

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXII-2

Greg Grandin. *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America.* New York: Metropolitan Books: Henry Holt and Company, 2019. ISBN: 9781250179821 (hardcover, \$30.00).

14 September 2020 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT22-2>

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 INTRODUCTION BY DANIEL IMMERWAHR, NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Greg Grandin, who was originally a historian of Guatemala, has become a leading chronicler of the history of the Americas. He won the vaunted Bancroft Prize in American History, and he has twice been a finalist for the National Book Award. The second time was for his most recent book, *The End of the Myth*, the subject of this roundtable, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction.¹

In it, Grandin updates the long-familiar ‘frontier thesis’ of the historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Like Turner, Grandin believes that the frontier acted as a safety valve in the nineteenth century, relieving social pressures within the expanding United States even as it wrought great violence at the periphery.² But whereas Turner held that the frontier closed in the 1890s, Grandin argues that it continued in new forms, including military adventures and economic expansion abroad. By and large, Grandin argues, this worked. With some noted exceptions, the frontier continued to operate as a safety valve through the twentieth century. But the United States could not forever flee its internal social problems, and the recession that began in 2007–2008 marked the expiration of frontier orientation. This ‘end of the myth’ brought with it a new spatial order, that of border, in which the racial violence that had previously been aimed outward was “turned inward,” on the United States’ own territory (7). Grandin, however, urges another solution: the establishment of a racially inclusive social democracy—a configuration that the United States, via the frontier, had evaded for more than a century.

Grandin’s sweeping history is, the reviewers affirm, a well-turned and important one. They praise particularly his eye for detail and his evocative discussion of frontier violence. It is a “timely” work” (writes Lloyd Gardner); a “passionately argued, powerful book” (Amy Offner); an “engaging, necessary, and provocative book” (Daniel Sargent); and a “lively historical narrative embellished with many well-chosen quotations and out-of-the-way details” (John A. Thompson).

The chief attraction of Grandin’s book is that it offers an interpretive frame for U.S. history, just as Frederick Jackson Turner’s paper once did. That has made this H-Diplo roundtable something more than just a series of praiseful assessments and minor quibbles. The reviewers have taken Grandin’s ambitious hypothesis seriously, and they have asked important questions about it. I will highlight three that arise in multiple reviews.

First is the causal mechanism. Grandin has a clear story about how the frontier operated in the nineteenth century: the rapid westward march of the U.S. border and the violent dispossession of original inhabitants provided cheap land to whites, which in turn helped protect the United States from the painful contradictions of its industrializing economy. But after the frontier mutated into other, non-land-based forms, how exactly did it relieve social pressures? Grandin highlights military interventions as providing jobs to working-class men, but Thompson objects that the armed forces were a very minor source of employment between 1890 and 1941—in 1939, only 0.25% of the populace held military jobs. One might think that international trade served as an economic safety valve but, as Sargent notes, U.S. industrial prosperity was striking for how little it depended, relative to peer countries, on exports during the time of high U.S. hegemony. What is more, Sargent continues, the foreign wars of the post-1945 era do not appear to have acted as an economic balm, because the era of enlarged U.S. military intervention was also one of a “prolonged economic decline” relative to other advanced capitalist economies. Given all this, how could war and the conquest of foreign markets have served as safety valves in the post-1890 period? This is the question Thompson and Sargent ask.

That question about the operation of the frontier in the twentieth century leads to another question about its end in the twenty-first. Grandin identifies the 2007–2008 financial collapse as an epochal event, one that plays the same role in his

¹ “The 2020 Pulitzer Prize Winner in General Nonfiction,” *The Pulitzer Prizes* (website), n.d., <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/greg-grandin>.

² Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 1893, in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 1-38.

interpretation as the 1890 frontier closure does in Turner's. But Thompson notes that the economic downturn of the 2000s and 2010s was "less severe and less widely experienced than some earlier ones" (the COVID-19 collapse, which occurred after Grandin's book and Thompson's review, has also put the 2007–2008 one into perspective). Thinking along similar lines, Sargent asks, given the gradual decline in the U.S. world economic standing since its apex in 1945, "why did Trumpism not explode until the recent past?" Sargent observes that the economic and hegemonic crisis of the 1970s gave rise to "a vigorous reassertion of frontier ideology." What makes Grandin sure that the 2007–2008 collapse was the true death of the frontier? Gardner, continuing the thought, points to bipartisan support for the "imperial presidency" in questioning whether "border-ification" is the dominant trend of the current era.

The third question is whether Grandin is looking at too small a slice of U.S. history to generalize. Grandin focuses on powerful decisionmakers and on violent men, particularly on the frontier. What *The End of the Myth* makes little room for, argues Offner, is the countervailing forces: this is a "story without social movements, except those that are racist and xenophobic," she writes. Offner also raises the possibility that Grandin concentrates "so intently on settler violence" and its perpetrators that he relegates to the periphery "the politics and lives of Native people, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans," who appear mainly as victims. Sargent, raising a related concern, worries that by emphasizing violent extremists Grandin is letting anyone who is not a vigilante at the border off the hook. In Grandin's narration, Sargent argues, the structural account of racial violence often threatens to devolve into a "morality play."

Thompson, too, wonders if Grandin's fascination with the country's edge—whether it be a frontier or wall—makes his account too narrow to serve as a grand narrative of U.S. history. "A work that says virtually nothing about industrialization and the rise of big business, large-scale European immigration, or the growth of cities can hardly provide an interpretation of the whole of American history," he writes. The border is "a strand in American history," in Thompson's view, but it "should not be taken for more than that."

Grandin offers an expansive and impassioned response to his reviewers, touching on many questions beyond those I have included in the above summary. He reflects on political developments since his book, explaining how they further confirm his sense that the inward-pointing logic of Trumpism (a "death cult," he calls it) operates differently than the outward-pointing frontier myth. He also connects capitalism to racism in different and perhaps stronger terms than he did in his book. "Individual supremacy is white supremacy. That's my working definition of racial capitalism, a term I did not use in the book but one that shapes my thinking," he writes.

Grandin meets criticisms not only on the empirical plane, where he corrects what he takes to be misreadings, but also on the loftier theoretical level. What emerges clearly is Grandin's concern not only with events but with essences, not just appearances but inner logics. And so he debates with Offner whether the Freedmen's Bureau pointed toward socialism or capitalism, and he contemplates with Sargent the relationship between structure and agency (or, better said, over whether the two can be coherently separated). Readers of *The End of the Myth* will find Grandin's response to be an edifying window into his thoughts, showing more than what is available in his celebrated book.

This is, in the end, a thoughtful, probing exchange. The readers have asked hard questions because *The End of the Myth* is a provocative, ambitious study. Their admiration for it comes through, even when they dispute its conclusions. "Grandin's book deserves the wide readership it has already attracted," Offner writes. "The frontier myth may or may not be dead for good, but we can only hope that the future looks something like the one Grandin imagines."

Participants:

Greg Grandin is a professor of history at Yale University and is the author of *The End of the Myth*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in non-fiction and was a finalist for Pulitzer Prize in history. He is also the author of *Kissinger's Shadow*, *The Empire of Necessity*, which won the Bancroft and Beveridge awards in American history, and *Fordlandia*, also a Pulitzer history finalist.

Daniel Immerwahr (Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 2011) is an associate professor at Northwestern University. He is the author of *Thinking Small* (Harvard University Press, 2015) and *How to Hide an Empire* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019). He is currently researching a book on environmental catastrophe in the nineteenth-century United States.

Lloyd C. Gardner is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A Wisconsin Ph.D., he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy, including “Safe For Democracy,” “Approaching Vietnam,” and “Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam,” and “The War on Leakers” He has been president of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Affairs, and lives in Newtown, Pa, with his wife Nancy.

Amy C. Offner is assistant professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Developmental States in the Americas* (Princeton University Press, 2019). Her work has been supported by institutions including the ACLS, SSRC, NEH, Library of Congress, and the Charles Warren Center at Harvard University. Her current book project, *The Disappearing Worker*, is a transnational history of the unraveling of the employment relationship since 1945.

Daniel J. Sargent is associate professor at the University of California with appointments in the Department of History and the Goldman School of Public Policy. He is the author of *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and a co-editor of *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Harvard University Press, 2010). He is writing an interpretive history of the postwar international order, provisionally titled *Pax Americana: The Rise and Fall of the American World Order*.

John A. Thompson gained his BA and Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge where he is now Emeritus Reader in American History and an Emeritus Fellow of St Catharine’s College. His principal research interests have been American liberalism and U.S. debate about foreign policy. His publications include *Progressivism* (Durham, UK, 1979), *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), *Woodrow Wilson* (London: Longman, 2002), and numerous articles and book chapters. His most recent book, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America’s Global Role* (Cornell University Press, 2015), was the subject of an H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable in 2016, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/8-15-sense-of-power>.

REVIEW BY LLOYD GARDNER, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY, EMERITUS

How the Myth Ended

The main subject, indeed, the heart of Greg Grandin's timely *The End of the Myth*, is Westward expansion, where the myth was born. It arose in the working out of James Madison's often cited formulation for preserving republican government by diluting and fragmenting factions by extending the sphere. Early on Grandin quotes Andrew Jackson's Secretary of War, Lewis Cass, on the president's Indian removal policy as a perfect example. "Their misfortunes have been the consequence of a state of things which could not be controlled by them or us," said Cass. (44) Like generations who came after, Cass and Jackson thus mystified "the way public force makes private power possible" (45). This basic confusion shielded Americans from a reckoning with their history. The westward tide of settlement, thus appears to be its own cause, in Peter Onuf's words, "the manifest destiny of nature's nation" (45).

Grandin argues that Americans lived with that myth derived from a seemingly endless frontier—'nature's nation'—the end of the Revolution until it literally turned inside out with President Donald Trump calling for walls and military force to protect the nation against an invasion from drug-dealers and alien hordes that would steal jobs from American workers. One could also argue that the myth produced, in the end, an ironic outcome of Madisonian projections and thinking about factions. By creating a tier of low population states with outsize representation in the Electoral College, the founders ensured that we now live at a time when a particular alignment of factions has gained immense power within government through both the Senate and the Electoral College.

But it all started with the American Revolution, which, in contrast with the revolutions in the Old-World, aka Europe, was a horizontal revolution as opposed to a vertical revolution. As Grandin writes, "The insurgency did not devolve into tyranny-justifying anarchy. Republicans rose up, created order out of chaos, and then proceeded to extract wealth out of nature. And they kept doing so" (42). The U.S. became a permanent revolution: the Westward Movement continuously celebrated in the Hollywood Age of John Wayne and Ronald Reagan. Americans, in Loren Baritz's words, came to believe in their origin myth – or a particular definition – of the origin myth that had them swinging free "in seemingly limitless space unhampered by the dead and deadening hand of the past" (46).

Grandin's book should perhaps be read alongside A.G. Hopkins' *American Empire* (2018), for they complement one another on both the origins of American exceptionalist thought and the importance of how the myth disguised reality. The Civil War period, Hopkins writes, put more guns into circulation than ever before, reducing their cost and increasing their effectiveness. "Martial values [thus] became embedded in the concept of liberty in the United States to a degree that made the use of force to advance national values seem natural and therefore normal. Slavery, segregation, and the 'Indian Wars' inculcated attitudes of racial supremacy that made it easy to present the imperialism of 1898 as national duty expressed through the civilizing mission."³

In a particularly pertinent discussion of how the myth operated, Grandin relies on Massachusetts Congressman Caleb Cushing's 1839 Fourth of July Oration celebrating the West as the "great safety valve of our population" (78). Cushing had innocently hit on the paradox (or oxymoron) at the center of the myth. The safety valve could only be made to work if American military force on the frontier was turning the valve's knobs. But that implied a growth of American military power – and perhaps other powers that would in the event curtail American liberties – of both individuals and the states.

