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How the West Got Wild: American Media and Frontier Violence A Roundtable

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# HOW THE WEST GOT WILD: AMERICAN MEDIA AND FRONTIER VIOLENCE

## A ROUNDTABLE

*Five participants of the 1999 Western History Association in Portland, Oregon, reprise their panel session, in which they each assess past and present trends in the violence, perceived and real, of the American West.*

### INTRODUCTION

STEWART L. UDALL

**T**ODAY, AS OUR NATION LEADS THE WORLD in civilian gun ownership and fatal incidents of handgun violence, hoary Wild West myths not only reshape the past but influence the values of the current generation. Gun violence is a staple of our entertainment industries—and is threatening to become a staple of the new western history as well.

The presenters in this roundtable do not believe that violence was a principal factor in the development of the West. They do not believe that frontier violence shaped our national character. Rather, they believe that the foundations were laid for civilization and for today's cities not by sensational episodes of violence, but by ordinary people, to use the wonderful term of Montana's Janet Finn, "crafting the everyday in their lives." In my view, Janet Fireman's father, the late Arizona historian Bert Fireman, was on the mark when he wrote, "The West was not won by guns. It was won by shovels and sweat." During eight decades, my life experiences have taught me a lot about the overall context of settlement in my home region. In the process of scrutinizing the lives of the Southwest's transcendent mythical heroes—Billy the Kid, Wyatt Earp, and Geronimo—I have been unable to find a single thing any of these killers did to advance the cause of civilization. Yet several hundred books have been written that have made these men icons for millions of Americans. Nor have I found a scintilla of evidence that anyone who remotely resembled John Wayne ever appeared anywhere in the West.

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The publication a few months ago of *Dutch*, Edmund Morris's official biography of President Ronald Reagan, should be a wake-up call for serious historians. Morris flouted the canons of our profession when he concocted a brew of fact, fiction, and myth to interpret the life of an important president. His embellishments needlessly diminished Reagan by essentially presenting him as a man who derived his understanding of American history "from movies he made or saw."

In any event, it is evident that Bill Kittredge was on the mark when he stated that films are the "imperial art form of our culture." If it is true, as some teachers aver, that perhaps 90 percent of Americans acquire their beliefs about our past from watching movies or television, historians face a herculean challenge. The choice posed by that challenge is simply to go with the media flow and sacrifice historical truth or to fight back and make a strenuous effort to persuade thinking people to value real world facts. The stance of this panel is summarized by Michael Bellesiles in the title of his paper, "Guns Don't Kill, Movies Kill: The Media's Promotion of Frontier Violence."

## IMAGINARY DODGE CITY: A POLITICAL STATEMENT

ROBERT R. DYKSTRA

IN THE AFTERMATH of the Columbine High School massacre, Patricia Nelson Limerick ruminated on its lessons in the *New York Times*. She deplored popular culture's glamorizing "the history of violence that characterized so much of what happened in the American West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century . . . the trivializing of the violence of the Old West." What she seems to have meant by this was that popularizers had sanitized all the pain and ugliness. The main result was to desensitize Americans, she said, encouraging a "shortfall in compassion, empathy and the capacity to respond seriously to the sufferings of others."

It is hard to argue with such sentiments. Yet I would respectfully disagree with Professor Limerick on two grounds.

First, I think the popular view of homicide in the Old West is far more pernicious than just its contribution to the decline of altruism. I refer to its role in the current national debate on gun control. Romantic revisionism of western violence offers a spurious validation of America's passionate love affair with handguns and assault rifles. And important historians have played to this: "Conquest!" "Regeneration through violence!" "Virtual civil war!" "Right on!" cries the N.R.A.—"The West wasn't won with a registered gun!"

Second, I really question the premise that the Old West was a *uniquely* murderous place. This is not the moment for world-historical comparisons that might explore the

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point definitively. But my considered opinion—and I published my first article on the subject in the 1950s—is that our popular culture, instead of trivializing violent death in the Old West, has exaggerated it out of all reasonable proportion. Romantic views of western violence rest on a belief that the Alamo, the O.K. Corral, and Little Bighorn were typical, that literally thousands of people died from well-placed revolver and rifle bullets.

Indian wars were of course dramatically apparent in the trans-Mississippi West—but so had they been everywhere in America. Was the Wounded Knee massacre of the Lakotas in 1890 somehow more horrific than the Mystic Fort massacre of the Pequots in 1637? The estimated body counts were roughly the same. Or was Little Crow's uprising of 1862 more frightful than Opechancanough's uprising of 1622? Again, the body counts, although less certain, were apparently of similar magnitude. The long record of Indian-white hostilities offers no logic whatever for a western exceptionalism based on interracial war.

In short, the uniquely savage and homicide-ravaged Old West is a construct as phony as America's favorite "invented tradition"—the quick-draw street duel reenacted every day in a score of tourist venues.

There is no historic locale in which the cultural construction of violence is more apparent than frontier Dodge City. Today the name is a widely used metaphor for homicide and general civil depravity. Many Americans believe that Dodge City was wholly mythical. Others, from undergraduates to syndicated columnists, are still surprised to learn that during its celebrated decade as a cattle town only fifteen adults died violently in Dodge—an average of just one and one-half per cowboy season. And recent efforts by historians to inflate this modest body count by transforming it into the criminologists' "per 100,000 population" ratio have been—for such a numerically tiny place—an exercise in statistical illiteracy. So how did the relatively nonviolent Dodge of history become the murder-ridden Dodge of metaphor? Answering that engages the cultural mechanisms by which the entire western past has come to be imagined.

