

“AMERICA’S MYTHICAL FRONTIER WAR IN CENTRAL AMERICA”

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Abstract

Creation stories are central to human life but also to the life of nation states. America’s creation story, its frontier myth, not only provides a narrative to explain the necessity of its birth but also, because the tale is inherently violent, the need and means to rebirth itself in armed conflict with other nations. War may indeed be Hell, as noted by Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman, but for the United States it has typically also been symbolically reaffirming and regenerative. My paper explores this idea by examining the occupation of Nicaragua, 1912-1933.

The frontier myth relates the historical settling of the United States but it also reinvents it so as to embellish the tale with a causation that eludes scholarship and, in fact, reality. The myth posits America’s “exceptionalism” as having emerged from the experience of white male immigrants who moved to the ever-shifting frontier regions of America’s west over several centuries. The best articulation of this story comes from Frederic Jackson Turner’s famous essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”

Turner held that the white man represented “civilization” and the frontier itself was “savage.” In order to overcome savagery, Turner held, the man must conquer it or die. To conquer it he must first unclasp himself of effete eastern or European cultural baggage. Once this was accomplished, the man had been “stripped” and was then reborn (in a process he does not describe). Reborn as a prototypical American—imagined as strong, brave, honest, clever, of the mind, sober...and white, male, heterosexual, Christian...and so on. Much like a Hollywood action or western film star. The process rebirthed America because it symbolically retraced America’s founding in imperial conflict waged against Aboriginal peoples.

Turner was wrong in all of his conclusions, historians have shown. That said, the myth remains alive and well and even thrives in American popular culture and political discourse. This is easily demonstrated by exploring the basic consonance between, say, press coverage of key conflicts and Turner’s articulation of the myth. To that end, my paper examines press portrayals of the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua, 1912-1933, with special focus on the character of General Augusto Cesar Sandino.

The paper represents part of a chapter in a book project, “America’s Frontier Wars.”

Keywords: Myth, American History, Cultural Studies, Frontier Myth

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Bio: Dr Mark Cronlund Anderson has published five books, including *Cowboy Imperialism and Hollywood Film*, which the 2010 Cawelti Award for best book in American Studies awarded jointly by the Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association, and the co-author of *Seeing Red, A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers*, which won three 2012 Saskatchewan Book Awards. He teaches at Luther College, University of Regina, Canada.