³ A.G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 237.

The first crisis, the Irrepressible Conflict, manifested itself in the final years leading up to the Civil War, when, as Hopkins points out, the South was faced with an existential threat— it had to break out before the North broke in.⁴

In the post-Civil War years the nation attempted to find some way to maintain this exceptionalist myth by finessing the Jim Crow 'solution' to race relations after Reconstruction ended. At first, Confederate veterans and their sons used the pacification of the West "as their rehabilitation program" (134). But as Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in 1896 amidst the Populist uprisings and other rumblings from the big sky country, the problem of the West came down to a simple fact: there was no more West.⁵

The immediate challenge of a frontierless future never happened, in part, one might argue, because racial and ethnic frictions prevented a unified Populist movement from developing into a national movement; but the greater factor in postponing the ultimate reckoning with a myth was the 'Pact of 1898,' which reunited North and South in a crusade to recreate space for American energies abroad. "The War of 1898 was alchemic," says Grandin. "It transformed the 'Lost Cause' of the Confederacy – the preservation of slavery – by bringing the South into the myth once again, which was now labeled humanity's cause for world freedom" (137).

President William McKinley was quick to grasp the opportunity thus presented by a splendid little war that brought to an end the lingering fears of the return of the worst days of the Panic of 1893 and the depression that followed. McKinley took a victory tour of the South, at one point pinning a Confederate badge to his lapel and praising the valor and heroism of the men from the south and the north. "When we are all on one side," northern industrial power and southern spirit, "we are unconquerable" (134). During his tour, McKinley also took another symbolic step, ordering that the federal government would now take over management of Confederate cemeteries.⁶

It was particularly fitting, then, that in the Memorial Day parades of my youth as a Boy Scout in a small Ohio town that we marched behind a Cadillac convertible with Spanish-American War Veteran Major Sansom riding in the passenger seat waving to the crowd on the way to the cemetery. "The Pact of 1898" did, as Grandin argues, provide new life to the original American idea, and there was a perfect blending of ambitions, economic and ideological, with the political ethos of an entire era. While McKinley celebrated the reunion of the Blue and the Grey, notes Grandin, he also quietly promoted the enlistment of American blacks in the army. It is also true, however, that blacks as Buffalo Soldiers had served the myth in the last years of the Indian Wars. Throughout the new century the ambiguity of black advancement in society through military service became a contentious issue dividing black leadership until the days of Dr. Martin Luther King's denunciation of the Vietnam War.

For the time being, war casualties were few and the prospects seemingly vast. McKinley and those who supported him regarded territorial acquisitions as an inescapable burden, however, rather than a field for social experimentation. Originally, as Thomas McCormick has argued, McKinley wanted only Manila as an American 'Hong Kong,' but quickly realized that a weak Philippine government could be easy prey for Germany. The drive for war was largely concerned with the China

⁴ Hopkins, *American Empire*, 223.

⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Problem of the West," *The Atlantic* (September 1896), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1896/09/the-problem-of-the-west/525699/>.

⁶ I am grateful to Paul Miles for bringing this important gesture to my attention.

market and protecting America's commercial future against potential European rivals. When you play the big game, however, the ante is only the first bet.⁷

The 'nature's nation' myth required that the War with Spain be elevated to humanity's cause. The propagation of the myth was done by those who could have no foreknowledge of the number of new cemeteries that would be needed to receive the dead of American wars of necessity and choice in the next century, wars that would ultimately bring the nation face to face in Vietnam and the Middle East with the myth's contradictions.

Grandin argues that the Pact of 1898 actually began to come undone much earlier, during the Korean War with its endless numbered hills that were supposedly vital to American national security. "Korea would be the end of the line," he writes, "the last place the Confederate battle flag could be unfurled as a pennant of reconciliation" (147). After Korea, the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power Movement emerged and the Confederate flag "returned to its original meaning: the bunting of resentful white supremacy" (147).

That is going a bit too far. But certainly the Confederate flag and other symbols appropriated by the white supremacy movement have been on display at every encounter with the social movements of recent years, most notably at Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. President Trump has seemingly been trying to forge a new 'Pact of 1898,' declaring that there were good people on both sides in that protest against removing a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee that led to violence and at least one death. His pact would center on the "border-fication of national politics" (166). It most certainly would not have humanity's cause as its ideological lodestar.

The career of Harlon Carter, a border control agent from the 1930s to the 1970s, suggests to Grandin a way to understand the evolution of border-fication. The Laredo born Carter began his career by shooting a Mexican teenager who talked back at him. He soon became one of the cruelest federal agents, the man in charge of Operation Wetback in the 1950s committed to all-out warfare to "hurl tens of thousands of Mexican wetbacks into Mexico" (166). In the 1970s Carter led a movement to transform the National Rifle Association into a key institution of the New Right. It was another Laredo border agent who invited Donald Trump to tour that port of entry just a few days after he declared his candidacy for the presidency in 2015 – the beginning of the keynote theme of his campaign and presidency.

How to square this dangerous circle? Trump's campaign gave energy to a movement-a-borning in older sectors of the economy, particularly the coal industry, but also in automobiles, and in rural America where resentments against the city had long simmered just below the boiling point. For a time, neo-liberalism had seemed a solution. So thought both Presidents Bill Clinton and Barak Obama. What would save American politics from becoming a circular firing squad was the Trans-Pacific Pact (TPP). The ensuing debate leading to the 2016 election convinced critics on the right and left "that the center had little to offer except more of the same" (262).

At the same time, Obama played into Trump's border-fication by spending more on border and immigration agencies "than on all other federal law-enforcement agencies combined" (263). Trump came into office promising a wall that Mexico would pay for that would solve the issue of immigration, on which he piled up all the wreckage left by the myth of the eternal frontier, and turning it inside out. The wall "offers its own illusions, a mystification that simultaneously recognizes and refuses limits" (273).

"Border-fication" is supposed to replace the "Pact of 1898." Grandin might also wish to consider the proposed Mega-budget deal of 2019. In this way conservatives and liberals get all they want, while the president gets more opportunities to shift money around just as he pleases. Once the party of strict budgets and Congressional supremacy, Republicans readily embrace the Imperial Presidency. At least that is what Senator Patrick Leahy, who will vote for the bill, believes: "I'm just

⁷ The best study remains, Thomas J. McCormick, *China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire, 1893-1901* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

concerned that there is too much flexibility for the president to move money around.” But that is just the point of where the imperial presidency has been moving since 1950 when President Harry Truman called the Korean War a police action.⁸

H. Ross Perot died on July 9, 2019. He became famous for a time during the 1992 presidential campaign running as an independent against George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. He was a one-issue candidate: opposition to the proposed North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA). “You implement that NAFTA, the Mexican trade agreement, where they pay people a dollar an hour, have no health care, no retirement, no pollution controls,” he said during the second presidential debate, “and you’re going to hear a giant sucking sound of jobs being pulled out of this country.”⁹

Perot took votes away from both Clinton and Bush, enough so that neither man could enter office with a majority of the popular vote—an outcome that has now repeated itself twice if in different ways, first in 2000 and again in 2016. We are in real danger of ‘Electoral College’ presidents becoming the norm. In the first instance George W. Bush polled half a million fewer votes than Al Gore; in the second Donald Trump polled three million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton. In a way, the increasing polarization of the country is demonstrated by a situation in which presidential candidates depend upon ‘hanging chads’ and a one-vote majority on the Supreme Court, or a few thousand votes in key states, possibly the result of a successful social media campaign by a foreign power. The legitimacy of government itself becomes an issue as national politics are ensnared in self affirmations at all levels.¹⁰

In 1934, Charles Beard delivered his presidential address to the American Historical Association, “Written History as an Act of Faith.” History, he said, was either moving toward some form of fascism, chaos, or social democracy. Nearly a century later the same choices appear. Long deferred, Greg Grandin says, by the emotive power of frontier universalism, (and one would add the intellectually crippling post-Cold War triumphalism) recent events have shown us the likely outcomes, and “the choice between barbarism and socialism, or at least social democracy” (276).

⁸ Emily Cochrane, Alan Rappaport and Jim Tankersley, “Federal Budget Would Raise Spending by \$320 billion,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/22/us/politics/budget-deal.html>.

⁹ Quoted in Harley Shaiken, “Ross Perot was Ridiculed as Alarmist in 1992 but his Warning Turned out to be Prescient,” *Salon*, July 21, 2019, https://www.salon.com/2019/07/21/ross-perot-was-ridiculed-as-alarmist-in-1992-but-his-warning-turned-out-to-be-prescient_partner/.

¹⁰ It happened three times in the nineteenth century, of course, but the changes with Women’s Suffrage and then the series of civil rights acts of the 1960s created a very different electorate (with different expectations) than the founders reckoned on when the ultimate decision was left to the Electoral College.

REVIEW BY AMY C. OFFNER, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

It has been said that President Donald Trump does not speak the vernacular language of U.S. politics. We hear little from this president about freedom or liberty, and just as little about rights, equality, or justice. Those concepts have proven flexible enough to serve presidents as distinct as Abraham Lincoln and George W. Bush. Their invocation promises nothing in particular, but identifies the speaker with some kind of political tradition. By contrast, 'Make America Great Again' recalls nothing that I can put my finger on. Printed in screaming capital letters on baseball caps, it looks like something an underpaid marketing consultant might have made up while rushing to the next job.

Greg Grandin pushes against this idea in *The End of the Myth*. He puts Trump and his vernacular into U.S. history by historicizing 'the wall.' Talk of walls, borders, and exclusion, he writes, is the product of a national political culture that has long idealized expansion as the solution to domestic problems and transmuted internal conflict into outward-facing violence. From nineteenth-century Indian wars through neoliberal 'free trade' agreements and the War on Terror, Americans repeatedly reinvented the concept of the frontier and imagined it as essential to the country's existence. But today, Grandin argues, there remains no sanctified international mission that can mobilize Americans, no belief that freedom can be assured for all or even many through expansion. The aggressive campaigns that once faced outward have turned inward; the conviction that well-being can be had through empire has given way to a steelier sense that Americans must defend their scarce resources from usurpers. The glorification of walls and the vilification of immigrants, Grandin writes, are the terrible but logical endgames of a country that has spent two-and-a-half centuries 'fleeing forward,' and has nowhere left to go (1).

This is a passionately argued, powerful book. Written for a broad public, it presents a fast-paced synthesis of several generations' worth of research on U.S. empire, enlivened by some fascinating new peeks into archives and newspapers. Grandin artfully captures the wide-ranging aspirations that Americans have pinned onto the idea of expansion since the eighteenth century. Initially, the frontier was supposed to preserve the republic and defuse social conflict generated by both slavery and capitalism. During the antebellum period, it was imagined variously as a yeoman's and an enslaver's paradise, a railroad baron's gold mine, and a site for colonization that could rid U.S. states of free blacks. After slavery's fiery destruction, Indian wars and the turn to overseas empire served a new national purpose: they facilitated national reconciliation on racist grounds. Northerners and Southerners fought side by side for the New Empire, and southern whites used the occasion to rehabilitate the memory of the Confederacy, cultivate the myth of the 'lost cause,' and elide it with the cause of the United States. After 1945, the idea of the frontier was born anew, associated with a liberal internationalist mission to create a world of capitalist nations growing together under U.S. leadership.