In the 1850s, if not earlier, eastern journalists touring the West were already creating a context for the ultimate emergence of Dodge City as metaphor. And in the 1860s the dime western novel began commodifying the West for a mass-market readership. But it was Mark Twain's classic memoir, *Roughing It*, that probably provided the most influential elaboration on this theme of ubiquitous, casual murder in the West. In frontier Virginia City, Twain mythologized, recreational homicide was commonplace. A person was not respected until he had "killed his man." Local layabouts named Sugarfoot Mike, Pock-Marked Jake, and Six-Fingered Pete each "kept his private graveyard," were always "on the shoot" (ready to fight), and cheerfully expected to die "with their boots on." Obviously, the legendary "gunfighter" had been invented, although this culturally essential term for him would not appear until the 1890s.

In June 1872—just months after publication of Twain's book—Dodge City sprang to life when two liquor dealers pitched a tent at the site. The Santa Fe Railroad was still a hundred miles away, but they would be ready when the Irish tracklayers arrived. Meanwhile, the two men made do with the trade offered by a nearby army post, Fort Dodge. Three weeks later the fort's commandant and eleven others formed a corporation to gain title to the tract and exploit it as a business enterprise. They filed a charter with the state of Kansas. A week later a tracklayer shot and killed a well-known troublemaker. "HOMICIDE AT DODGE CITY," trumpeted the front page of the state's most widely read newspaper.

The first political task of any bourgeoisie is the protection of its commercial economy. Dodge's proprietors knew that its future as a real-estate speculation depended as much on reputation as on location. Gun violence ignited their fears—not for their lives, but for their pocketbooks. Civic order required stewards: a sheriff, a county prosecutor, and local judges. But the railroad, fearing that its corporate property would bear the main tax burden for any local government created so far west of the actual frontier of settlement, tied up the matter in court. This prevented the village's fledgling commercial elite from legally organizing the county in 1872.

The result was predictable. Not until mid-1873, almost a year after Dodge City's founding, were local authorities permitted to take control. By then the price of anarchy amounted to between 16 and 19 documented murders, justifiable homicides, or manslaughters.

But for the next four years not a single violent death is known to have occurred in Dodge. And, prudently, just before the Texas cattle trade arrived, businessmen organized Dodge as a municipality. This added another protective layer of law enforcement. After 1875, peacekeepers headquartered at Dodge City included a city marshal, an assistant marshal, as many policemen as needed, two township constables, a county sheriff, an undersheriff, as many deputy sheriffs as needed, and a deputy U.S. marshal. It was this formidable array of lawmen, together with strict gun control ordinances, that largely explained the ensuing decade's modest body count.

Yet Dodge never lived down that first deadly season. "Dear Father," wrote a young emigrant camped east of town in 1877, "Have laid over here to wait for a larger crowd, so as to be perfectly safe going through Dodge. There are nine teams now and will be three more in the morning, so we will be safe." Testified another wayfarer: "I was told not to go near Dodge City; . . . I would be robbed of all I had besides standing a good chance to have my throat cut." Some newspapermen were equally leery, only to have their fears proved groundless. "Not a man was seen swinging from a telegraph pole," marveled one visiting journalist.

Some of Dodge City's violent reputation was self-generated. Early on, Boot Hill, the town's early informal cemetery, attracted tourists. Here, wrote a New Yorker, "are twenty-eight tolerably new graves, and all but three of the occupants are reported to have 'died with their boots on.'" A visiting Pennsylvanian, gathering some pebbles as

a souvenir, said that back where he came from Boot Hill "is considered almost as great a curiosity as the grave of Shakespeare."

The town's two or three dance halls were another tourist venue. Each of these emporiums featured drinking, gambling, dancing, and, behind closed doors at the rear, commercial sex. "Everybody is supposed and expected to visit these places," testified a journalist, "and 'everybody' does." One citizen complained of newsmen who "like 'to do the city of Dodge by gaslight,'" and then go home and write about "the bad character of this town. . . . The dance houses, in which they lug and hug the frail creatures, are the special scenes of attraction, and in which they wear away the dull hours until midnight 'train time.'"

Indeed, most unfavorable moral judgments derived from Dodge City's sin rather than its occasional violent death. Once again, many arrived with preformed judgments. The author of an Indiana report admitted that "I had expected . . . to find it a perfect Bedlam, a sort of Hogarthian 'Gin Alley,' where rum ran down the street gutters, and loud profanity and vile stenches contended for the mastery of the atmosphere." His negative expectations proved unjustified, but others disagreed. "At the time I was there," wrote a New Yorker, "there was more concentrated hell in Dodge City than in any other place of equal size on the American continent." A morally offended visitor from the nation's capital agreed. "Dodge City is a wicked little town," he or she sermonized. "Indeed its character is so clearly and egregiously bad that one might conclude . . . it was marked for special Providential punishment."

But the settlement's business community could live with sin; it was gun violence and threats of gun violence that stirred its anxieties. And despite its civic supervision, a series of incidents reinvigorated Dodge City's reputation as a place where homicide as well as depravity regularly occurred.

The year 1878 turned out to be the town's most lethal since that murderous first season. Five died violently, all from gunshot wounds. One of the shootings received a write-up in New York's *National Police Gazette*, earning Assistant Marshall Wyatt Earp his first brush with nationwide fame. The main result of 1878 was a renewed commitment to gun control. A sign went up at Dodge City's busiest intersection: "THE CARRYING OF FIRE ARMS strictly PROHIBITED."

Even nonlethal encounters could prove to be public-relations disasters. In 1881 a falling-out between a dance hall owner and his partner resulted in a daytime street battle involving ex-Sheriff Bat Masterson and four or five other shooters. Before anyone got killed, the major and the undersheriff arrived on the scene with shotguns, forcing Masterson and his allies to leave town. A press report termed the incident "the most determined fight made since the days of 'Wild Bill.'" Masterson's picture appeared in the *Illustrated Police News* of Boston, beginning the national media exposure that would one day transform him, too, into a legend in his own time.

