

INFLUENCE OF THE TURNER THESIS ON THE NEW DEALERS ✓



### great opening line

With the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl occurring simultaneously, many questioned if capitalism itself had failed. The Dust Bowl was an environmental disaster on the Great Plains brought on by extreme drought and poor farming techniques that led to large scale dust storms and potential desertification of the Plains. Fredrick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis claimed that the frontier line closed in the 1890s, and up to that point it had shaped American democracy. Farmers ignored this claim and continued farming in an individualistic way that used old techniques, which were unsuitable for the drought-ridden Plains, ultimately leading to the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. Or at least that is what most New Dealers thought, "the problem is one of arresting the decline of an agricultural economy not adapted to the climatic conditions"<sup>1</sup>. They aimed not only to save the people and land affected by the Dust Bowl, but to maintain American democracy through the creation of a new frontier.

Resettlement of farmers from land effected by the Dust Bowl to areas where farming was possible or other jobs were available was the main way that New Dealers saved the plainspeople. After blaming farmers for turning the Great Plains into a horrible, drought-ridden environment throughout most of his film "The Plow That Broke the Plains", Pare Lorentz ends with an upbeat epilogue that portrays the New Dealers' Resettlement Administration as a heroic governmental force that saved the farmers<sup>2</sup>. Tugwell goes ever further by assuring the public that when the Resettlement Administration proves successful, "we can effect the most orderly and constructive 'strategic retreat' from an economic disaster recorded in history"<sup>3</sup>.

The Great Plains Committee believe that farmers would not have created the Dust Bowl had their farming techniques not leached all life from their lands in less than a generation,

---

<sup>1</sup> The Great Plains Committee, "The Future of the Great Plains."

<sup>2</sup> Lorentz, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*.

<sup>3</sup> Tugwell, "No More Frontier: Part Two."

therefore educating farmers about better farming practices and restoring the land they destroyed were the committee's top priorities. For example, in their report "The Future of the Great Plains", they emphasized the importance of teaching farmers erosion control techniques that could be implement to keep their soil from becoming airborne dust. In order to restore wrecked farmlands, they suggested that the government acquire effected lands and, in cases where the land was not suitable for farming, restore it to a point where it could be added to the grazing lands<sup>4</sup>.

More than anything, the New Dealers recognized that if Turner's claim that the frontier formed American democracy was true and also that the era of the physical frontier was over, then they desperately needed to create a new frontier in order to maintain the democratic ideals of the nation. In 1968, Harvard historian Steven Kesselman suggested that, following the closing of the physical frontier, four economic "frontiers" became the new frontier because they represented areas in with American could improve. These were the technological, production, organizational, and population frontiers. Kesselman argues that Tugwell thought of the new frontier more literally, advocating movement to suburbs and cities because he felt that these represented the future<sup>5</sup>. The most important conclusion the New Dealers came to was that they must resort to a form of controlled capitalism in order to remain democratic and prevent capitalism from truly failing, as many thought it already had<sup>6</sup>.

Due to the New Dealers' efforts, the Great Plains is now the most productive dryland wheat area in the world and Americans still enjoy a democratic and capitalist way of life<sup>7</sup>. That

---

<sup>4</sup> The Great Plains Committee, "The Future of the Great Plains."

<sup>5</sup> Kesselman, "The Frontier Thesis and the Great Depression."

<sup>6</sup> The Great Plains Committee, "The Future of the Great Plains."

<sup>7</sup> Donofrio and Ojima, "The Great Plains Today."

being said, the idea of controlled capitalism has never been lost, and to this day the government pays farms not to overproduce in order to prevent overuse of agricultural land<sup>8</sup>.

Great paper. Well argued, well written.

A handwritten capital letter 'A' in black ink, positioned to the right of the main text.

---

<sup>8</sup> Frank, "Why Does the Govt. Pay Farmers to Not Grow Crops?"

## Bibliography

- Donofrio, Celine, and D. S. Ojima. "The Great Plains Today." *Natural Resource Ecology Laboratory at Colorado State University*, May 1997.  
[https://www.nrel.colostate.edu/projects/climate\\_impacts/gptoday.ht1.htm](https://www.nrel.colostate.edu/projects/climate_impacts/gptoday.ht1.htm).
- Frank, Robert H. "Why Does the Govt. Pay Farmers to Not Grow Crops?" *PBS NewsHour*, August 4, 2009. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/making-sense/why-does-the-govt-pay-farmers/>.
- Kesselman, Steven. "The Frontier Thesis and the Great Depression." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29, no. 2 (June 1968): 253–68.
- Lorentz, Pare. *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. Documentary, 1936.
- The Great Plains Committee. "The Future of the Great Plains." Governmental, February 10, 1937.
- Tugwell, Rexford. "No More Frontier: Part Two." *Today: An Independent National Weekly* 4, no. 10 (June 29, 1935): 8–9.