Woven through that history of expansionist imaginaries is a history of racist exclusion and brutality that Grandin culls from the vast scholarship on settler colonialism, immigration, and borderlands history. He places special focus on the terrifying, often sadistic violence that U.S. officials and paramilitaries perpetrated against Mexicans and Mexican Americans along the southern border during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There more than anywhere else, he argues, we see the Janus-faced quality of the frontier idea—the burning-hot steam that the safety valve was designed to point outward. At times, Grandin overstates the efficacy of the frontier myth in channeling violence outward, and downplays violence and social conflict that pervaded the United States. So, too, can his account of cruelty recall an older style of Western history that focused so intently on settler violence that it marginalized the politics and lives of Native people, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans.¹¹ Nevertheless, no one can read this book without being shaken by Grandin's portrait of terror at the border and its ties to U.S. imperial projects. In some cases, the perpetrators we meet are border-patrol officers and Texas Rangers who were official agents of imperial policy, formally tasked with patrolling lands that the United States took from Mexico. In other cases, we meet military veterans turned vigilantes—people who, in Kathleen Belew's formulation, brought

¹¹ Grandin's work recalls and at times relies on Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992). Thanks to Theresa Ventura for discussing this with me.

the war home.¹² The humiliation of defeat in Vietnam and the endless, ignominious wars in Iraq and Afghanistan whetted some soldiers' appetites for vengeance, and the border became a place where they reenacted war games, this time against immigrants and their descendants.

Until recently, the border was imagined as a space of exception—a place where the frontier's promise of freedom did not apply, but where the price of freedom was paid by foreigners and immigrants. But with the neoliberal mission and the War on Terror exhausted, the frontier has withered as an ideal, leaving only its negative image. The border, in Grandin's view, stands alone today as the dominant wellspring of U.S. political culture and political mission. There remain sputtering attempts to reignite enthusiasm for new frontiers, whether private space exploration or yet another round of worldwide economic liberalization. But those visions compel few at a time when most Americans experience their lives as structured by constraint, not by promises of expanding freedom. "A whole generation...may never recover from the Great Recession," Grandin observes. "For many, less and less is possible, including a decent education and a dignified retirement, or any retirement" (271).

Grandin has long been fascinated by social democracy and socialism; his research on their histories in Latin America have transformed Eurocentric understandings of their origins and nature.¹³ Turning his attention to our own time, he argues that in a world of limits—a world without a frontier—the United States has just two options: socialism or barbarism. The latter is the Trumpian project. The former is Grandin's choice, and it's one that he believes the frontier myth foreclosed for too long. In that sense, the book echoes a familiar lament: the United States was a country that grew rather than resorting to redistribution; it was a country that idealized rugged individualism and disdained collective security. But Grandin comes to a cautiously optimistic conclusion: the end of the frontier might change all that.

As a piece of public political argument, *The End of the Myth* is more than a critical origins story of the Trump regime. It is a challenge to liberal critics who decry the current occupant of the White House as a sort of hijacker who owes his station merely to foreign influence and who stands in opposition to U.S. political norms. Grandin offers a more punishing indictment of the United States itself and a different prescription for its apocalyptic present. The country had reached an intractable crisis of social welfare and political purpose before 2016, he suggests, and Trumpism represents the apotheosis of racist, nativist, and revanchist traditions internal to the country's past. Speaking in harmony with many on the left, Grandin makes a powerful case that any return to liberal internationalism would simply feed the beast that liberals hope to slay.

To this reviewer, Grandin's choice—socialism or barbarism—is a welcome and necessary framing of the United States' political options. There are nevertheless pitfalls to reading U.S. history through those options. *The End of the Myth* is centrally about the limits of U.S. politics, and as Grandin surveys the country's history, he identifies two competing impulses. On the one hand, there is a dominant, nearly unbroken tradition of turning to empire to fulfill or deflect from domestic needs. On the other, he finds in Reconstruction, the New Deal, and the 1960s embattled attempts to accept limits and create public systems of social welfare provision—efforts that he argues pointed toward socialism. I am not entirely convinced that the concept fits the episodes and actors he analyzes. In Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., there is a case to be made.¹⁴ By contrast, the Freedman's Bureau was arguably the only institution in the postbellum South committed to building a capitalist economy. The Freedman's Bureau struggled mightily to create capitalist labor contracts in a society

¹² Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).

¹³ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Greg Grandin, "The Liberal Traditions in the Americas: Rights, Sovereignty, and the Origins of Liberal Multilateralism," *American Historical Review* (February 2012): 68-91.

¹⁴ As Brandon Terry has argued, however, King might best be understood as a figure with something to teach socialists today, rather than a socialist forbearer. Brandon M. Terry, "Was Martin Luther King a Socialist?" *Plough Quarterly* 21 (Summer 2019).

where former slaveowners wanted to return to bondage and freed people dreamed of becoming independent smallholders or creating collective economic institutions. Grandin's retrospective claiming of the Freedman's Bureau, the New Deal, and King represents a politically meaningful attempt to construct a usable past for a new generation of socialists defining their own aims today. It embodies a phenomenon he has long studied: the construction of socialist and Communist experiments from all sorts of vernacular materials in American societies. Nevertheless, his categorization can obscure the ways that historical actors understood their own attempts to provide for social welfare.

Given the existence of flesh-and-blood socialists in U.S. history, I came away wondering why Grandin chose the lineage he did. His work reflects waves of scholarship since the 1960s that have made the history of racism, class conflict, and settler colonialism central objects of study, but in some ways, the story he tells recalls the old consensus history of the 1950s. Like Richard Hofstadter and Louis Hartz, Grandin sees the United States as an exceptional nation, and he analyzes the limits of U.S. politics through the careers of great men: John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Donald Trump.¹⁵ That interpretive choice means that Roosevelt, rather than the Communist Party, the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO), the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, or the Southern Negro Youth Congress, must stand in for the social-democratic or socialist impulse in U.S. life during the 1930s.¹⁶ The Freedman's Bureau receives due credit for creating public schools, but we do not see the catalytic activity of enslaved and freed people themselves, who initiated the drive for education, created their own schools, and pulled the government along.¹⁷ Grandin does pay tribute to contemporary activists and scholars documenting the history of paramilitary violence in Texas, but in general, *The End of the Myth* is a story without social movements, except those that are racist and xenophobic. Given that focus, Grandin must lean heavily on his chosen figures to illustrate the story he wants to tell. He thoughtfully explores the New Deal's limits and contradictions, but still gives it a rosier cast than it might deserve. In a book about the origins of the border wall, the 1930s pass without a mention of mass deportations of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans that began under Herbert Hoover and declined but did not end under Roosevelt. Grandin's focus on high politics might be the reason that he finds so few alternatives that point toward socialism, and must at times massage his examples to point them there.

Like the consensus historians, Grandin ultimately agrees that the scope of U.S. political debate has been strikingly narrow in international perspective, distinguished by an enduring faith in negative liberty and possessive individualism. At times, that argument erases still more possibilities and tensions that have run through U.S. history. In this synthesis, we see only the individualistic dimensions of republican political theory, and nothing of the republican conviction that a virtuous citizen was one who could put aside interest to act in pursuit of the general good.¹⁸ We see a country that could never "accept the legitimacy of social or economic rights" (124). While that gloss contains a grain of truth, it cannot quite communicate the nature and limits of the U.S. welfare state. To take just the most important example, the right to a public education has been an unusually strong social right in this country, one that developed relatively early and was imagined in part as a tool that

¹⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And The Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955).

¹⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Penny M. von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: African Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

¹⁷ James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

would prepare children to compete in the labor market. U.S. policymakers have turned repeatedly to training and education to resolve problems of poverty and inequality that many other societies have addressed through employment, income, pension, housing, and health care policies. In that sense, a consequential social right has acquired widespread acceptance in the United States without ever dethroning the idea that well-being was a matter of individual responsibility and poverty a personal failing.¹⁹ At a time when school privatization and teachers' strikes are so central to national politics, it does not seem adequate to tell Americans that they have never had social rights; it is important to explain the welfare state they do have and the stakes of dismantling or transforming it.

Given the ambitions of the book and the urgency of its message, *The End of the Myth* can more than survive these qualifications and disagreements. Grandin's book deserves the wide readership it has already attracted. The frontier myth may or may not be dead for good, but we can only hope that the future looks something like the one Grandin imagines.

¹⁹ Tracy L. Steffes, *School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Miriam Cohen, "Reconsidering Schools and the American Welfare State," *History of Education Quarterly* 45:4 (Winter 2005): 511-537.

REVIEW BY DANIEL SARGENT, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

San Diego orients north, but the hills of Tijuana loom from downtown skyscrapers. Proceed down Interstate 5, and the border comes into commanding view: a ribbon of gunmetal draped across arid hills. The border menaces, but it is not impenetrable. The crossing at San Ysidro is the busiest in the Western Hemisphere and the second busiest on earth. On the U.S. side sit the Las Americas Premium Outlets, a retail complex that signals: welcome to the United States of America, and shop!

The border continues towards the ocean. To its north, retail gives way to scrubland. To the south, housing abuts a bull-fighting arena. Finally, the landmass of North America dips into the ocean. The border continues for another fifty yards: a parade of poles, marching into the Pacific.

Turn around at sunset, and the border winds backwards into the darkness setting over the continent. Six miles into the night is Otay Mesa, the region's secondary border crossing. Otay Mesa was the site where U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) erected in early 2017 six prototype sections of border wall. Otay Mesa is also the site of the large detention facility that the Corrections Corporation of America operates for United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The panorama encapsulates the border's inescapability and its paradoxes. Militarized and ominous but porous and generative, the border produces both exclusion and interaction. It radiates physicality, but the border resides uneasily with the land: the Tijuana River rises in Mexico but empties in the United States. The border is omnipresent, defining the entire metro region, but Otay Mesa feels a world away from the bars of Pacific Beach and the verandas of La Jolla, where well-to-do Americans—a category that includes tenured academics—can enjoy ocean vistas and contemplate uninterrupted international travel.

Greg Grandin in *The End of the Myth* calls time on the fantasy of borderless globalization. His signal achievement is to force readers to grapple with the border's centrality in American life, not just the lives of border cities like San Diego. In these times, the exercise is vital. But in any time, Grandin would be the right scholar for the job. Well-known and justly lauded for his contributions to the histories of the Americas, Grandin brings critical perspective, roaming sagacity, and a panoramic vision. These distinctive intellectual traits enable him to offer a broad and searching analysis, which he presents in an engaging, necessary, and provocative book.

The End of the Myth is organized around a subtle analytical gambit. The border, Grandin argues, represents both the inversion and the apotheosis of a more hopeful spatial conceit, which was the frontier. Whereas the border embodies the hard-nosed recognition of limits, the frontier evokes lofty and weightless aspiration. It conveys possibility, futurity, even the prospect of transcendence. It is the green light in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, beckoning us towards an orgiastic future.²⁰

Like Fitzgerald, Grandin is enough of a realist to grasp that the frontier has been more hokum than reality. Nor, to his credit, does Grandin elide the violence and dispossession that accompanied the frontier of settlement's movement across the continent. Instead, he affirms the verdict that a generation of historians of the American West has made familiar: in their quest to realize a continental ethnostate, white Americans in the nineteenth century dragged a cordon of violence across North America—uprooting, dispossessing, and slaughtering the continent's indigenous inhabitants.