In 1883 another dispute among saloon owners prompted a second bloodless but image-perpetuating event. An ineffective exchange of shots between an officer and a

saloon owner resulted in the latter's being run out of town. He rejected the Kansas adjutant general's mediation and telegraphed Masterson, Earp, and other friends to come to his aid. The result was the so-called Dodge City War, which ended nonviolently, but not before being broadcast far and wide by the Associated Press and provoking a barrage of comment in the metropolitan media.

A Chicago editor hoped that "the inhabitants of that noted center of wickedness, Dodge City, will endeavor to reform it altogether. If they succeed, then there is every chance of a man dying a natural death there once in a while." A critique of the town's civic culture even appeared in a British newspaper. The *National Police Gazette* printed a portrait of the Masterson-Earp posse looking solemnly self-righteous. The accompanying story described Masterson as a man "of whom so much has been written," and termed Earp a "celebrity."

And at least four New York City dailies offered judgments. The *Tribune* correctly noted that "Dodge has had a worse reputation than it deserved, for of late years there have been few actual deeds of violence." But this testimony fell on deaf ears. "Dodge City is the Sodom of the West," concluded the *World*. The *Times* first dismissed the Dodge City War with a boys-will-be-boys story, but followed up the next day by sneering that "the respectable citizens of Dodge City, . . . for whom the public has been beguiled of some sympathy, are purely hypothetical." Speculated the *Commercial*: "It must be a delightful place of residence, cowboys and six-shooters being as thick as huckle-berries in fly time."

But by 1884 some elements of Dodge City's business community had developed a taste for such notoriety, evidently agreeing with the modern dictum that *any* publicity is good publicity. They advertised what would be the first "genuine Spanish bull fight" ever held on U.S. soil. New York, Chicago, and Saint Louis reporters covered the event, which included an unexpected bonus: the fatal shooting in a local saloon of a prominent young Texas cattleman by a gambler.

The 1885 cattle-shipping season, Dodge's last, opened with media rumors that despite the state law against prizefighting, citizens hoped to host a match between John L. Sullivan and his latest challenger. The angry governor of Kansas ordered his attorney general to put a stop to it, mobilizing the militia if necessary. A second rumor had it that Dodge would hold another bullfight.

Neither report proved true, and Dodge's only notoriety that year stemmed from the fact that its saloons were, as reported, "in full blast again." Kansas was now officially a "dry" state, in which the sale and consumption of all alcoholic beverages had been prohibited. But Dodge City reveled in noncompliance. The Kansas State Temperance Union decided to close down its bars. A leading prohibitionist and an agent of the attorney general's office arrived to file injunction papers; a crowd of idle construction workers forced them to leave again. "The feeling here is overwhelmingly against prohibition," reported an overwrought Saint Louis correspondent, "and some of the most dangerous desperadoes in the country live here. . . . If the prosecution is not

dropped *there will be death and destruction in this community*, and no power on earth can prevent it." A Kansas temperance journal sketched an image of Dodge City reminiscent of the bad old days of 1872–1873—and even of Mark Twain's archetypal description in *Roughing It*. "The town is now and always has been controlled by a gang of cut throats," it editorialized. "The man who has 'killed somebody' appears to have a magnetic attraction for some men and women, and, in addition to the long list of murderers already domiciled in Dodge, there are men constantly on the watch for a chance to 'make a record' (this being the polite Dodge City way of describing murder) without endangering their [own] lives too much."

But that same summer, settlers overran Dodge City's outlying ranges, legislators closed Kansas to southern cattle, and ranchers fenced off the trails from Texas. Dodge's cattle trade ended, the excitement faded, the illegal and sinful amenities disappeared. "The *Kansas City Daily News* will please discontinue referring to Dodge City as the 'devils own,'" remarked a local editor, "we have reformed."

In the twentieth century, writers occasionally renewed Dodge City's national name recognition in such mass-circulation journals as *Everybody's Magazine*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Time*. The famous artist Frederic Remington produced a portrait of a Dodge City lawman in action. Bat Masterson, now a New York sports writer, arranged national publicity for a pioneer memoir of Dodge. Then, in 1931, publication of Stuart Lake's *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal* proved a signature event. This best-selling biography not only transformed Earp into a cultural icon, but elevated Dodge into a modern tourist destination.

A new generation of Dodge citizens gaily collaborated in shaping their town into a commodity. Its most important symbol of civic dignity, city hall, was crowned Boot Hill. In 1932, 15 or 20 make-believe graves were dug on the city hall lawn and comic headboards, supposedly identifying their occupants, were erected. This bizarre exhibit, proudly tended by municipal employees, became a permanent display for the mystification of tourists. Ten years later an estimated one million visitors had viewed Dodge's tongue-in-cheek attraction. "It doesn't make a bit of difference if Boot Hill is a lot of baloney," boasted a businessman, "People are going to keep right on coming anyway."

In 1939, the movie *Dodge City* premiered in Technicolor at the real Dodge. The presence of the movie's stars lent glamour; offering gravitas were the governors of New Mexico, Kansas, and Colorado. Special railroad sleeping cars sat on sidings to house overflow crowds. Twelve thousand visitors signed the register at Boot Hill.

Occasional other films kept the imaginary settlement alive in the post-World War II years. But most influential of all were three television serials: *Bat Masterson*, *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, and especially *Gunsmoke*, whose two-decade electronic tenure exceeded the real Dodge City's frontier era by six years. Dodge City seems to have become a fully-shaped metaphor during the Vietnam War. Young service personnel, nurtured on these TV portrayals, used it to designate any fearfully defended locale. To "get outta Dodge," for example, meant to vacate a dangerous area.



