

The Frontier

Part Three: Aggression

by Bill Herbst

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Various themes underlie the stories Americans tell ourselves about the frontier — unlimited expansion, economic opportunity, rugged individualism, etc. Central to the frontier, at least in its mythic dimension, was (and still is) *aggression*. In the 19th century version of the frontier myth, guns and violence were core facets of American aggressiveness, with war and militarism following close after.

We live in a violent world. At the cosmic level, the universe constantly creates and destroys on a scale that dwarfs the imagination. Our local star the Sun, source of Life here on Earth, is nonetheless a bomb that explodes perpetually for billions of years and will eventually consume our planet in fire. On the Earth, nature is violent. Sex is violent. Is it any wonder, then, that humans are also violent in our effects on the landscape and our interactions with each other? No, that's not *all* we are — humans are capable of great love and tender compassion — but aggression is woven into the very fabric of our DNA. We are not, by any stretch of the imagination, an inherently peaceful species.

The idea that America is a violent country and that Americans as a people love violence is not news. Nothing I write here is likely to add fresh information or deeper insight to that knowledge. My intention in this three-part series on the frontier myth that has been so fundamental to the American character is not revelation, but transformation. That will take another page or two to set up, so bear with me.

In America's mythic history, especially during the 19th century, the western frontier was a zone of raw, primal conflicts. Life was often reduced to the struggle for survival. The plow was essential and practical, but the gun was different — not a mere tool, but more like a sacred talisman. For a farmer breaking sod on the plains, a double-barreled shotgun was a more practical weapon than a Colt .45 or Winchester repeating rifle, but the latter two have achieved legendary status as the guns that "won the west."

The manufacture of firearms literally kick started the Industrial Revolution, and America led the way. Until the end of the 18th century, rifles and pistols were forged and built one at a time by skilled craftsman. Parts from one gun didn't fit any other. Guns were prized as pieces of art and priced accordingly. That changed in America when Eli Whitney applied the European concept of assembly

line production using interchangeable parts — not for cotton gins or sewing machines, but for firearms. Guns became affordable for everyone, and they sold like hotcakes. Mass production of other goods then followed suit. Henry Ford achieved fame for the assembly line Model T, but the Whitney Armory more than a century earlier was more revolutionary.

Americans love their guns. Almost half of the small firearms — pistols and rifles — in the world are held by Americans. We own almost 400 million guns. Needless to say, the easy availability of lethal firearms in America contributes to the rising epidemic of gun violence. No other country in the world experiences anywhere close to the number of mass shootings that occur in America, now seemingly every week. Yes, it's a problem of laws, but it's also a problem of national character that is so much a part of our frontier mythology.

Even our entertainment reveals the penchant for violence. Movies and TV shows are filled with it. But violence as entertainment goes far beyond Hollywood. The video gaming industry is massive, with annual revenues far surpassing the combined sales of Hollywood entertainment and music. Virtual mayhem is the mother's milk of video games. Some people claim that fictional violence desensitizes us to actual violence, while others believe it a necessary outlet, effectively a subliminal release. I don't know if either view is objectively correct, but displays of violence seem to be just about everywhere we turn in America.

Often, America's aggressive tendencies have been expressed through war. Over our first century, these organized, armed conflicts occurred within the North American continent: The Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, The Indian Wars, the Mexican War, the Civil War. In the 20th century, American wars moved far beyond our borders: the Spanish-American War and Philippine Insurrection, World War One, then World War Two, Korea, and Vietnam. In the 21st century, we adopted perpetual war: Afghanistan and Iraq.

Eventually, America became a militarized society. That took awhile, but once locked in after World War Two, when (for better or worse) we took on the role of global policeman, there was no pulling back from the growth of the military-industrial complex. Not only does the American military currently maintain 800 bases around the world in foreign countries and territories, but civilian law enforcement in domestic society has been militarized to an extent never imagined by our grandparents and great-grandparents. Increasingly, cities resemble garrisons. America's Congressionally-approved military budget now approaches \$1 trillion annually. Hardly any Senator or Representative in Congress dares to oppose that staggering expense for fear of being labeled "unpatriotic," not to mention incurring the wrath of military contractors and support companies that comprise such an essential part of many states' economies.

What is to be done about all this? Is there any way to transform the feral aggressiveness of human beings — and American aggression in particular — into a form that is less violent and destructive?

Those who hope for a mass awakening of humanity into some idealized state of spiritual grace — like the song “Age of Aquarius” from the 1967 Broadway musical “Hair” — are, I fear, deluded, or, at least, a bit naïve. (As an aside, that song’s opening line, *“When the Moon is in the 7th house and Jupiter aligns with Mars, then peace will guide the planets, and love will steer the stars,”* is REALLY bad astrology. The entire song is silly as hell, with the lyricists clearly reveling in their mocking of hippiedom...) The longing for “enlightenment” simply isn’t common enough among humans to galvanize a collective awakening.

That said, there is, I think, a way that is fast approaching to transform aggression into collectively unified purpose. It’s coming because we now face the likelihood of suffering on an inconceivable scale, possibly ending in the extinction of our own and many other species. Coming together in total commitment won’t be easy, and it may not emerge soon enough, but the looming crisis of catastrophic climate change caused by humans will propel the transformation.

For a host of reasons, humanity cannot count on its leaders, policy-makers, or privileged elites to give up the status quo of business-as-usual in favor of the truly radical and revolutionary changes that need to occur if we are to minimize the global devastation of climate disruption. The change will have to come from the ground up, from the people themselves. That groundswell is beginning, but we have a long way to go before those at the top get the message, and only a short time (less than a decade) to make it happen.

What will be required in America and elsewhere is a complete mobilization, along lines somewhat similar to America’s astonishing conversion to an all-out war economy in 1942. This new mobilization will be different in many ways, of course, and much more challenging.

Over the coming weeks and months, I intend to write numerous commentaries about the urgency of climate mobilization and the steps necessary to achieve it. No topic is more important to me.

Even if Americans wanted to, laying to rest the mythology of the frontier is probably beyond our power. But perhaps we can transmute the historical meanings of the frontier by updating the legacy to new forms. Will a mass mobilization to address catastrophic climate change let us appreciate our limits to change economics and how we live? It has to. Will it rid us of the marked tendency for some humans to dominate, subjugate, and control the rest of humanity? Probably not. Will it end racism and all the subtler forms of enslavement that still beset us? I doubt it. Will it end violence, war, and militarism? Not by itself. Despite that, the coming mobilization may be our best chance — and perhaps our last — to evolve humanity and civilization beyond our disturbed adolescence toward greater maturity.