The open frontier was purchased in blood, but it nonetheless became a generative force in American life, Grandin argues. To a degree that may surprise and unsettle some of his readers, Grandin endorses Frederick Jackson Turner's famous hypothesis: the frontier permitted (in Grandin's paraphrase) "an unprecedented expansion of the ideal of political equality"

²⁰ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 1990).

(117). The frontier thus launched the United States on a trajectory of political-economic development that Grandin, echoing Turner, calls exceptional.

Exceptional, Grandin insists, does not mean optimal. Signaling his own social-democratic commitments, Grandin laments that the open frontier enabled the rising United States to forego the experiments in social welfare that European states enacted from the 1870s. Reconstruction, thus situated, becomes a lost opportunity. The victorious Union might have consolidated Appomattox with the building of a “fully developed welfare state” (101). Instead, Grandin argues, the frontier’s “safety valve” (68-82) made such provision unnecessary. Tellingly, President Ulysses Grant came to see the acquisition of the Dominican Republic as the most plausible solution for providing emancipated slaves with a modicum of security and economic opportunity (109-119).

Grandin’s critique echoes Turner’s: both blame the open frontier for the nation’s failure to build a welfare state on the European model. They disagree, though, on the meaning of the frontier’s closure, which the Census Bureau declared in 1890. For Turner, the end of the frontier marked a grand rupture; for Grandin, something more like a reorientation. Hereafter, Grandin argues, U.S. aspirations were expressed upon a larger canvas. With the closure of the continental frontier, the frontier became a global—and globalizing—project. 1898 and the colonial project that followed instantiated the frontier’s outward turn.

The reckoning, in Grandin’s account, came with the Great Depression. The long slump and soaring unemployment reanimated a crucial strand of Turner’s argument: the proposition that frontier individualism had deprived the United States of a modern welfare state. New Dealers like Rex Tugwell strove to remedy the defect. Drawing on foreign exemplars including Mexico, whose revolutionary constitution enumerated social and economic rights), the New Dealers attempted to build an American welfare state. Their efforts, Grandin argues, represents a kind of bookend to Reconstruction: a phase when Americans turned inwards, away from the chimera of the frontier, and grappled in a realistic spirit with building an economic and social democracy.

Unfortunately, in Grandin’s view, the prospects for American social democracy proved fleeting. With the Cold War’s advent, the frontier beckoned anew, now constituting an ideological rationale for a renewed U.S. globalism. Once again, Grandin argues, U.S. elites undertook to forge an open world in the optimistic image of the American frontier: universalist, assimilatory, and future oriented. Once again, he argues, the prospect of expansion conjured the illusion that the nation’s internal conflicts might be transcended through the global diffusion of the American way. Yet in its postwar phase, as before, the reality was that profound internal contradictions could not be transcended forever.

Dr. Martin Luther King grasped the unsustainability of the postwar order. Dismayed by the Vietnam War, King revolted against frontier ideology and called upon Americans to abandon expansionism and attend instead to domestic amelioration. The time had come, King argue, for the “social frontier” (203) to supplant the territorial frontier.

King’s most creative move, Grandin argues, was to invert the old causal mechanics. Whereas Turner and many others—even Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, Grandin notes—had taken expansion for a solvent, King argued in the era of the Vietnam War that expansion was, in fact, a wellspring of internal social conflict. Americans, needless to say, did not heed King’s clarion. Instead the United States after Vietnam recommitted to the project of frontier expansion—a project that now focused, more tightly than before, on ensuring the transnational mobility of goods and capital.

What resulted, Grandin argues, was a cruel twist upon the old frontier ideology. The old regime was built upon dispossession and removal, but it had at least exalted the human freedom. The new frontier ideology, in contrast, emancipated capital but trapped people within hard territorial borders. The implications for social cohesion, Grandin writes, have been devastating: “never before has a ruling class been as free—so completely emancipated from the people it rules—as ours” (271).

The denouement of frontier ideology in our times leads us back towards the other side of Grandin's dialectic: the hard line on the border. Building upon King's analysis, Grandin argues that the social contradictions which the frontier has failed to resolve have ratcheted up the nation's preoccupation with territorial borders. After Vietnam, Grandin argues, some veterans relocated to the desert southwest and became border vigilantes. More broadly, the march of deindustrialization that capital outflows propelled from the 1980s has inflamed nativist resentment, fueling Trumpism.

Trump may project disregard for constraints, whether normative or constitutional, but his politics, Grandin writes, are all harsh limits. Where Cold War presidents avowed the transcendence of limits—think “pay any price, bear any burden”—Trump proffers harsh “geopolitical realism” (272). Even his inaugural marked a jarring break from the wispy oratory of presidents past. “That was some weird shit” was George W. Bush's reputed verdict on Trump's maiden presidential speech.²¹ Grandin's achievement is to clarify the nature of the disjuncture that Bush sensed. As he puts it, Trump's appeal is simple:

“racism was never transcended; there's not enough to go around; the global economy will have winners and losers; not all can sit at the table; and government policies should be organized around accepting these truths” (272).

Trump is an aberration from past presidents, Grandin writes, but his ascent thrusts us towards reckoning. Discounting the possibility that the old frontier ideology and the orgiastic future it promised can ever be recaptured, Grandin offers an arresting conclusion. Either the nation opts for “socialism, or at least social democracy”—a course that would presumably build upon the unfinished legacies of Reconstruction and the New Deal—or the United States descends further into Trumpian “barbarism” (276).

Grandin's stark conclusion is a fitting crescendo to his ambitious argument. Like a frontiersman, he has staked out his terrain. The question for readers is: what do we make of his argument?

Set aside for now the political stakes of Grandin's historical argument, to which I will return. Focus instead on the historical analysis, which is stimulating and provocative but also raises questions. I will engage three: the problem of comparison between the two eras of frontier expansion that Grandin identifies; the question of U.S. exceptionalism; and the related conundrums of agency and evidence.

First, the comparison between the nineteenth and twentieth century frontiers. In Frederick Jackson Turner's terms, which Grandin adopts, the frontier functioned as a social safety valve, permitting outbound migration and releasing pressure in labor markets. Grandin makes much of this point, but he never really explains how the global frontier of the twentieth century performs similar work—functioning, that is, as a safety valve through which internal tensions ventilate. Instead, the significance of the frontier to U.S. economy, society, and politics in the twentieth century is more imputed than explained.

After all, few Americans emigrated in the twentieth century, which would have been the functional equivalent of transcontinental migration. Nor is it clear that U.S. industrial prosperity depended in the twentieth century's mid-phase upon exports, as historians working in the ‘open door’ tradition have often asserted.²² By far the most self-sufficient of the world's mature industrial economies, Americans in the midcentury heyday of the global frontier consumed at home most of what they manufactured and farmed.

²¹ “What George W. Bush Really Thought of Trump's Inauguration,” *New York Magazine*, March 29, 2017 <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/03/what-george-w-bush-really-thought-of-trumps-inauguration.html>.

²² Most famously, William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

An alternative perspective might characterize America's Cold War responsibilities not as a frontier of opportunity but an imperial burden: more akin to the Appalachian border the British Empire secured in 1763 than the unrolling continental frontier of the nineteenth century.

Mobilizing an anti-Communist alliance of nation-states may have served U.S. security interests, but it is not so clear that waging a global Cold War served American economic interests. Here, comparison is instructive. Between 1820 and 1900, the U.S. economy achieved an annualized growth rate of more than 3.6%—about twice the 1.8% that industrializing Great Britain sustained.²³ After 1945, though, the United States experienced a prolonged economic decline relative to the advanced capitalist allies it designated Cold War allies—and whose physical security U.S. armed forces now guaranteed.

In some ways, this is precisely Grandin's (and Trump's) point: the global frontier did not reap the benefits its advocates promised (and that nineteenth-century frontier expansion had achieved). But the failure of the global frontier to serve American economic interests has been self-evident for decades. As far back as August 1971, after all, President Richard Nixon delivered a prime-time television address in which he declared the international monetary order to be rigged against the United States. "The foreigners are out to screw us," declared Nixon's Secretary of the Treasury. "It's our job to screw them first."²⁴

That was 1971, recall. If the failure of the Cold War frontier to serve U.S. economic interests has been tangible for half a century, why did Trumpism not explode until the recent past? Is the failure of a safety valve that never really worked sufficient explanation? And if we concede the affinities between Nixon's politics and Trump's, how do we sustain Grandin's characterization of the present crisis as a terminal reckoning? The prolonged crisis of American globalism that turned on the 1970s gave way to a vigorous reassertion of frontier ideology—in the form of pro-globalization policies—that endured until Trump. If history still rhymes, Trump too may pass.

Second, the problem of exceptionalism. Again echoing Turner, Grandin in *The End of the Myth* affirms the exceptionality of the American experience. Exceptionalism for Grandin is not a value judgment but an analytical proposition: as a settler-colonial republic functioning at a near-continental scale, the United States is different, he argues. And yet I could not help but wonder as I read: just how different?

The United States is not the only empire in world history to have expanded across an open frontier only to encounter limits. Such dynamics recur and have expressed themselves recurrently in the construction of walls. From Emperor Hadrian to the Ming dynasty, the onrushing of masonry has demarcated phases of inflection in the life cycles of empires, indicating the ends of expansionary phases and pivots towards consolidation.

Whether the United States is exceptional depends, in the end, upon the comparison set. The frontier may distinguish the United States from the compact entities that constitute the ideal-typical nation-states in the conceptual imaginations of our (enduringly Eurocentric) social sciences. But we should be wary of enshrining European models as the baseline for comparison. Change the comparison set—think Russia and China in the contemporary world—and the United States may look rather less exceptional than it does in Turner's analysis, or Grandin's.

²³ Derived from Angus Maddison, "Statistics on World Population, GDP and Per Capita GDP, 1-2008 AD," <http://www.gdc.net/maddison/oriindex.htm>.

²⁴ Cited in John S. Odell, *U.S. International Monetary Policy: Markets, Power, and Ideas as Sources of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 263.

This points towards an intriguing possibility. Do the pathologies Grandin ascribes to his border/frontier dialectic in fact expose an even deeper ambiguity: an unresolved and persistent conflict between conceptions of the United States as a universalist empire and the United States as a nation-state?

Empire has become in recent times a term of political opprobrium, a concept so conflated with practices of modern colonization as to be irredeemable. Yet empires, over the broader span of human experience, have often sustained ethnocultural differences in tolerable suspension. Empires have proved powerful instruments for inclusion. Over a 500-year span, after all, an expanding Rome broadened the scope of Roman citizenship—from the city, to the Latin League, to Italy, to the entire imperial domain.

The United States, in some ways, accomplished a similar feat in the nineteenth century: forging a republican empire at a near-continental scale. Like Rome, America paid for expansion in other people's blood: America dispossessed and annihilated native peoples; enslaved and exploited African-descended people; and excluded non-white peoples, including Chinese immigrants. In these lines of structural exclusion, we encounter the origins of an alternative political conception, which is the republic not as universalist empire but as homogenous ethnostate. Abhorrent to the liberal promise of a creedal republic, this alternative conception of America aligns quite neatly with defining dynamics of the modern era.

The United States matured and developed in an era when the organization of political communities around ethnicity and culture became the general basis for statehood—first in Europe, then worldwide. A universalist republic in a world of nation-states, the United States has been neither betwixt nor between. The United States may be in principle a creedal state, but it remains for many members of its white ethno-cultural majority an ethno-state, which is to say a nation-state much like any other.