Today, the public's perception of Dodge City seems largely unchanged. The 1994 movie *Wyatt Earp* at least showed Earp attempting (if vainly) to maintain gun control. But a nonfiction TV series, *The Real West*, offered one episode with Dodge in its title that resisted reference to the cattle town's paltry body count. In at least two reformatted versions "Bloody Dodge City" has become a History Channel staple.

Since 1872, then, Dodge City's violent image has been at work helping America define its cultural identity, continuously providing the model bad civic example. The metaphor deserves retirement—now more than ever.

In this year of the Columbine massacre, historians have a political task. Journalists are finally listening to those of us who say: Don't look to some long tradition of gun violence for a cultural alibi; don't ask history to exonerate bad public policy.

With the national body count higher in 1993 than it was in 1980, and gun control an issue in Congress as well as in the courts, it seems to me time for all clear-sighted western historians to de-escalate, time for us to stop lamenting that frontier violence was as American as apple pie. It's a hoax, folks, just like those comic headboards on Boot Hill. And what I think none of us wants to see is western violence become a full-scale political myth, potentially as lethal as all that "Lost Cause" nonsense underlying resurgent neo-Confederate racism in this land. Because that's not comic.

GUNS DON'T KILL, MOVIES KILL:  
THE MEDIA'S PROMOTION OF FRONTIER VIOLENCE  
MICHAEL A. BELLESILES

BACK WHEN "DUTCH" REAGAN and I were in school together, he would often say "Ed"—he kept confusing me with Edmund Morris—"to understand American history, just watch the movies." There is much to recommend this perspective, but I have come to prefer the view of my old Knicks' teammate, Bill Bradley, who insisted that we examine the sources.

In this contest between the postmodern dialectic of image versus reality, image usually wins. It is difficult for the serious scholar to compete with the media's power to form popular views of reality through visual impact. Granted, no one really expects films to be historically accurate. Most screenwriters and directors feel not the slightest compulsion to verify any historical re-creations or facts which they want to use. After all, who but a few isolated scholars will care?

The media embodies the postmodern credo: make it up, it is easier than research. Thus we get the "fallacy of authorial intent" and the primacy of the critic over the writer—a manifesto for the mediocre. Admittedly, what follows has a tinge of

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postmodernism in that it speculates as to why historians of the Wild West were so far ahead of the curve in their adherence to image over evidence. But my intent is to push historians to be a bit more careful about generalizations.

We are surrounded in the United States by a mythology of our own creation that frontier violence forged the essential American character. Frederick Jackson Turner has joined Clint Eastwood in the popular imagination, crafting a national persona irrevocably independent and brutal. It is true that the United States is today the most violent country in the industrialized world. To find comparable levels of personal violence, one must examine nations in the midst of civil war or social chaos. It is the origin of that violence which is in contention. Many Americans seem to take comfort in the notion that this violence is immutable, the product of a deeply imbedded historical experience rooted in our frontier heritage. Nonstop Indian warfare and gunfights in the streets of every western town inured Americans to the necessity of violence. From this Hobbesian heritage of each against all emerged the modern American acceptance of widespread personal brutality.

Though historians have long since qualified, rejected, or turned Frederick Jackson Turner on his head, the public largely accepts his formulation that the frontier served as the determinant of American history. It is hardly surprising that the western movie maintains its popularity, though most film critics hold that Westerns are all of an unvarying type—or rather, archetype. As Robert Warshaw wrote in his classic 1954 essay on the Western, “The two most successful creations of American movies are the gangster and the Westerner: men with guns. Guns are physical objects, and the postures associated with their use, form the visual and emotional center of both types of films.” Even though, and precisely because, the United States has become overwhelmingly urban, most Americans continue to glory in their frontier heritage. Patricia Limerick and Richard White have done a wonderful job demonstrating the dominance of American cultural language by the frontier and its tropes, even though most people have only the haziest idea of what it means.

The frontier fantasy of rugged and violent individualists has come under steady scrutiny starting with Robert Dykstra’s *Cattle Towns* (New York, 1968). A number of scholars have shown that the frontier depended on federal action and support through every step of its development. There is also an accelerating body of evidence to demonstrate that there is little reality beyond the image of ceaseless violence in America’s past. Contemporary European cities, riven by political and economic upheaval, had higher levels of personal violence than did cities in the United States; and the frontier never attained levels of personal violence equivalent to those in American cities. Many scholars have noted the relative paucity of murder in the United States prior to World War II, finding violence in the West, as Max Weber argued, largely the monopoly of the modern state.

In a sense, recent scholarship is only rediscovering what contemporaries and earlier historians already knew. Frederick Jackson Turner, like most of his predecessors,

observed that movement and making money, not violence, marked the West. Early-twentieth-century historians followed Turner's lead portraying the frontier in the context of national expansion or economic development.

Some early narratives were far more sophisticated in their analysis of the western frontier than many post-World War II texts. For instance, in 1929 Robert Caldwell examined the social and economic cleavages of "The Far West," even noting that the need for irrigation in much of the West necessitated government actions and tightly cohesive communities in ways distinctive from the more settled eastern towns. A hostile and often waterless environment meant that westerners needed one another. Environmental historians rediscovered this necessity in the 1980s.

Most early historians emphasized westward migration as part of a culture-building process, a "march of civilization." And as Turner so often emphasized, the West gave birth to American nationalism and supported the expansion of federal power to the detriment of parochial and sectional interests.

None of this is intended to imply that settlers of the western frontiers were not violent. Rather it is to say that they were no more violent than any other part of the country; certainly they were less violent than the contemporary South. To state the obvious, violence is not geographically determined. One astute observer, Robert Baird, commented in 1834 that "The great difficulty in describing the character and manners of the West, taken in general, arises from the fact that they do not *essentially* differ from those of the population of the Atlantic states." They were a little more informal, but otherwise the only significant distinction Baird noticed was that the West "is exceedingly heterogeneous."

