aid and rights for Native Americans.

The rest of the text scarcely mentions Native Americans at all. There is a few short passages regarding the roles that Native Americans played in World War II, particularly the Navajo code talkers, and the push and advocating for equal rights for Native Americans living in the United States. The reference material details the founding of AIM, or the American Indian Movement, and the birth of the ‘red power’ movement in the 1960’s. The natives fought vigorously to receive the same benefits that other Americans receive, ranging from the

occupational takeover of Alcatraz in 1969, or their sit in at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington D.C. in 1972 (1205). All of these events will serve as a general baseline for analysis moving forwards, as this is the present oldest edition in the literary selection for this paper. Now, we will compare the events detailed in the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the same textbook, published originally in 2007.

A time jump of nearly 10 years between the editions of the textbook that are present is quite a difference, but I believe that it will offer better insight to how the attitudes and ideas that are manifested in the 5<sup>th</sup> edition may have changed over time. The full 7<sup>th</sup> edition starts with a much more comprehensive covering of Native Americans in general, but since we are only using Volume II of the 5<sup>th</sup> edition as the baseline for the reference material, we will start with post-Civil War information. This should not, however, discredit the information presented prior to that point, as it offers a general idea of the scope that the reference material covers.

The first prominent mention of Native Americans in the 7<sup>th</sup> edition in the post-Civil War period is much the same as the 5<sup>th</sup> edition, regarding the Indian wars in the west, the Battle of Little Big Horn, and other significant conflicts that stretched all across the frontier. It is almost the same exact content from the previous edition, which is a good sign that information that was already present may not have been omitted or changed in favor of something else. The rest of the documented information in the first analysis is for the most part present in the form that it originally was, especially events regarding the treatment of Native Americans, the follies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the eventual progression into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One difference, however, is the mention of Native Americans being a part of Teddy Roosevelt's 'Rough Riders' during the Spanish-American War. It might seem like a passing mention at best, but I believe that the text went out of the way to mention that Native Americans rode with Teddy Roosevelt as

part of the Rough Riders is a significant accomplishment in itself (659). This is also the first mention in the reference text of Native Americans regarding the Spanish-American War.

The next mention of Native Americans comes in regard to the sprawl of American Industrialization, as Native American groups were displaced by federal authorities to make way for the railroad tycoons to build tracks to the new site of Yellowstone National Park. This is one of the few specific instances that land grabs by American whites is mentioned. The same passage also mentions the restrictions set by U.S. government officials that regulated the hunting of game, in the interest of well to do hunters and to the dismay of many others, particularly Native Americans. These two references are both prime examples in the text of the rights of Native Americans being infringed, a key point that Tindall and Shi make clear to emphasize (687).

From this point once again, there is little to no mention of Native Americans aside from the struggles and strife they faced in the midst of the Great Depression and their involvement in the Second World War, much as the 5<sup>th</sup> edition had already covered. The 7<sup>th</sup> also mentions the birth of the red power movement fostered by AIM, and for the most part hits on the same material almost verbatim. It should be noted that while a few additional mentions of government policy towards Native Americans was added, none of the information presented in the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the text appeared to be missing in the 7<sup>th</sup>. As of now, this contradicts my thesis that minor information may have been omitted from the text upon revisions or editing. The 7<sup>th</sup> edition, however, often continues the trend set by the 5<sup>th</sup> in rarely painting American whites as the aggressors aside from massacres perpetrated by government or military forces. Hopefully later editions will efficiently attempt to remove as much bias as possible from the records, but here's hoping.

The next batch of reference material we will be looking at is the 8<sup>th</sup> edition of Tindall and Shi's textbook, originally published in 2009. The time gap between this edition and the previous 7<sup>th</sup> is only two years, the general rotation that most college level textbooks in Texas are set at. This analysis will provide a glimpse at the changes that can be expected when entry level reference material switches to a fresh edition. The first notable difference is that in this textbook, Native Americans are referred to as "American Indians", more than likely making the language akin to what was present in the text of prior editions of the source material. This textbook also differs in that it has broken up many of the covered topics into subsections or other areas altogether, even going as far to detail a handful of individual tribes.

