10. American Wests—American Domain

The United States entered the twentieth century as a fully transcontinental republic and nation. Half a century of imperial conquest and management and the accompanying swirl of migrations, colonizations, and exploitations had spread an
American population over all this western half of the country. Even though it was, on the whole, still thinly settled compared to the rest, containing only a little more than 4 million of the 76 million enumerated in the 1900 census, there could be little doubt but that it would continue to grow in population and productions. Powerful business interests, lavishly aided by the federal government in some cases, had firmly bound all these distant centers and regions into the primary networks of the nation. Within a few years the transformation of the remaining territories into states would complete the formation of a transcontinental federation. In short, what had been no more than a vast imperial sphere of potential attraction and development in 1850 had become an integral domain of a vigorously developing nation in 1900.

Our review of this half century of developments has emphasized the distinct character of each major region and hence the necessity of thinking in terms of American Wests rather than a single great entity. Nevertheless it is also important to recognize what these areas have in common when viewed in this larger, national perspective. Obviously one thing they share is the very fact of this transformation, this eventual functional integration with the older half of the nation, and there were some common features of that process. Viewed broadly, a four-stage sequence can be readily recognized:

1. *Migration and Implantation.* Each of these areas was far removed from the main body of the nation and could be reached only by long journeys by land or by sea. Such movements require some special compelling attraction and tend to be highly selective of migrants. The initial nucleus must perforce begin in a high degree of isolation, with only seasonal or occasional connections to source and market areas. Formal government is likely to be capacious in frame but rudimentary in substance.

2. *Experimental Adaptation to New Environmental Conditions.* Physical conditions in the American West were sufficiently different from those in the East as to preclude the routine transfer of familiar agricultural and, in some cases, industrial practices, and in most regions major alterations were required. Furthermore, none of these areas was uninhabited, and in some cases deep-rooted populations were present in such numbers as to require sociopolitical adaptations by the invading Americans.

3. *Expansion and Regional Formation.* A continuing influx of migrants opens up new resources and leads to the occupation of all readily exploitable areas, creating a system of settlements connected by transport networks and focused on a regional capital. A distinct regional society emerges, attempts to shape a geopolitical frame-
work to fit its territorial aspirations, and retains a high potential for cultural divergence from the still-remote national society.

4. Articulation and National Integration. The extension of national trunk-line railroads revolutionizes time, mode, efficiency, and costs of contact with the main body of the nation. New inflows of people and capital begin to have major impacts on settlements, economic developments, and marketing; there are increasing pressures toward national control and cultural conformity, but regional distinctions based on marked physical and sociocultural differences persist.

Applying this general sequence to the six major regions reveals both the shared patterns and the anomalies to be expected among such a diverse set of areas (fig. 32). Among the greatest variations was the contrast in the opening stage between a Gold Rush California and a New Mexico annexed not for its own resources but because it provided access to that Pacific province. As for stage 2, Oregon required the least adaptation and Utah the most, for the Mormons had no direct experience with irrigation (but they at least understood the challenge they were facing, whereas the Mediterranean-type climate of California was unfamiliar to Americans and necessitated extensive experimentation). Colorado was anomalous in its late initiation and quick railroad connections so that its regional formation was simultaneous with heavy national investment. National integration was of course a powerful process for all these regions, but with marked variation in immediate geographic impact: bringing the least change to an already complexly developed California, the most to the physically complex Pacific Northwest with its divergent and competitive Columbia River and Puget Sound foci. The impact of new people and alterations in social geography during this stage were most apparent in Mormonland, New Mexico, and Southern California.

For all the importance of those iron bands connecting these Wests with the nation, there remained important distinctions of the West as a whole within the bounds of the United States. There was the sheer distance from the national core, the visible, experiential separation of East and West by those intervening open plains. Even the fastest trains took more than a day or a night to cross the narrowest band, between Omaha and Denver. Furthermore, there was the divergent pull of another ocean—hardly discernible perhaps in Colorado, minor in New Mexico, but palpable in Mormonland and powerful upon all within the real Pacific Slope. The attraction was not simply the existence of a great ocean and its invitation to the seacoasts of the world but the strong lure of vigorously developing American societies on that coast with their widely heralded resources and potentials.

Most obvious was the simple fact that this West was a different kind of country, a
land and climate unlike anything in the East. Generalizations about that difference often foundered—then as now—on the great variety within the West, for it contained the wettest as well as the driest areas of the country, the hottest as well as some of the coldest, the highest as well as the lowest, scenes of rugged grandeur as well as some of the most monotonous of countrysides. No one could move here from the East without encountering those differences, look upon these landscapes without seeing the great contrasts with former homelands, experience Western seasons without feeling the change, till this ground for farm or garden without making adjustments in familiar practices. Those differences were what prompted the great series of government-sponsored surveys of Western lands (the most famous of which we now commonly identify by the names of their leaders: King, Hayden, Wheeler, Powell). Their massive, often beautifully illustrated reports and maps of geology, natural history, and physical geography were not merely contributions to science but tools to be put to use in developing the resources of these strange lands.