After the closing of Turner's frontier and after World War II, American historians accepted the wild and lawless frontier as a given fact of U.S. history. The 1980 edition of the Morison, Commager, and Leuchtenburg textbook focused on the "necessary . . . elimination of the Indians" and the violence of frontier life. The authors supported their claims by quoting a long passage from a 1912 book by the journalist N. P. Langford rather than making use of any of the recent studies of the West by historians. Langford wrote that "Not a day or night passed which did not yield its full fruition of fights, wounds, or murders. The crack of the revolver was heard above the merry notes of the violin. . . . Pistols flashed, bowie-knives flourished, and braggart oaths filled the air. . . . This was indeed the reign of unbridled license." Here was a West that anticipated images; a frontier with bodies littering the streets and the night punctuated with casual murder.

Cold War era textbooks tended to craft a vision of a violent West in which the strong individual had to care for himself without reliance on the government. A 1989 text clarified that the frontier settler could not count on any government to protect him from "resentful Indians" or "lawless whites." As a consequence "Many pioneer agrarians worked at their daily tasks encumbered by their heavy rifles. . . . Men solved legal problems directly and in an individual way." This is Ronald Reagan speaking, not Frederick Jackson Turner.

Still, there is generally no effort to validate an assertion of widespread violence. Thus, Daniel Boorstin can say that “the requirements for self-defense and food-gathering, had put firearms in the hands of nearly everyone.” Not a word of evidence is offered. It is all rather mysterious how stability ever came to such a troubled region, where, as Esmond Wright recently wrote, “violence, not peace, was the ‘norm.’” It just sort of happened. Without further comment, George Tindall stated that “An era of lawlessness gave place to vigilante rule and, finally, a stable community.” What then is the origin of the widely held perception of western savagery?

The media seems to have played a decisive role in convincing the majority of Americans, including historians, of the everyday violence of frontier life. In 1993 the American Psychological Association summarized the media’s impact on young people: “The average American has seen 8,000 television murders and 100,000 acts of violence by the end of elementary school and has watched about 22,000 hours of TV and some 18,000 murders in the media by the end of high school.” A 1998 survey found that these numbers had actually increased.

Images of murderous rage did not simply appear on television in its first programs. In the presentation of accelerating amoral violence, television followed the lead of the movies. And for the movies, it was the Western that introduced the concept of glorified violence. Three works are notably influential in the construction of this vision, starting with two books that became movies many times over—*The Virginian* and *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*.

Owen Wister’s 1902 novel *The Virginian* popularized the gunfight, the standard of any Western. The fact that such gunfights were incredibly rare hardly mattered when compared with the enormous romantic power of such a man-to-man face-off. The gunfight represented the height of western individualism, with life dependent on one’s skill with a gun. Wister hated democracy and the artificial equality of modern society. Industrialization raised weaklings to positions of power, leaving no room for the strong loner. As the *Virginian* declares, “Equality is a big bluff.” The unregulated and lawless quality of the West, in Wister’s view, forced each individual to sink to his natural savageness, or rise to his natural nobility. Sure the West was violent, Wister wrote, but at least it lacked the vice of New York City, “and death is a thing much cleaner than vice.”

In 1931 Stuart Lake’s *Wyatt Earp* immediately transformed this obscure figure into a national icon. In real life Wyatt Earp mostly used his gun to pistol-whip drunks and served only a few years as a lawman. Earp’s job as sheriff lacked romance; he devoted most of his time to removing animal carcasses and repairing the town’s sidewalks. Lake’s book ignored these details, though he claimed that his study was based on interviews—Earp having lived in Hollywood until his death in 1929. But Lake later admitted that he made it all up. No matter, the book served as the basis for at least ten movies on the life of Earp, setting the legend firmly in American consciousness, and likely nothing will eradicate it.

Though both of these books were works of fiction, they form between them the two greatest influences on Westerns made before *The Wild Bunch* in 1969—the third great determinant of the popular perception of the West. Prior to 1969, nearly every Western had the obligatory violent outrage about two-thirds through the film, which set the hero reluctantly toward his final encounter with the villain. That final showdown with the evildoer, which occasionally necessitated the killing of some collateral hired villain in the process, climaxed the film; and it was followed by the reassuring last minutes when the film demonstrated that civilization triumphed with this one act of violence.

By the 1950s the popular portrayal of the frontier agreed in a consistent presentation of uncontrollable violence that could end only with the transformative violence of the hero. There certainly is a connection between this view of America's past and the Cold War. After two devastating world wars and a series of smaller encounters against Soviet aggression, it appeared evident that only American power could bring peace. The imagined frontier heritage thus showed the way to resolution of this nearly interminable conflict: a final act of overwhelming violence. Of course the same message could work on the personal level. An alternate lesson of popular films, television shows, and literature is that with a gun we each hold the solution to our problems in our hand.

In 1969 with Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, the level of portrayed violence exploded. Up until then, it was possible to count the number of people murdered in a Western on one hand. It is not possible to keep track of the number of people killed even in the opening minutes of *The Wild Bunch*. Peckinpah's West is one of unremitting and ceaseless violence, with absolutely no discernible distinction between lawmen and gunmen, heroes and villains. Peckinpah admitted that he had the Vietnam War in mind when he made this film. It is therefore not so much about the way the United States was, but more about what it had become.