This distinction between America as a frontier empire capable of assimilating diversity and America as an exclusionary ethnostate maps onto Grandin's distinction between frontiers and borders. Yet the alternative metaphors may offer different comparative traction. Take the modern European nation-state as our baseline for comparison, as Grandin does when he laments America's failure to enact a Bismarckian welfare state, and America appears deviant. Situate America among empires, as Charles Maier has proposed, and the United States may appear less exceptional than it does when situated among nation-states.²⁵

We will return to the distinction between universalism and particularism as bases for the organization of political communities. But permit me first to detour into the arena of disagreement, which turns on the question of agency and, relatedly, the problem of evidence.

Admire, as I do, the rigor and even-handedness with which Grandin builds his overarching argument, *The End of the Myth* falters, I think, in its efforts to hold individual malfeasants and malignant social types responsible for the border's violence and exclusion, especially in its final chapters. The scenes Grandin limns in this part of the book show, *inter alia*, the Confederate battle flag fluttering atop U.S. forces in Vietnam and American veterans of that war unleashing the furies of their frustrations upon defenseless immigrants. Such examples are moving and powerful. The representativeness of the illustrative evidence that Grandin introduces, at points seems less self-evident.

Difficult as the establishment of representativeness may be, some of Grandin's evidence, such the newspaper articles he cites as proof of the Confederate Battle Flag's ubiquity in South Vietnam would have benefitted from fuller contextualization. (I asked a friend who captained a patrol craft on the Mekong Delta whether he had witnessed such scenes, and he responded: "not on my boat, and if I'd seen one, I'd have thrown the f**king thing in the water.") One wonders whether a historian with a different story to tell could have mined similar archives—i.e. vast databases of digitized news stories—and sustained quite

²⁵ Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

different conclusions? Such may be the perils of writing history in the digital era, but the point seems worth mulling, at least as a methodological quandary.

Next, and somewhat related, the question of agency. Here, I wondered whether Grandin's powerful indictment in his final chapters of select bad actors—white nationalists, including veterans-turned-vigilantes; rapacious, but often faceless, corporations; and Donald Trump and his circle of enablers—risks transforming Grandin's powerful structural argument into something more resembling a morality play and, perhaps even worse, exculpating ordinary Americans—including you and me.

Decent people should loathe the excesses of the Trump administration, but the disconcerting fact remains that the benefits that result from the border's harsh differentiation accrue to many of us who reside as citizens and lawful residents of the United States. Grandin may well concur, but I would posit—in a spirit of respectful engagement—that his desire to hold the guiltiest accountable risks occluding the systemic benefits that other Americans derive from a border that is as porous as it is exclusionary. The bottom line is that citizenship in an advanced industrialized state is an unearned privilege, conferring myriad economic and social advantages, including the opportunity to benefit from the low-wage labor of non-citizens. But this is no less true in Sweden or New South Wales than it is in San Diego. Differentiation on the basis of citizenship may be the global color line of our times, but it is not a uniquely American pathology.

Nor will lambasting Trump resolve the hard tradeoffs that all advanced societies—not just the United States—must make between openness to immigration and the pursuit of social justice within bounded space. Grandin concludes his book with a call to socialist arms, but in what world a significant upgrade of the American welfare state—such as Medicare for All, including noncitizens—would not exacerbate the country's immigration crisis, I do not know. Here, the kinds of solutions that America's self-avowed socialists favor risk becoming their own kind of frontier fantasy: all grand aspiration, oblivious to limits and evidence.

Like it or not, the structural reality, which Trump grasps quite well, is that the politics of social solidarity depend upon borders and the enactment of exclusion. (What makes Trump crueler than Scandinavians who are turning against immigration is his willingness to draw lines of categorical exclusion within the body politic.) Such has been the experience not only of the United States but of all modern states: as scenes of brutal exclusion enacted from Calais and Lampedusa to Manus and Nauru indicates. This is the tragedy of the modern nation-state: exclusion has been the price for whatever social inclusion it has achieved.

But let us return, in conclusion, to Grandin's point of departure: the promise of the endless and open frontier. Grandin, who has thought long and hard about the problem, concludes that the frontier in our times is an obsolete and broken dream. I am less certain.

The frontier receding into the indefinite horizon may have always been a fantasy—a mere smoke-and-mirrors trick—but improbable fantasies often serve as touchstones for political identity. How many Romans can really have believed that their empire originated with a wolf suckling a pair of foundlings?

Frontier ideology, as President Andrew Jackson argued and Grandin affirms, at least offers a basis for civic participation different from the ethno-cultural solidarities upon which most nation-states are constructed. It is a creed that is both universalist and future oriented. Other people look backwards, towards myths of common origins. The frontier orients Americans forwards, towards a future that may yet be brighter than our present. History may reveal Fitzgerald's green for an illusion, but the frontier can still serve—as Grandin's historical analysis suggests—as a source of cohesion in American life, as a touchstone for identity and belonging that can exist apart from the myths of ethno-cultural solidarity that sustain political societies elsewhere.

Situated as an alternative to the harsh shadow of the border, the frontier may retain more relevance than Grandin is willing to concede. If we accept the terms of Grandin's dialectic, we may find ourselves mulling the question: what more potent

antidote is there to the terrible allure of white supremacy, whose resurgence in American life demands solutions? If the United States has a future as a universalist and assimilatory republic, that future may depend not upon the frontier's transcendence, as Grandin concludes, but upon its resurrection. That Grandin's book opens such far-reaching questions is still a powerful testament to his achievement.

REVIEW BY JOHN A. THOMPSON, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Much has been written over the years about the importance of the idea of western expansion to Americans throughout their history, including such classic studies as Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* as well as, most famously and influentially, Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis.²⁶ As Greg Grandin reminds us, Turner's original paper took off from the Census Office's declaration that in 1890 "there can hardly be said to be a frontier line any longer." Since then, Turner himself and many others have sought to find replacements for the function that Turner saw the ever-receding "area of free land" in the west as having played (124, 113). But Grandin suggests that these substitutes have lost whatever credibility they had, with a consequent souring of American attitudes that is both symbolized by and expressed in the support for President Donald Trump's determination to build a wall along the Mexican border. This argument is developed through a lively historical narrative embellished with many well-chosen quotations and out-of-the-way details. The underlying purpose is clearly to illuminate the current state of the country by tracing the historical origins of the attitudes and emotions that lie behind the support for Trump, and to do so in a manner that would attract a wider readership than Grandin's fellow scholars.

"Settler lust for the land," Grandin points out, pre-dated the founding of the United States. Indeed, he stresses the role of the Royal Proclamation of 1763 prohibiting European settlement west of the Alleghenies in straining loyalty to the Crown; "the Declaration of Independence of 1776 was, among other things, the colonists' counter to the Royal Proclamation of 1763" (49, 23). The Proclamation had been inspired by a concern for the Native American peoples who had been Britain's allies in the Seven Years War and, in line with current scholarship, Grandin stresses that the west was other peoples' territory rather than the 'free land' of Turner's theory. He also reminds us that after independence the United States government made some attempts to protect the territories of the indigenous peoples with whom it made treaties; the 1807 'Intrusion Act' made the unsanctioned settlement of western public land a crime and authorised the use of military force to remove squatters (50). But the federal government lacked the resources to enforce this policy in the face of the sort of defiance that President Andrew Jackson embodied. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 represented the triumph of Jackson's point of view but raised the difficult question of the legal status of such nations as the Cherokee. Here, as elsewhere, Grandin draws upon his wider knowledge of western hemisphere history by making a comparison with the adoption in South America of the Roman law principle of *uti possidetis* ["as you possess"]—without perhaps sufficiently recognizing the different situations in the two continents. The scale of human suffering involved in the forcible dispossession of whole populations is briefly but vividly recounted, along with some of the anguished debate it gave rise to (32-4, 58-65).

The often brutal violence involved in white Americans' drive west is something that Turner rather downplayed in his description of the frontier's steady recession; as Grandin nicely puts it, the individualism Turner celebrated was "more James Stewart than John Wayne." (Surprisingly, this allusion is Grandin's only reference to Hollywood films, which have surely done much to shape Americans' image of the west and to sustain the 'myth' of the frontier.) Interestingly, Grandin contrasts Turner's account with future president Theodore Roosevelt's defense of frontier vigilantism in his slightly earlier narrative of *The Winning of the West*. Roosevelt justified the fate of Native Americans in Darwinian terms: "Let the sentimentalists say what they will, the man who puts the soil to use must of right dispossess the man who does not, or the world will come to a standstill" (119-121).²⁷

In thus advancing an argument that applied also to the settler colonialism taking place at this time in Australia and Africa, and in making no reference to Manifest Destiny, Roosevelt implicitly anticipated one of the standard criticisms of the frontier thesis as an explanation for the distinctive character of the United States—that the experience was not uniquely

²⁶ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1950); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921). This volume contains Turner's original 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and some of his later elaborations.

²⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West* (New York, 1889), volume 1, 133.

American. A second objection has been that it is difficult to see how an experience so specifically confined in both location and time could decisively shape the character of such a large and complex society as the United States. By focussing on the supposed centrality of ‘the myth’ of the frontier, Grandin makes his argument, too, vulnerable to these two criticisms—particularly the second one. A work that says virtually nothing about industrialization and the rise of big business, large-scale European immigration, or the growth of cities can hardly provide an interpretation of the whole of American history. It might be countered that none of these developments do much to explain Trump’s support, but that more narrow definition of the book’s purpose and scope is never explicitly stated.

The latter part of *The End of the Myth*, following the discussion of Turner and his thesis, has three main themes. One is the role of government. Grandin points out that Turner himself acknowledged in a private note that “government *came before the settler*, and gave him land, arranged his transportation, government, etc., etc,” and that “the West of our day relies on national government.” (123) But Grandin also sees the federal government as an alternative and potentially more effective instrument for furthering the equality and opportunity that the frontier mythically promised on an individual basis. He traces this theme back to the Freedmen’s Bureau of the Reconstruction era, described as “the antithesis to Jacksonianism” (103-104) and forward to the critiques of the effects of the frontier in fostering a “self-confident, short-sighted, lawless” individualism by *New Republic* editor, Walter Weyl and other progressive era advocates of “a socialized democracy.” The New Deal represented the partial fulfilment of such progressive hopes but, as Grandin shows, in advocating it President Franklin D. Roosevelt and some of his lieutenants did not challenge the Turnerian interpretation of the frontier’s benign role in the past. Rather, Roosevelt argued that, now that a simple agrarian economy had been superseded by a complex industrial one, collective action through government was the only way to secure what the frontier had provided in the past—essentially a decent standard of living for everyone who was prepared to work (168-176).

A second theme is overseas expansion, and particularly foreign wars. Comparisons between this more recent aspect of United States history and the earlier western advance across the North American continent can certainly be made. Both, for example, might be seen as violent expressions of a militant, self-confident nationalism. But the two experiences were also different in fundamental ways; suggestions that they performed the same economic and social function are unpersuasive.²⁸ In the attempt to trace a continuity, Grandin misrepresents the intervening history. Correctly emphasizing the role of the Spanish-American war in promoting sectional reconciliation and thereby re-legitimizing the Confederacy, he also notes that “thousands of African Americans signed up for the U.S. Army in early 1898” (140). But the following statement that “as the promise of ‘free land’ receded, the various branches of the armed forces became the primary means of social mobility, allowing both whites and, increasingly after 1898, blacks shelter from the capitalist market” (147) concertinas forty years of history. In 1939, the total strength of U.S. armed forces was only 334,000, constituting 0.25% of the nation’s population—hardly enough to play such a significant social role.²⁹ Intervention in World War I had been reluctant and brief, so it can scarcely be said that by the late 1920s “American history was fast turning into an endless public parade of war and more war.” (145). It was only after 1945 that U.S. power was projected globally as it never had been before. Since then, there have of course been a number of foreign wars and covert coups in the third world. But Grandin’s assumption that these have been motivated by a concern to secure the country’s disproportionate consumption of the world’s resources is open to several objections. (198-9, 211).