Furthermore, these great surveys were themselves a step toward what would become another general contrast between East and West: the continuing major role of the federal government in Western life. That unprecedented intervention arose in large part from those contrasts in geography, from the fact that American policies designed to transfer public lands into family farms simply could not work as intended in most Western areas. Thus “although Congress wanted to replicate existing landholding patterns, agricultural systems, and republican institutions in the West,” not only did colonization processes, settlement patterns, and developmental sequences fail to follow Eastern precedents, a large proportion of the land (even after lavish distributions to railroads, states, and various special recipients) remained under federal control. How to find ways to bring these lands into beneficial use called forth extraordinary efforts and instruments, including not only those special surveys (and the famous rejection of John Wesley Powell’s program for the Arid Region as too radical a departure from established land survey and allocation systems) but also the institutionalization of such study in the U.S. Geological Survey, the establishment of extensive government-administered reserves of lands (such as national forests and parks), and federal irrigation developments under the National Reclamation Act of 1902 (sixteen projects were authorized within the first three years). The administration of these activities produced an increasingly professional and centralized bureaucracy that was “often more powerful than local political interests in the West.” Thus, just as the Bureau of Indian Affairs became a permanent fixture rather than an agency designed to terminate its own special business through the transformation of its wards into citizens, so, as Richard White noted,
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The federal bureaucracies of the land office and the territorial system were only to be a giant administrative scaffolding from which officials and citizens together would build models of older states. When they were finished the scaffolding would come down and the new states would stand as duplicates of the old.

Much of the scaffolding did eventually come down, but other sections of this administrative framework remained, and in fact the government began elaborating and adding to the framework until the scaffolding, in altered form, became a permanent fixture in the West.

Thus an unusual degree of "dependence on the federal government has been a central reality of western politics" and has helped shape a special political concern and character that is recognizable throughout the region even though varied in its particular state expression and rarely cohesive in any broader sense ("there has been no western equivalent of the solid South").

Although all the territorial scaffolding did eventually come down, it stood for much longer over much of the West than elsewhere because of those great differences in land and peoples. The thinness of populations over large areas for long periods of time retarded statehood in numerous cases (Washington was under federal territorial administration for thirty-six years), while the presence of captive, nonconforming peoples retarded the admissions of Utah, New Mexico, and Oklahoma even longer (sixty-two years for New Mexico). And the great spaciousness of the West, the wide separation of its several nuclear settlement areas, became built into the federal system. Aside from the State of Washington, with its great watery indentations, all the eleven westernmost states were larger than any state to the east (excepting of course the obvious anomaly of Texas, which was not a congressional design), averaging over 100,000 square miles, twice the average size of those in the older Transappalachian West. Even so, given their populations, almost all of these states enjoyed representation in the U.S. Senate far greater than comparable populations elsewhere—thus enhancing their voice in pertinent federal policies.

Finally, the West was distinguished by the presence of particular peoples, though each was unevenly distributed across the region. It was the home of most Indians (although the former Indian Territory, eastern Oklahoma, contained the largest concentration). It was home to the largest deep-rooted bloc of Hispanic peoples (in New Mexico) and to borderland Hispanic communities being augmented by immigrants from Mexico (as was the case in Texas). And it was home to most of the Chinese in the continental United States and to the more recent influx of Japanese. The great majority of these Asians were in the Pacific Coast states, but Chinese, especially, were to be found in industrial camps and railroad towns throughout the West. Although even taken together these peoples constituted but a small proportion of the regional population, each was regarded as a problem by
the dominant Whites, and all were subject to special laws and treatment. Such
discriminations and suppressions were specific to the West only in terms of these
special groups. They were, of course, routine expressions of deep-seated and gen-
eral American attitudes, with reference to which we should note that Blacks, the
major pariah population of the United States, were present in all of these states but
totaled only about 30,000 in 1900, two-thirds of whom were in California and
Colorado.

Students of the West have often cited other features that help distinguish and
define this half of the country, and closer examinations of society, economy, and
politics might yield further evidence. But the geographer cannot but remain im-
pressed with the limitations of many such generalizations, with how awkwardly or
incompletely they fit upon the several regions within the West. Rather than strain
to find what else California, Mormonland, New Mexico, and the others might
have in common, it seems far more useful to conclude with a stress once again upon
the bold reality and basic significance of American Wests. Having sketched some-
thing of the historical geographic character of these diverse parts it is time to turn
once again to the East and trace the development of the other domains and core of
the nation during this powerfully formative half century and thereby gain a clearer
picture of what these several Wests and the West as a whole were being contrasted
with and connected to in this continuous shaping of America.