*The Wild Bunch* did not just affect other films. Historians on different parts of the intellectual spectrum have responded to its sharp images, from Richard Slotkin, who confused the myth for the reality that then became his myths, to Richard Maxwell Brown. Brown must have been watching *The Wild Bunch* when he claimed in 1991 that individual confrontations between gunslingers was the reality of the West. Brown maintains without the slightest shred of evidence that "By the 1860s, man-to-man gunfighting was an established practice in the West," and that there "were thousands of Western gunfighters." Brown admits to being unconcerned with "the common wisdom of scholars" that the gunfighter was mostly mythology, as he breezily dismisses the use of court records, preferring to rely on a "highly realistic fictional account of Texas cowboys" to argue that "gunfighters were important in objective terms." Brown offers a stunning negation of all scholarly standards of history but a valuable demonstration of the power of imagery over reality.

It is that evocative power of images which explains the nature of historical views on the West such as Brown's, as well as the transition in movies exemplified by *The*

*Wild Bunch*. The image feeds into the collective memory and becomes the way it must have been. A study of Montana memoirs found that they described events that occurred only in popular novels, and in roughly the same language. Similarly, people in New Mexico came to claim that they witnessed events in the life of Billy the Kid that appeared only in the pages of fictional accounts. These in turn become Richard Maxwell Brown's sources. That "scholarship" then informs the analysis of contemporary social critics such as Carl Nightingale and Orlando Patterson, who have traced African American male violence to Westerns, insisting that inner-city young men learned a violent code of honor from spending years watching these movies on television. Patterson has written that "violence is not an Afro-American pathology; it is an American pathology. . . . An American suburbanite attempting to understand 'these people' does not need an expert in urban anthropology or diversity training to advise him; all he has to do is recall his old John Wayne and Clint Eastwood movies." Both writers take the Westerns as essentially accurate portrayals of America's cultural heritage, citing Brown's work in support.

The media context explains much of this shift in the film presentation of violence. In the first half century of filmmaking, that context was initially books and then books and radio. Neither of those media lend themselves to a stream of violent scenes. Instead, radio and books required character development and dialogue. Only so many "Bangs!" and "POWs!" could be allowed on a page or on the airwaves. Nor could one effectively write a long mumble or hope to stay on the air long if the average listener could not determine what was being said. Initially, films followed these standards, and performers had to be audible when they spoke their often unrealistic lines. But by the late 1960s the media context was television; just television. Nothing else mattered for determining tastes. Television is entirely visual, 24 hours a day of nonstop images. From that period, films replicated the standard of television, hoping to compete with more dramatic and vivid images, and no longer required that the actors be particularly articulate, or even comprehensible.

Television changed the conventions of storytelling. Traditionally a story leads to a climax, followed by a denouement. With television, there must be many climaxes in order to keep the viewer's wandering attention. To quote the beat poet William Everson, "It is the deadened nerve which needs to be stunned."

The point here is not so much that the public came to believe that the Western was an accurate portrayal of reality, but more that historians did so. The early historians of the West saw the western settler establishing order in their new communities without dramatic gunfights in the middle of the street, but rather, and perhaps sadly, with lawyers and contracts and government bonds. But post-World War II historians seem to have accepted the values of the Western, adopting an essentially antisocial world view. The public enjoys these films for precisely the reasons Freud suggested in *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York, 1961): in the midst of their highly regimented world, they enjoy reading anarchy into the past. Thus there is an evident longing for social collapse among many gun enthusiasts, as *Guns & Ammo* encouraged

its readers to buy more guns in preparation for a predicted Y2K disaster. The problem for filmmakers is to somehow show the triumph of civilization over savagery without reminding the viewer of how boring and stifling modernity can be. The Wild West is simply more exciting than life in a middle-class town.

But here is the bizarre irony of the Western. Its message is that personal violence will vanish with the passing of the frontier, as order is established in the hero's wake. Yet the opposite is the case. Americans get ever more violent, as do their movies. It could be that the very expectation of violent confrontations leads Americans to violence. Put another way, because Americans believe everyone around them is armed and dangerous, they own guns; and as a consequence, everyone is armed and dangerous—and feels less secure.

It is as though most Americans cannot get the image of the Wild West out of their brains; they cannot even conceive of an alternate vision of the frontier. There is an obvious reason why this imagined past holds sway: it is attractive. Esmond Wright admitted, "The frontier's is a colorful as well as a boisterous history." And who are we to destroy that perfect image? As the newspaper editor says to Jimmy Stewart at the end of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

## COMMENTS

PAULA MITCHELL MARKS

TO BEGIN WITH, I would like to reiterate the common theme of this roundtable: the real frontier West had little relation to the Wild West, that violent murderous place of popular imagination, and this distortion is a creation primarily of the media. Furthermore, it is an especially dangerous distortion because it provides a pat, false, unjust explanation—and even in some cases a justification—for modern violence.

I am in general agreement with these ideas and would like to clarify, building on the two presentations and the material Stewart Udall has shared, some ways in which I think we should approach the idea of a Wild West. Here are five suggested guidelines.

First, when talking about the Wild West image, western frontier experience, and any relation of the two or lack thereof, we must distinguish between the broader use of the term to include licentiousness, or loosened moral codes, and a more specific use: the equation of wildness and violence. Robert Dykstra distinguishes between these in his paper, but too often, I believe, we fail to sort out the definitions of the word "wild." Further, I would argue, we need to distinguish between the sort of minor violence,

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often among friends, which grew out of frontier environments filled with young men, liquor, and freedom, and the more serious forms of violence, either unpremeditated homicidal action or violent actions taken “with malice aforethought.”