²⁸ Land was a source of production, markets an outlet for it. So the two were complementary rather than alternatives. Overseas markets absorbed a significantly larger proportion of American production in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries than in the late nineteenth and early twentieth. Robert E. Lipsey, “U.S. Foreign Trade and the Balance of Payments, 1800–1913” in Stanley Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States*, volume II *The Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 685-691; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C., 1975), 887, 903.

²⁹ *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 8, 1141.

The third theme in the later part of the book is the history of the U.S.-Mexican border, a subject closer to Grandin's expertise. The emphasis throughout is on how much Mexicans have suffered at the hands of Americans and on the racist attitudes that have been used to justify the violence and brutality involved. Thus the account of the 1846-48 war highlights the atrocities committed by U.S. troops, particularly the volunteer units commanded by future President Zachary Taylor, which led the U.S. commander Winfield Scott to declare martial law. (88-94). After a description of the 2000-mile border established by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and later Gadsden Purchase (illustrated by a map), Grandin describes the impact of the substantial U.S. investment in the late nineteenth century on the indigenous Yaqui population. The Mexican Revolution gave rise to more violence on the part of the Texas Rangers and other vigilante groups, and in the 1920s by the Ku Klux Klan. The U.S. Border Patrol was established in 1924 as part of the Immigration Act that by drastically reducing immigration from Europe led to a great increase in that from Mexico, a process facilitated by the establishment in 1942 of the Bracero Program under which regulated labor contracts could be offered to migrant workers. This benefited U.S. agribusiness, and, from the mid-1960s, U.S. industries, too, benefitted from cheap Mexican labor by outsourcing their production, a process much accelerated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993. The Border Patrol, according to Grandin, commonly mistreated undocumented Mexican migrants, who have also been the target of vigilante groups who apparently hunt them as they would animals. (145-67, 182, 232-66).

The role of myths is not an easy subject for historians. Usually based on some reality and commonly affecting behavior in the real world, myths are by definition themselves some distance from the truth. Notwithstanding its subtitle, this book is more about history as it happened than the image of it in the minds of Americans. As a historical narrative, it gains from Grandin's range of knowledge, instinctively comparative perspective, and curiosity about detail. An outstanding example of the last is the way he enriches his discussion of the common image of the frontier as a safety-valve by a description of how early nineteenth-century safety valves worked and how important they were at a time when riverboats were frequently blown to pieces by exploding boilers (68-82). The basic argument of the book, which is most clearly set out in the first few pages, is an extended version of the safety-valve thesis. While racist and nativist aggression has been a constant in U.S. history, in the past they have been deflected by "the promise of a limitless frontier"—initially in North America and after that by overseas expansion and economic growth. This belief lost credibility "as the 2007-2008 financial collapse has been followed by a perverse kind of recovery, marked by mediocre rates of investment, stockpiled wealth, soaring stocks, and stagnant wages." The consequent disillusionment and loss of optimism about the future constitutes "the end of the myth" (1-8). But, insofar as this thesis has plausibility, it is dependent on an economic downturn that has been less severe and less widely experienced than some earlier ones. As for the broader history Grandin recounts, it is hard to deny that there does seem to be some continuity in attitudes and behavior between the followers of Andrew Jackson and those of Donald Trump. Again, though, if this is a strand in American history, it should not be taken for more than that.

RESPONSE BY GREG GRANDIN, YALE UNIVERSITY

I started this essay in early March, just before the COVID-19 virus hit Brooklyn. As schools and businesses began to shut down, and teaching (and learning, for our eight-year-old) went remote, I kept thinking: I will come back to it when things calm down. Well.

With the pandemic giving way to nation-wide protest against police repression and forebodings of a second wave of infections, on the eve of what will be a punishing presidential campaign, calm seems a long way off. Now is as good a time any to respond to the thoughtful engagement of *The End of the Myth*. I thank the contributors to this roundtable, Lloyd Gardner, Amy Offner, Daniel Sargent, and John Thompson, and Daniel Immerwahr in the introduction, for their fair readings of the book and useful criticisms. What follows is mostly a discussion of the disagreements, which were very helpful since they offered a chance to think about larger methodological questions.

The current crisis has brought the book's through lines into sharp relief, offering real-time validation, or at least illustration, of many of its arguments. The "nationalization of border brutality," or, in the phrase Gardner highlights, "the borderfication of national politics," is on full display. As the virus rages, the Trump administration leverages the pandemic to push forward more restrictive immigration policies, closing the U.S.-Mexico border and banning green cards and curtailing work visas issued outside the U.S. In south Texas, federal agents use the cover provided by shelter-in-place policies to grab land to speed-up the building of the border wall.³⁰ Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), too, uses public-health restrictions to step up their raids, even as nurses struggle to get masks and other protective equipment. In response to the dissent sparked by the murder of the Minneapolis police officer George Floyd, the White House deployed the Border Patrol, along with its drones, in against citizens. Black Hawk and Lakota helicopters flew low and buzzed crowds, engaging in what is called a "show of force" that uses the rotor wash to terrorize people on the ground, tearing masks off faces, assaulting the assembled with trash and tree branches. It's a common tactic used on the borderlands against entering migrants, as solidarity activists working with groups like No More Deaths can attest. Such use of border tactics, agents, and technology in the heartland highlights a central argument of *The End of the Myth*: the way extremism, which had previously been kept on the margins, the borderlands of national consciousness, has due to the collapse of expansion as an ideological project moved front and center. Meanwhile, Koch-network funds 'open America' protests, which in open-carry states include platoons of heavily armed white men occupying state buildings in defense of their understanding of freedom, with a number of Trump supporters pledging their willingness to sacrifice themselves and their elderly loved-ones if it meant saving capitalism. *The End of the Myth* argues that gratuitous cruelty has become a badge of the contempt that many hold for the political establishment, and now human "culling" has been added to the country's culture wars: "Mother Nature has to clean the barn every so often," a Trump activist said, complaining about the stay-in-place orders. "So what if 1 percent of the population goes? So what if you lose 400,000 people? Two hundred thousand were elderly, the other 200,000 are the bottom of society. You got to clean out the barn. If it's real, it's a positive thing."³¹

It has become commonplace to refer to Trumpism, as an expression of such human disregard, as a death cult. I used that term early in the Trump administration, in an [essay](#) that previewed some of *The End of the Myth*'s arguments. Cultish it is, but the dynamic of the death drive, the way that the United States has resisted socialization on a fundamental level, needs to be specified.

³⁰ Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Border Wall Land Grabs Accelerate as Owners Shelter from Pandemic," *New York Times*, May 29, 2020.

³¹ Travis Gettys, "Woman Who Accused Dr. Anthony Fauci of Sexual Assault Now Claims Trump Supporters Paid her to Lie," *Salon*, May 7th, 2020, https://www.salon.com/2020/05/07/woman-who-accused-dr-anthony-fauci-of-sexual-assault-now-claims-trump-supporters-paid-her-to-lie_partner/.

Here, let me offer as schematic and reductive a description as possible of how I see the workings of the cult: A seemingly infinite frontier, credited with creating seemingly infinite power, nurtured a dominant political culture that defined freedom as freedom from restraint. Mortality, of course, is the final restraint, and frontier expansion was held up as its cure—a fountain of youth, said historian Frederick Jackson Turner, a place of perennial rebirth. Will there be new frontiers? To ask that question, said the historian Walter Prescott Webb in the 1950s, revealed nothing less than the rejection of possibility of death.³² You might as well ask, Webb said, whether there is a human soul. In social terms, such a rejection translates into denying the racialized labor and property regimes that not only led to the accumulation of capital in incalculable amounts but an exceptionally sharp sense of individualized freedom: the dispossession of Native Americans, the expansion of chattel slavery, the conquest of a sizable portion of Mexico, the criminalization of labor migration, counterinsurgent wars against people of color to defeat third-world economic nationalism, trade treaties, such as NAFTA, which enshrined Mexico as a source of low-wage labor, and the militarization of the border.

People of color, in this context, are unwanted reminders of the social basis of individual life, existential rebukes to the idea of freedom as freedom from restraint. Their very existence functions as memento mori, a reminder of limits, evidence that history imposes burdens, that life contracts social obligations, and that, as Tony Kushner once said, attributing the idea to Marx, that the smallest human denominator is two, not one.

This history of racialized labor produces an endless array of generative binaries that gave life to what is often sloppily described as American Exceptionalism, among the most important being that white people are the bearers of sacred individual rights while people of color embody perverse social rights. There's a long history of rhetorical action in the United States that defines any federal initiative aimed at protecting the general welfare as 'slavery,' and resistance to those initiatives as 'freedom.' But after President Barack Obama's 2008 election—in the wake of a massive immigrant-rights movement, and in the aftermath of a catastrophic military campaign and collapse of the postwar growth model, as atmospheric CO2 levels increased and the world marked the hottest years in modern record—such speech acts turned paroxysmal: taxes are slavery; climate-crisis remediation is slavery; the right to health care is slavery; gun control is slavery; abortion is slavery; limits on the sale size of sugary drinks is slavery. Now, wearing masks to help prevent the spread of a virus, even just as a gesture of civic consideration, is slavery.

The pandemic has brought the dissonance discussed above—between an economic system that depends on racialized labor and an ideological system that can not recognize the dependency—into view: in migrant workers simultaneously being deemed “essential” even as they are hunted down and expelled;³³ in the federal government's invocation of the Defense Production Act to keep meat plants open even as contagion rates among their low-wage workers, many of them vulnerable migrants, skyrocket; in the disproportionate impact of the virus on African-Americans and poor, working people who, because of the absence of a humane social-safety net and the importance of their jobs—as nurses, bus drivers, field workers, meatpackers, delivery people—have no choice but to continue to work; and in Washington's threatening Mexico to keep its border factories running, “even as outbreaks erupt and waves of cases and deaths sweep the companies.”³⁴

³² Turner used the phrase, “perennial rebirth,” in his classic 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” reprinted widely including in a 1999 collection (*Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) edited by John Mack Faragher (32 for perennial rebirth). Turner called the frontier a “magic fountain of youth in which America continually bathed and was rejuvenated” in an address on education, edited by Fulmer Mood and published as “Frederick Jackson Turner's Address on Education in a United States without Free Lands, *Agricultural History* 23:4 (1949): 253-59, at 256. For Webb, see *The Great Frontier* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1951), 126.

³³ Miriam Jordan, “Farmworkers, Mostly Undocumented, Become ‘Essential’ During Pandemic,” *The New York Times*, 2 April 2020 [10 April 2020], <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-undocumented-immigrant-farmworkers-agriculture.html>.

³⁴ Natalie Kitroeff, “As Workers Fall Ill, U.S. Presses Mexico to Keep American-Owned Plants Open,” *The New York Times*, 30 April 2020 [2 May 2020]. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/world/americas/coronavirus-mexico-factories.html>.