The reference material appears to hold all of the original information presented in the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the text, as well as the additions made in the 7<sup>th</sup>. It would appear that as the editions of the book progress onwards, the topics are starting to become more concise and nailed down rather than lumped into the general category of Native Americans. It's interesting to note that as time passes, these issues are getting a more focused spotlight rather than a mere passing comment. This is great, hopefully hints at the idea that Turner's thesis may not have contributed to Native American history getting scrubbed from the record books. Next up, the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of *America: A Narrative History*.

The 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the reference text, originally published in 2013, provides one of the most recent and up to date perspectives regarding Native Americans and the role they play in American History. On a personal note, this was the same textbook that I used when taking U.S. History during my years as a college freshman and sophomore.

Upon initial inspection, the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the reference text seems to contain all the information already presented in the prior editions of the book, taking leads from the previous edition in 2009 and separating some of the more specific topics into more concise, focused subsections rather than including them under the broad umbrella of Native American history in general. It should be noted however that despite the material being outside of the realm of the content this paper is analyzing, this edition includes one of the first mentions of Native American women in the reference text. It is simply a short mention in itself, but it still represents more the further progression of what parts of Native American history are being mentioned.

Next up is the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the reference text, which as of this writing, has yet to be officially published for entry level college courses to use. This would serve as the most recent publication of the source material that we are covering, and would provide a glimpse at what can be expected in near future versions of the text.

At first, glance, the 10<sup>th</sup> edition appears to be much of the same content that was already brought forward in the editions prior, editing little and leaving most of the original content and diction in place. A notable difference, however, is the fact that the 10<sup>th</sup> edition reverted back to the term Native Americans instead of American Indians, with the latter being a simple reference in the index to seek out the former. While it isn't necessarily groundbreaking change, it shows how little things such as the simple wording of certain terms or title can shift back and forth over the years, and in this instance, nearly 16 years of change between the first and last editions being analyzed.

For the most part, the findings of the experiment are quite a stark opposite to what was originally proposed by my thesis. While much of the text is not all encompassing, there is

substantial material that takes a comprehensive look at Native Americans and their relation to United States history. While it is true that some of the jargon and descriptions of certain events may be slanted in favor of one side or another, the later editions of the reference material attempt to present the information with equal representation of both parties, including their actions and faults. All in all however, there is very little of Native American history in the period covered that has been omitted or altogether erased from the history books.

In regards to a general comparison across the various editions, and as expected, the later editions of the source text seemed to look at Native Americans more comprehensively than the first few editions. Earlier texts lumped most of Native American history under one umbrella, but as time progressed, the topics themselves were looked at through various lenses and how they impacted the nation around them, sending them off or letting them drift into other fields of work and other topics pertaining to the discussion. It is, in essence, a good evolution of distancing Native American history from that of the United States and gradually bringing it into the fold.

Regarding my own thoughts of the results, I can say that I am genuinely and happily surprised. As someone with partial Native American descent, it is thrilling to see all of these events and accounts that were generally scrubbed from high school textbooks openly available to entry level students. It also manages to disprove, or at least go against, my initial assertion that Turner's Frontier Thesis had managed to influence education enough to wash Native American influence from the slate, but it appears that is certainly not the case. True, there is still a long way to go in regards to fair representation of both parties in events stretching further back than the time period covered. It is also true that the information not covered in this paper may have been altered more than we can imagine, or it may be even more comprehensive than later events in Native American history. For me, only one question remains. What steps can we take in the

future, or even today, that can help in broadening the scope of a shared history between the United States and its Native American inhabitants, and to bring equal and fair representation to all parties involved?

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