Second, we need to recognize and examine the presence of Wild West myths even as western frontier communities coalesced. For example, Dykstra mentions the influence of the dime westerns of the 1860s and 1870s. Two days before the infamous gunfight at the O.K. Corral, a Tombstone newspaper advertisement joked, “We haven’t had a man for breakfast for some time, but you can get all the butter, eggs, and poultry for breakfast you want at the Boss Store.” A few months later, after a New York newspaper reported that few Tombstone residents died in their beds, the *Tucson Daily Star* facetiously chided the paper for underreporting. The *Star* noted that all citizens—men, women, and children—went armed, with more than four out of five carrying bullets in their bodies. Tombstone was “a great place for suicides; if a fellow wants to die with his boots on he just steps out in the street and yells ‘You’re another,’ and immediately he is pumped through from all sides with a shower of bullets.”

In other words, we see frontier communities consciously playing with an already established violent frontier image, one which continued to evolve. Myth and reality occasionally intersected, as in the very real gunfight at the O.K. Corral; although myth, true to its nature, oversimplified this event as it did other violent episodes in the West. Myth and reality also intersected in faulty pioneer memories; see, for example, Clyde A. Milner II’s “The Shared Memory of Pioneers” in *Major Problems in the History of the American West* (Lexington, MA, 1989). Further, some western communities not only played with but began to exploit the violent myth, as Dykstra notes of Dodge City. All of this means that the historical record itself provides a rich study of the interplay of myth and reality.

Frontier freedoms and uncertainties do underlie the Wild West myths to some degree. Thus, in talking about the presence or absence of a Wild West, either in the broad sense (including freedom from social constraints) or in the more specific sense (violence), my third suggested guideline is that we need to consider how long frontier conditions prevailed for immigrants. The story I often use in this regard is of Mary Maverick, who moved to San Antonio, Texas, in 1838, when it was part of the shaky Republic of Texas. San Antonio was an old Hispanic settlement, but still very much a frontier town. Mary had her second child there—at the Alamo—in 1838. Comanches periodically raided the town, and Mary’s husband rode out with other defenders in pursuit. The child, Lewis, grew up and in turn went on expeditions against the Comanches who raided into San Antonio. By one measure, at least—Indian/Anglo hostilities—Mary Maverick saw this child grow to maturity on a frontier.

Nationally, of course, immigrants’ experience of frontier life was very uneven. Some communities very quickly left frontier conditions behind, with transportation networks, particularly railroads, playing an important part in the transformation. Others, primarily because of remote locations, did not.



My fourth guideline is that we need to more rigorously examine and weigh the evidence both for and against a violent frontier West. Although I agree with the presenters of this roundtable that a violent frontier West is primarily a media creation, the historical evidence is often very mixed. Michael Bellesiles cites travelers' accounts as refuting the idea of a violent West, while Robert Dykstra notes traveling journalists' accounts supporting it. Dykstra's point is that the latter were probably early examples of media hype, but nonetheless, there is historical evidence for a heightened level of frontier violence at certain times and in certain places. How, then, do we weigh the experiences of young Mollie Sheehan of Virginia City, Montana, who witnessed repeated vigilante hangings, against that of William Goulder, who rambled the early gold camps of Oregon, California, and Idaho and spent 50 years in the West yet testified he never witnessed a killing or even the body of a murder victim?

My fifth and final suggestion is that we need to challenge the popular perception of significant stories in the West, as the chair and presenters of this roundtable are doing. A number of years ago, I visited Billy the Kid's grave and discovered that Bosque Redondo, the site to which the Navajos were brought on their "Long Walk," lay just a short distance away. Here, too, was a monument, a monument to the Natives' suffering and the lives lost in this failed military experiment at a reservation. Which is the more significant story? Billy the Kid? Or the Mescalero Apaches and Navajos who inhabited Bosque Redondo? I don't mean to imply that all significant frontier stories are grim and tragic; many are not. But this example demonstrates for me how the presence of the Wild West myth has not only obscured but trivialized western history.

#### COMMENTS

GREGORY H. NOBLES

IF THERE IS ANYTHING GOOD to have come out of the shootings in Littleton, Colorado, it is that the crisis at Columbine High School has increased the urgency of the debate over gun control and gun culture and violence in American society. And, as a sidelight, historians in the discussion are being taken seriously for whatever expertise we can bring to this very difficult issue. That seems to be especially true if we have something to say about violence and the West. Journalists and politicians, and American citizens in general are asking us, in the midst of this national anxiety about guns and violence, what we as historians can say to help make sense of the situation and, even more important, to help make change.

The only problem I have with all this is that I think maybe they are asking the wrong questions, and maybe we are giving the wrong answers. Heretical though it may be to say so in this venue, I am not convinced that the key to America's culture of

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violence—and certainly not the key to American culture in general—lies in the West, especially in something we might try to identify as the culture of the West. In fact, I have a suspicion that all this emphasis on the West and Westerns seems a little too obvious, maybe even superficial, and it may be keeping us from getting to other equally important explanations.

I have to admit: I am a historian who normally lives in the eighteenth century, and even though I am not a legal historian by trade, when it comes to gun control, I am generally comfortable with arguing for a strict construction—or restrictive construction—of the Second Amendment. That is, I can take seriously the opening phrase about “a well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state” and argue that the right of the people to keep and bear arms rests in a well-regulated and well-organized entity, not in a bunch of self-directed individuals who keep a carbine in the closet. But again, I am not a legal historian, and I know the N.R.A. has a gang of lawyers—hired guns, so to speak—who are ready with millions of words about the twenty-seven words in the Second Amendment.