One of the questions *The End of the Myth* looked to answer is what explains the nation's cultish adherence to individual rights (especially as compared to the social-rights tradition found in countries of the Americas) and refusal to legitimate social rights. But forget social rights. Even the conservative policy reforms Obama championed, based on the idea that the general welfare requires some restraint on individual freedom, are taken as something viler than heresy. They implied limits, and limits violate the premise that it all can go on forever. Being forced to recognize social dependence, to accept limits, to admit there might be an end, transmutes fear of death into its opposite, death's embrace, not as nirvana but aggression. As Trumpism, the 'death cult' everyone is talking about.

Daniel Sargent reads *The End of the Myth* as simply accepting Turner's argument that the frontier created "an unprecedented expansion of the ideal of political equality." "The old regime was built upon dispossession and removal," Sargent writes, meaning to summarize my position: "but it had at least exalted" human freedom. This misses the argument. Expansion did not "at least" exalt freedom. The idea of freedom, defined as freedom from restraint, was dependent on dispossession and removal, through a violent reaction-formation whereby white men measured their sovereign selves—self-possessed, self-governed, self-controlled, self-regulated—against subjected people of color. "Never before in history could so many white men consider themselves so free," winning a "greater liberty by putting down people of color" and then defining that "liberty in opposition to the people of color they put down" (67). The psychic and social trauma of nineteenth-century capitalism—which deepened the ideational schism between self and community, between existence and nature, and which simultaneously elevated the ideology of the patriarchal family even as commodification and finance eroded the material foundation of that family, which called forth the fiction of the individual even as wage labor, debt and monopoly power undercut the individual—was sublimated into racial violence. The very notion of a bounded, sovereign self with inherent individual rights is created in race war, conquest, and chattel slavery. And ongoing race violence, in all its many physical and rhetorical forms, kept the creation alive. Individual supremacy is white supremacy. That's my working definition of racial capitalism, a term I did not use in the book but one that shapes my thinking.

Amy Offner wonders why I chose to focus on the Freedman's Bureau and the New Deal, since both moments represent the rationalization of capitalist labor relations. By highlighting these periods in U.S. history, Offner fears I am marginalizing radical social movements. *The End of the Myth* devotes a chapter each to the Freedman's Bureau and the New Deal, taking both as challenges to the myth of endlessness. But I do not ignore more militant challenges. For instance, I argue that Turner's mythification of the frontier was a reaction to confrontational trade unionism, radical feminism, anti-racism socialism, and anarcho-syndicalism—as represented by, among others, Eugene Debs (who put forth a socialist version of the Frontier Thesis), Alice Paul (who refused to compromise her suffragism by making peace with President Woodrow Wilson's militarism), A. Philip Randolph (socialist, civil rights activists, and labor organizer), and the cowboy, miner, and ranch-hand radicals of the Industrial Workers of the World. I define Turner's influential approach to history as legitimating Wilson's World-War-One persecution of the U.S. left, which resulted to the destruction of a vibrant socialist movement.

Offner's concern deserves a more substantive response. I believe that to understand an historical moment is to understand its potential contradictions, not the unfolding of actualized contradictions. One of the objectives of the Bureau was undoubtedly what, in other contexts, scholars call capitalist modernization. But radical anti-racist and Marxist sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, in 1935, appreciated the Bureau's work in the U.S.'s larger historical context, of chattel slavery and white supremacy, believing it "the most extraordinary and far-reaching institution of social uplift that America has ever attempted," an assault not just on the propertied power of the southern planter class but on all the ideological props of that power, including the fetish of limited government and individual rights.³⁵ The historical importance of something also should be judged by the reaction it generates, and the backlash to the Bureau was intense. It did seek to jump-start the cotton economy and establish a plantation labor market. But that is not all it did: education, health care, welfare, food, refugee settlement, the administration of justice, all under the command of an occupying army. The backlash crystalized, and revitalized for new times, the Jacksonian consensus, creating, especially in President Andrew Johnson's campaign against

³⁵ *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in an Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1935).

the Bureau, the ‘common sense’ that would be used to racialize the federal bureaucracy and social welfare in the decades to come.

Likewise, I spend significant time arguing that NAFTA and the corporate upscaling of U.S. agriculture flowed directly out of policies put into place by the New Deal. That point is central to my argument: that the terms of the ideological crisis that overwhelmed the country in the 1960s, and that powered the New Right, were embedded in the New Deal. That doesn’t make the New Deal’s dramatic expansion of the ideals of social citizenship and cultural pluralism, no matter how inadequately those ideals were manifest in policy, any less earth-shaking. I am a ‘Bernie Bro dead-end,’ despite the fact that I know that all of Senator Bernie Sanders’ campaign proposals would have made capitalism run smoother—smoother, that is, were they to be enacted in a vacuum where ideological contradictions and elite overreaction did not have material effects.

Offner says that *The End of the Myth* makes no “mention of mass deportations of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans that began under Herbert Hoover and declined but did not end under [Franklin] Roosevelt.” Not so. I draw on heavily on Kelly Lytle Hernández’s scholarship to discuss what she calls the Hoover administration’s “criminalization of informal border crossings,” and how Hoover officials responded to mass unemployment with massive deportations (see 164-165).³⁶ I then (around page 182) write that President Roosevelt’s Bracero program was an “update” of Hoover’s criminalization, “channeling Mexican migrants into two distinct streams. In one stream were those outside the Bracero Program; they remain criminalized, subject to imprisonment and prosecution The number of apprehensions skyrocketed, with annual deportations by 1952 pushing close to a million.” In the other stream, “Bracero workers were legal, but largely unprotected by labor law.” I go on to link the end of the Bracero program in the 1960s to changes in tariff law that would eventually lead to NAFTA, and to border militarization, all in the context of Vietnam and shifts in immigration policy.

I appreciate Danial Sargent’s explication of the book but feel his three main criticisms, broken down into smaller points, miss the mark. The first has to do with distinguishing between ideology and interest: Sargent suggests that perhaps the United States’ post-WWII stance was less rooted in the faith of endless expansion, and the conceit of universalism that such a faith allows, than “imperial burden.” “Mobilizing an anti-Communist alliance of nation-states may have served U.S. security interests,” Sargent writes, “but it is not so clear that waging a global Cold War served American economic interests.” Let’s set aside that we can’t know what the growth rate would have been had the Washington followed a different postwar policy, as well as the old argument over what motivated U.S. economic policy during the Cold War (on these topics, see the debate between Rick Perlstein and Noam Chomsky, among others).³⁷ I do not make a distinction between interest (defined either in terms of security or economics) and ideology. Both categories of human experience are endlessly recursive and mutually constitutive; Interests are not so transparent, and even if they could be isolated, their relationship to ideology and political action is neither clear-cut nor unidirectional.

Continuing under the rubric of his first criticism, Sargent writes: “If the failure of the Cold War frontier to serve U.S. economic interests has been tangible for half a century (since at least the second half of Nixon’s first term) “why did Trumpism not explode until the recent past?” *The End of the Myth* offers this answer: Reaganism, which resanctified the U.S. mission, and Clintonism, which expanded and codified the mission through what we now call economic globalization. These answers are not “imputed,” as Sargent writes, but presented in detail in the book’s last three chapters: “More, More, More” focuses on the Reagan Revolution’s restoration of the idea of frontier limitlessness; “The New Preemptor” deals with Clinton’s institutionalization of that idea in trade treaties, even as he turned “illegal alien” into a triangulator’s term of art; and “Crossing the Blood Meridian” describes how the post-Vietnam restoration came to an end, placing details (wars, tax

³⁶ For Kelly Lytle Hernández, see *Migra! A History of the US Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010) and *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

³⁷ John Halle, “A Cold War History Colloquy: A Discussion on PPS-23: Rick Perlstein, Greg Grandin, Seth Ackerman, Andrew Harman and Noam Chomsky,” John Halle (blog), <https://johnhalle.com/political-writing/a-cold-war-history-colloquy/>, 2013.

cuts, growing nativism within the Republican Party, climate crisis, immigration policy, and the reaction to Barack Obama) in an overarching argument: yes, the 1970s was an age of limits, as was recognized, as Sargent points out, by President Nixon. Reagan and Clinton, among others, re-inflated the bubble. No matter how daunting the crisis caused by Vietnam, third world nationalism, and the end of Keynesianism half a century ago, today's unfolding climate catastrophe is existential. I agree with Naomi Klein that the only thing more frightening than a nativism that denies the climate crisis—that denies limits—is a nativism that believes in it, that uses the threat of scarcity to legitimate tribalism and brutal policies—building walls and caging kids, for example, and doing so with glee—and I trace the pre-history of Trumpism to the 1970s, to what at the time was called eco-fascism.³⁸

Sargent's second criticism turns on the problem of comparison, or "the problem of exceptionalism" as he writes, wondering just how unique the experience of the U.S. frontier, and the U.S. empire is, compared to other frontiers and empires. This, too, is an old question, with scholars long pointing out that many other countries have frontiers (Brazil, for example, or Russia, Colombia, Mexico, China, and so on). Sargent here also draws from more recent scholarship that downplays the importance of nationalism and posits 'empire' as a transhistorical phenomenon, from Emperor Hadrian to the Ming Dynasty. I do not find much of interest in this interpretive turn, since it shades the historical specificity of capitalism. As discussed above, *The End of the Myth* is concerned with the racialized process of individuation, in all its ideological and psychic dimensions, a process that I take as related to capitalist extraction, property relations, and labor hierarchies.

The frontier thesis, as applied to the United States, has many uses. Turner used it to translate the terms of critical continental philosophy, including that of Hegel and Marx, into an "American" vernacular. Later, writing in the 1960s and 1970s, New Left scholars such as William Appleman Williams, Michael Rogin, and Richard Slotkin used the idea of the frontier to return the focus to capitalism, along with empire and what is now called settler-colonialism.³⁹ In any case, my premise is that U.S. capitalism (and the way it manifests in ideology) is exceptional in terms of form, substance, and consequence. All countries have borders, and many, as Sargent notes, have frontiers and walls. Only the United States has had a frontier that has served as a proxy for human liberation, synonymous with the possibilities and promises of modern life itself and held out as a model for the rest of the world to emulate. And while all countries have borders, many frontiers and walls, only the United States has had a Department of the Interior that, as Megan Black in her important book, *The Global Interior: Mineral Frontiers and American Power*, shows, expanded the institutions of domestic settler colonialism and resource extraction abroad.⁴⁰ Turner thought the 99th meridian, where the prairie meets the desiccated plains, to be as good a place as any to symbolically mark the frontier. Beyond this line, tenacious, inventive men figured out ways to irrigate dry land and to think of history as progress, as moving toward an ever more bountiful future. It was here where the U.S. became liberal and internationalist, where it learned to "feed the world," even as, as Black points out, it was learning how to extract the world's resources, and justify that extraction in the name of common humanity. Williams, Rogin, and even Turner knew that to talk about the frontier is to talk about capitalism, about its power and possibility, and to transform its drive toward

³⁸ Klein has made this argument in *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), as well as in follow-up interviews for the book.

³⁹ For Williams, see *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1959), *The Contours of American History* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1961), *The Roots of the Modern American Empire* (New York: Random House, 1969), and *Empire as a Way of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). For Rogin, see *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976); *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1979); and *Ronald Reagan: The Movie* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). For Slotkin, see his frontier trilogy: *Regeneration Through Violence* (Wesleyan: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); *The Fatal Environment* (New York: MacMillan, 1985); and *Gunfighter Nation* (New York: Atheneum 1992).

⁴⁰ Megan Black, *The Global Interior: Mineral Frontiers and American Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

expansion into a promise of boundlessness. Trump figured out that to talk about the border, and a wall, was a way to acknowledge capitalism's limits, its pain and brutality, without having to challenge capitalism's terms.

