

# The Frontier

## *Part One: Unlimited Expansion*

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Human beings are story-tellers. Of particular importance are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. The story of the frontier is one of America's most beloved and important myths.

In most countries, the word frontier denotes a boundary or border, a line that separates within from without. In America, the idea of the frontier includes that meaning, but the implications go much, much further, both literally and figuratively.

When explorers from the European empires — most notably Spain, Portugal, England, and France — began to colonize the western hemisphere half a millennia ago, the world had suddenly become a much larger place. Seemingly overnight, the known land mass of the earth had increased by a third. The two new continents were considered by Europeans as a pristine wilderness offering an unlimited bounty of natural resources. In both the real and mythical senses, the New World represented a nearly unimaginable wealth of riches.

The fact that these new lands were already inhabited and settled by perhaps 50 million human beings was of little consequence. From the perspective of the Europeans, the indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere were mere savages, brutes, and unworthy of consideration as human. Their cultures were seen as primitive and backward. The only civilization that mattered was European.

Such attitudes of cultural and racial superiority were held strongly by the predominantly English and Protestant immigrants who populated the strip of 13 original colonies that stretched north to south along what is now America's eastern seaboard. Even before America was a nation, but even more emphatically from that point on, the frontier to the west became not just a boundary, but a place, a region a zone of unbounded wilderness that stretched on forever. The frontier was established as a future destination, a permanent fixture within the American imagination, and the functional solution to a host of social problems that bedeviled domestic policy.

If America was to be the "land of opportunity," the vehicle for good fortune was unlimited expansion — potentially infinite growth. For the first century after America's founding as a country, that expansion was achieved by the westward

march across the North American continent. What Hitler later envisioned as "lebensraum" (living space) to the east had already been achieved by America in its westward conquest. When that task was completed at the end of the 19th century, America shifted gears to become a global empire. Unlike the older European empires that conquered and colonized whole countries through formal rulership of subservient populations, America used economics as the controlling force of its impact, opening new markets for domestic products. The sun may never have set on the British Empire during its glory days, but America preferred the all-encompassing shining eye of the dollar to achieve world dominion.

The idea of unlimited expansion and infinite growth is so deeply ingrained in the American psyche that it has become a pervasive metaphor for much of what we are and do. Any major new area for possible economic development is labeled a "new frontier." The space race and sending men to the moon were JFK's new frontier. Now it's the algorithms of technology and 5G.

Most historical empires recognized that the earth has limits — limits of available resource, limits of power, limits of wealth. They achieved their imperial stature by conquest — imposing their will militarily by taking what they wanted from weaker states. It was a zero-sum game — for some to have more, others had to have less. America approached empire with a radically different notion, that growth could be perpetual and wealth-creation infinite. However crazy that idea was in the long run, it worked pretty well throughout the 20th century.

Capitalism produced great fortunes, even if the wealth tended to be concentrated into relatively few hands. That was a basic tenet of the American Dream, that anyone could become rich through business. Just build a better mousetrap and market the hell out of it. Or carve roads through Appalachian mountain passes and civilize the wilderness, like Daniel Boone yearning for "elbow room." Or trek 2,000 miles in a Conestoga wagon over the Rockies on the Oregon trail to work your own homestead farm. This is the Horatio Alger fairy tale of social mobility through physical relocation to greener pastures — true for some, but not nearly so many as the myth suggests.

Watch the financial news on any mainstream media outlet, and you'll see and hear the mantra of unlimited expansion and infinite economic growth repeated on a daily basis, like a sermon. What you won't see or hear is any serious discussion of economic limits. More is not only better, it's required.

Sadly, modern business in the global economy is less like market commerce and more like a ponzi scheme, a shell game, the old three-card monte. It's great for those in at the beginning who run the con, but lousy for the marks who end up getting fleeced, which is to say, about three-quarters of the population.

Yes, the Great Depression of the 1930s nearly killed capitalism, but FDR saved it, and World War II finally ended the Depression. Of course, that recovery was paid for with the blood of 75 million dead, followed by a permanent military-industrial complex in America, so it was something of a devil's bargain. More recently, the Great Recession of 2008 should have been a major meltdown, but

the geniuses at the Fed came up with Quantitative Easing — trillions of dollars created out of thin air to keep the game going. Of course, that “recovery” was paid for by the greatest increase we’ve ever seen in wealth inequality, dwarfing the Gilded Age Robber Barons of the 1870s and equaling the stark inequities of the Roaring ‘20s. Back then, we kept the poor in slum tenements living hand to mouth; now we sell the poor smart phones and flat-screen TVs and saddle them with debt. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

The economic systems we’ve created over the past two centuries possess their own apparently irresistible momentum. Even if we want to slow down and reconsider, the system itself resists. Whoever pulls back first gets eaten for lunch, so no one volunteers. We don’t really think about *less* as a solution. Instead, we add *more*, tinkering with the system to buy a little extra time to pluck whatever low-hanging fruit remains, all the while stealing from the collective future to party in the present.

If Artificial Intelligence will supercharge commerce — smart appliances, smart cars, smart homes, smart everything — then we go for it. If GMO crops will buy agro-industry another two decades of profits, then we go for it. If more gun sales will keep the arms manufacturers fat and sassy, we allow it. The “wisdom of the market” and our single-minded quest for profits will not be denied, just aimed a little differently. But the flies in that ointment are diminishing returns and unanticipated consequences.

The times have already changed. The endless expansion and infinite growth mythology of the frontier are already being challenged by the resurgence of zero-sum economics. No longer is America the land of boundless opportunity. The frontier has flipped, turning into the Border Wall. Having grabbed the lion’s share of the economic pie for the 30 million “winners” in America (forget the 300 million “losers”), Trump wants to re-create America as a gated community for the wealthy. But walls do not merely keep out the riff-raff; they also imprison those who live within them.

So now we get dueling narratives in contradictory stories. Endless economic growth remains the carrot dangled in front of the donkey, since Americans don’t want to give up our long-held beliefs, but let’s also make sure that we keep foreigners out, since they might want a cut of our ill-gotten gains. If we can’t dominate the global economy, let’s kill it to protect what we already have. The only problem with that strategy is that it won’t work.

Our seemingly limitless frontier spawned Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism. For almost two centuries, America rode those memes for all they were worth, like bronc-busting cowboys. But the frontier was never truly limitless. Perpetual expansion and infinite growth are terrific right up until the moment they aren’t, and then they’re disastrous. We’re making that turn now, and it’s a hard thing for many people to wrap their heads around.