Anyway, the issue today is more about culture than about law, and specifically about the culture of the American West. As someone who spent the first 18 years of life in Texas and a couple more in California, I guess I can be as western as the next guy; but as someone who has not spent the majority of his life east of the Mississippi, I have become very wary of regional reductionism. At the very least, I could raise some questions about some celebrated cases of violence in my own region. A year or so before the Columbine killings, there was a school sniping incident in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and a week or so after Columbine, a copycat school shooting in Conyers, Georgia. Then this summer, there was the rampage by the crazed day trader in Atlanta that took several lives. In all of these cases, I did not notice any reporter calling historians to inquire about the culture of *eastern* violence. Neither did I hear historians fretting about the possible effects of repeated viewings of *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) or excessive exposure to the novels of James Fenimore Cooper. I suppose one could put a southern spin on these incidents and trot out some explanation based on traditions of southern manhood and honor and all that, but I think we would all see that as a facile, unsatisfactory answer. No, when we think, ask, and talk about violence in American society, I think we have to agree with Michael Bellesiles when he says, “To state the obvious, violence is not geographically determined.” Unfortunately, given the tenor of current commentary, maybe that is *not* stating the obvious at all.

Actually, when I think about the geography of violence, I do not think about East or West or even urban or rural; these days, I think about suburban. No matter where we look, Littleton or Conyers, or almost anywhere else, it is in suburbia that the seemingly inexplicable violence seems to be cropping up, in those “crabgrass frontiers,” as Kenneth Jackson puts it, those areas suspended somewhere between urban and rural, where roots are shallow and people are bound together primarily by this self-satisfied sense of separation from the city and its alleged evils. Suburbs are becoming scary places, and I think they are worth a closer scholarly look.

Place is one consideration, but perhaps even more important is thinking about who is doing the violence. Here I rely on the historian's standard triad of gender, race, and class and, maybe at the risk of also stating the obvious, suggest that the gender is male, the race is white, and the class is middle. I confess I do not have current crime statistics at hand, but I think it is fair to argue that violence is not at all the monopoly of minorities at the lower end of the economic scale. White males between the ages of 15 and 35 have been claiming a good share, especially in recent episodes of violence. In fact, I would argue that precisely the people who are most privileged in American society—middle-class white males—can also be the most dangerous, and they too merit closer scholarly scrutiny that goes beyond what movies and TV shows they are watching and even what video games they are playing. We need a more thorough investigation of the social conventions and expectations that shape these individuals and the gender roles and rituals that turn some young men into losers—and some, apparently, into killers.

Finally, I think we need to be more precise, or certainly more careful, when we talk about a so-called "culture of violence" in America. I am not convinced a culture of violence in America makes any more sense than a culture of violence in the West, much less the East or South. That is, I would take Michael Bellesile's warning about violence not being geographically determined and expand it beyond the bounds of the United States. As I look around the world, both now and in the past, I see violence everywhere, perpetrated by everyone at one point or another. The questions are what sort of violence? and perpetrated by whom? I don't think we have to concentrate only on the most recent examples in Rwanda, Kosovo, or East Timor. When we look at our friends the British, for instance, we may be impressed, even embarrassed, to note the frequently cited comparison that the number of murders there each year is usually well under 100, while the similar figure for the United States is 9000 or so. But at the same time, we do not have to think too hard to remember that the British have been quite willing to engage in violence, especially state-sponsored violence, to achieve their geopolitical goals at various times in the past. One might even say that their behavior in World War I, when they sent so many of their young men to certain slaughter in the Somme offensive, brings into question the extent to which they value human life—their own as much as anyone else's. Is theirs, then, a "culture of violence" any more or less than our own? The comparison, and therefore the argument, quickly gets absurd.

The real comparison, of course, has to do with the prevalence of guns: that is where England and the United States are very different. But that being the case, I would rather see us talk about a "culture of guns" rather than a "culture of violence." They are not the same, and we need to appreciate the distinction. In fact, I would rather see us not talk about "culture" at all. As both Bellesile's and Dykstra's papers demonstrate, there is nothing to suggest that guns are somehow "natural" or inherent in American culture, that they are embedded in the American psyche. As Michael Bellesile has been telling us, they are part of a commercial campaign of gun consumption that has been supported by an increasingly strident and successful political strategy.

And so to conclude, I would go Robert Dykstra one step further and not just say, "It's the media, stupid" but say, "It's politics, stupid." We are dealing with a fundamentally political question, and we need to address it as such—and in doing so, address not just some vague notion of "culture" that puts the onus on us as a people, but address the interests and actions of those organizations that promote guns and gun ownership. And if that means going back to the Second Amendment and squaring off against the N.R.A., so be it.

## CONCLUSION

STEWART L. UDALL

I BELIEVE THE MOST ACCURATE account of the settlement of the West can be found in the letters, journals, and diaries of the men and women who were settlers, not the individuals whose violent conduct made them fodder for legends.

Much of the violence that produced the myths, and on which most movies are based, literally took place in a few minutes of the settlement of the West. But through the fixation of filmmakers on such isolated occurrences, history is wrenched out of shape and a great myth is born that frontier violence forged the essential American character.

The organizers of this roundtable reject outright the current contention that gun violence was a "principal factor" in the history of the American West. We also reject the corollary contention that frontier experiences infected the nation with the idea that unhindered access to all kinds of firearms is a God-given right. We realize, too, that correcting the record will encompass an uphill struggle in an entertainment-oriented society drenched in a dogma that gun violence is as American as apple pie.

We are also aware of the commercial reality that stories of violence on screens and in books are runaway best-sellers in today's world. This daunting truth was dramatized in Wallace Stegner's final years during a lecture at a Montana university when a student posed the question, "Mr. Stegner what is the difference between your West and Louis L'Amour's?" Stegner's response was wry and terse. He said: "Several million dollars."

Willy nilly, historians are guardians of historical truths. I believe members of this association are at a crossroad. Where violence is concerned, we can relax and go along for the ride as some of our colleagues provide soothing background music for the N.R.A. during the ongoing national debate over gun control. Or we can launch a fresh, dispassionate search for truths that will draw sharp lines between the omnipresent myths promulgated by the media and the real story of western settlement.