As to the problem of exceptionalism and the comparative method: the best way to understand the nature of a thing is to compare it to something else. I hardly "lament," as Sargent says I do, the failure of the U.S. to adopt a model of Bismarckian welfare state. But I do take the persistence of the fetish of individual rights, the adherence to a notion of freedom as freedom from restraint, and the ongoing racialization of social rights, which gives coherence to disparate factions of the conservative movement, to be historical problems worthy of specific focus. I know that in the dark all cats are grey, but, before the lights go out completely, we should differentiate. Besides, a more substantive criticism of the book would be its failure to try to explain Trumpism within a larger context of the neoliberal authoritarians who have emerged over the last decade, in such countries as India, Brazil, Russia, Hungary, and the Philippines.

Sargent's third criticism has to do with agency, structure, and sources. I am confused, though, whether he thinks that I am (by making a strong argument about the use of the confederate flag as a banner of post-1898 reconciliation) structurally ignoring the agency of his friend, who says in Vietnam he would never have tolerated flying the St. Andrew's Cross. Or if I am inconsistent, betraying *The End of the Myth's* structural argument by ending it with the actions of border vigilantes. I am belaboring the point, but I do not find the distinction between structure and agency, nor analysis and morality for that matter, any more useful than the separation of ideology and interests. Individuals are bearers of structures, structures allow fuller access to individuals, and in constructing a compelling, internally coherent historical narrative one needs to wrestle with figuring out how to organize the parts so that the whole has meaning, while still recognizing the integrity of the parts.

I cannot parse the meaning of Sargent's meditations on guilt, responsibility, and benefit, but he seems to suggest that I, at the end of the day, assign responsibility to "select bad actors—white nationalists, including veterans-turned-vigilantes; rapacious, but often faceless, corporations; and Donald Trump and his circle of enablers." There's the chapter on NAFTA, long discussions of the Democratic Party, including passages on presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. The book does not end on individual 'malfeasance' but rather with a detailed description of the nativist realignment of the Republican Party, as related to the collapse of bipartisan military, border, and economic policy. Nor is the point to present vigilantes as villainous. They have little agentive power over the historical processes that have led them and us to the brink of catastrophe, including rising CO2 levels, structural stagnation, the delinking of wage compensation from socially necessary labor, and the desacralization of war and foreign policy. I present them, in wrapping up the book, as history's lost boys, caught beyond the blood meridian. Their last words are of longing, offered by one veteran who, having suffered multiple injuries and stress disorders in Iraq and Afghanistan, hopes the desert might calm his nightmares and give him 'new memories.'

Of course, there were people who objected to the flying of the Confederate flag in Vietnam, and elsewhere, or who perhaps never noticed that the banner yet waved. One account has a New Englander complaining after U.S. troops raised the confederate flag over Shuri Castle in Okinawa and gave out a Rebel Yell: "Should we sing 'Dixie?'" The flag flew for two days, after which Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., whose father, Simon Bolivar Buckner, fought for the United States in the Mexican-American War and for the Confederacy in the Civil War, ordered it taken down: "Now, let's get on with the war."⁴¹

Sargent uses his friend's anecdote to ask this question: "One wonders whether a historian with a different story to tell could have mined similar archives—i.e. vast databases of digitized news stories—and sustained quite different conclusions?" I doubt there is a substantive difference between extensive digital databases and limited paper repositories. But 'wonder' is hardly called for since there is no end to revisionist histories, based on whatever kind of archive, of the Vietnam War. Anyway, are we really debating that a single dissent negates the large compilation of African-American testimony, both digitized and in print, narrating their experience in Vietnam of confederate flags and cross burnings, especially after Martin

⁴¹ I discuss Okinawa in *The End of the Myth* on page 146 but this anecdote can be found in Irving Werstein, *Okinawa: The Last Ordeal* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company Publishers 1968), 157.

Luther King Jr's murder, or the argument, made by King himself, among others, that the war fueled racial conflict at home and abroad? Sargent's friend might not have seen it in Vietnam, but it took until 2020, in response to the George Floyd protests, for the Marines to ban the Confederate flag "from individual offices and storage spaces to naval vessels and government vehicles," as well as on "things like mugs, bumper stickers and posters."⁴²

Sargent ends his essay with what I take to be his normative standpoint: "the politics of social solidarity depend upon borders and the enactment of exclusion This is the tragedy of the modern nation-state: exclusion has been the price for whatever social inclusion it has achieved." Sargent points to "scenes of brutal exclusion enacted from Calais and Lampedusa to Manus and Nauru" as evidence to back his assertion. This response has gone on too long, and I cannot here engage with the ongoing debate regarding social democracy and immigration. But I do want to point out the dangerous slipperiness of this position. Why naturalize national borders as the setting the proper bounds of inclusion/exclusion? Today's race realists would simply extend the premise, and ask 'why not skin color?' After all, one only need look at the "scenes of brutal exclusion enacted" in Ferguson, Powderhorn Park, Tulsa, Colfax, Wilmington, Satilla Shores to say that racial subordination is "the price for whatever social inclusion it has achieved." National lines are historical artifacts, no less so than what Du Bois over a century ago called the "color line."⁴³ Border are products of an accreted past, of wars, differential rates of capital accumulation, labor migration, wage arbitrage, settlement, and dispossession. They should not, especially by historians paid to know that things change over time, be cited as immutable divisors of who has rights and who does not. In any case, the United States has long been a nation where many inside the line have been treated little better than those outside the line.

It is an honor to have the book closely read by Lloyd Gardner, who, as a student of William Appleman Williams, recognizes its intent. For over half a century, Gardner has been a model of engaged scholar, and I am glad he spent a large part of his essay explicating what I meant by the "Pact of 1898," as it relates to confederate symbology. He is right that Trump says the quiet part—that is, the pact's white supremacy—out loud, which before Vietnam remained muted so long as the U.S. could credibly claim to be waging war in the name of humanity. As I write this response, Trump just tweeted that he opposed renaming military bases named after Confederate officers since it would betray the nation's 'Great American Heritage.' Perhaps, as Gardner suggests, the border-fication of national politics is a way to continue bipartisan patronage, where "conservatives and liberals get all they want, while the president gets more opportunities to shift money around just as he pleases," what the progressive historian Vernon Parrington, writing of the frontier land and resource grab, described in the 1920s as a "great barbecue," a great democratic feast where the barons and corporations were served the choice meat and the common folks got the scrapes.⁴⁴ In the last year alone, border-wall related federal contracts disbursed many billions of dollars. The snouts are still at the trough. What is different though, and a main argument of the book, is that the end of faith in limitlessness has ended the possibility of political realignment, of a new governing coalition taking shape that can invest the greed with moral meaning. All that's left is the gluttony—and the cruelty.

John Thompson's main objection seems to be that I overstate my case, and perhaps I do. Such a judgement, though, is valid only if we are overstating the present crisis, which I do not think we are. It is not often that current events confirm, if not the conclusions than at least the premises of one's argument: the Covid crisis has distilled the Trump crisis, even as the Trump crisis distils the general crisis. Of my "broader history," Thompson writes that "it is hard to deny that there does seem to be some continuity in attitudes and behavior between the followers of Andrew Jackson and those of Donald Trump.

⁴² "Marines Ban Depictions of the Confederate Flag, Including on Bumper Stickers and Mugs," *CNN*, June 7, 2020, found at History News Network, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/175856>.

⁴³ "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 903), 13.

⁴⁴ *Main Currents in American Thought*, 3 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927-30), vol. 3, 23-24.

Again, though, if this is a strand in American history, it should not be taken for more than that.” That depends on the question.

I do disagree with Thompson’s separation of “history as it happens” from “the image” of history, in the same way that I disagree with the separation of ideology and interests, or structure from agency. His doubt, though, is apposite: how to explain the reproduction of ideology down the ages. “It is difficult to see how an experience so specifically confined in both location and time could decisively shape the character of such a large and complex society as the United States. I gloss the problem in the book’s “A Note on Sources and Other Matters,” as well as in the introduction: “There is a lot to unpack in the argument that over the long course of U.S. history, endless expansion, either over land or through markets and militarism, deflects domestic extremism. How, for example, might historical traumas and resentments, myths and symbols, be passed down the centuries from one generation to another? Did the United States objectively need to expand in order to secure foreign resources and open markets for domestic production? Or did the country’s leaders just believe they had to expand?” When these sorts of arguments were being made in the 1960s and 1970, some scholars said that expansion let the U.S. ‘buy off’ its domestic white skilled working class. Others stressed the political benefits of expansion, drawing on Madison’s *Federalist* #10 (“extend the sphere....”). Others emphasized more Freudian, even Jungian, motives, including the sublimation of deep-seated violent fantasies formed in long-ago wars against people of color. I did not want to replicate these efforts, since to do so would have meant going deep into the weeds. And, ultimately, such specifically causal relations are impossible to establish.⁴⁵

This historical problem circles back to Amy Offner’s suggestion that I have much in common with the ‘consensus historians,’ including Richard Hofstadter and Louis Hartz, in that I do not pay enough attention to counter traditions. Finding “few alternatives” to an air-tight ideology, *The End of the Myth* “erases still more possibilities and tensions that have run through U.S. history.” ‘Erase’ is a strong verb, and I do not think that a book, by not covering a topic, ‘erases’ that topic (though, as I mentioned earlier, the threat of radical alternatives is central to my argument). In any case, this is a criticism that New Left scholars often faced. Michael Denning, for instance, called Michael Rogin’s *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (1975) “negative consensus history,” inverting “the celebratory mode of most consensus interpretations of American politics” even as it shares “their minimization of internal political conflict.”⁴⁶ Williams, as James Livingston pointed out in his wonderful 1990 *In These Times* obituary, found no usable past, no consciousness that was not structured by empire. The New Left cracked up, and social historians began to excavate counter traditions and cultures, ideologies not subsumed by frontier myths, racist wars, imperial expansion, much less inescapable psychic traumas and Jungian collective shadows, downplaying arching concepts such as the ‘Jacksonian consensus’ or even ‘market revolution.’

Rogin, in response to Denning, conceded that “Indian conflict may not have generated working class nationalism,” but insisted that “neither did a widely supported, lasting political alternative emerge.” Counter-traditions must not be “confused with elaborated political opposition.” I would add that in the case of the United States, any counter movement hoping to bring about a more humane, sustainable world, needs to reckon with the fact that so far in the United States there has been no expansion of legal equality—from suffrage to abolition, from labor to civil rights—that was not correlated with, if not predicated on, expansion. Those fighting to expand the realm of social freedom will have to develop a coherent agenda that reflect a new reality, a reality where domestic politics can no longer be organized around the idea of endless growth, and

⁴⁵ Barrington Moore usefully summarizes scholarship on what he calls “imperative imperialism,” in his 1972 (Boston: Beacon Press) book *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery and Certain Proposals to Eliminate Them*, including work associated with Monthly Review Press and the Frankfurt School.

⁴⁶ Denning’s remark was a personal communication to Rogin, which Rogin reproduced, and responded to, in the 1991 edition of *Fathers and Children*. See also Denning’s “The Special American Conditions: Marxism and American Studies,” *American Quarterly* vol. 38 (1986), 356-380, for further discussion of leftwing negative consensus histories.

where progress at home at home can no longer ride on the back of national power abroad. I take Offner's point, but the responsibility of a book is to answer the question it lays out: Why Trumpism now?