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HIST 413

Explain the importance of the American West to American history as a whole. Use information and quotations from Limerick and Richardson as your sole sources for quotations and of specific factual information.

#### Limerick Richardson Essay

Throughout Heather Cox Richardson's "West from Appomattox" and Patricia Nelson Limerick's "Legacy of Conquest", two important ideals recur about the importance of the West in American history. Both authors set into the detail the importance of the West in regard to the active role in the government in American's lives and the identity of what it truly meant to be American. Both authors then also describe the strange duality that these differing ideals create and how the two exist together. Though the two ideals of government and American independence differ and at times come to blows, like yin and yang, the two exist in unison and in many ways, one cannot exist without the other.

American individuality is one of the greatest driving forces in the history of the West. The Jeffersonian ideals that the ideal man is at one with nature and 19<sup>th</sup> century Republicans view of free labor is engrained not only in Western culture, but also into the American identity itself. The ideals that any man worth his salt can rise above poverty in American is so engrained that drives

of immigrants from around the world have come to America through the centuries to find build their fortunes. When discussing the origins of American Westerners, Limerick paints the picture of the American dream. “In migration as elemental as the law of physics, Europeans moved from crowded space to open space, where free land restored opportunity and offered a route to independence” (Limerick, 322). This dream of independence was not only shared by Americans and Europeans but also by others throughout the world. From Europe, Asia, South and Central America people moved to the West to take advantage of its resources and build lives all their own. Following the Jeffersonian ideal that the ideal man can sustain himself off the land with no assistance, Americans traveled to the West to find that independence. “Farmers had gone west in the great optimism of the postwar years, convinced to that they could succeed if only they tried hard enough” (Richardson, 148). The Jeffersonian ideal of farming was not the only way to win that independence. The free labor of mining, ranching and railway work offered Westerners the same hope of independence in the West as farming, one just had to put in the time and effort. “The laborer was to be self-employed; and the status of laborer was to be temporary, left behind when profits made escape possible” (Limerick, 97). However, the reasons for this escape were not only economic. The dream of political escape was also a driving factor to move to the West, especially after the Civil War. The reconstruction and readmitting of the American South left Americans from all walks of life feeling cheated. The White aristocracy of the South argued that the newly adopted state constitutions were a threat to their ideals and that “the newly enfranchised African Americans were revolutionaries intent on confiscating the regions wealth and property” (Richardson, 85). These cries of the old aristocracy ignited turbulent racial relations in the South and drove many Southerners, both White and African American, westward

to escape political and social strife. White Southerners often moved to the West to escape the poverty stricken and war torn area. Newly freedmen also escaped for the same reasons, but also to escape the growing resentment of their freedom by disenfranchised Southern whites. So many newly freed African Americans moved to the West that “nearly one third of cowboys were men of color” (Richardson, 73). Not only was this ideal of free labor and independence championed by immigrants and American citizens, but also the American government as well.

During the Civil War and the reconstruction years that followed, the American government began to grow in strength in leaps and bounds. The free labor system that powered the North’s factories and its large population were driving factors in the federal government’s victory of the Confederate States of the South. By strengthening the power of the federal government, the North was able draw on strength of their industries through newly enacted federal taxes and the passing of conscription made it possible for the government to draw on the strength of its population. This newly acquired wealth and taxes also meant that the federal government could continue to militarily occupy the rebel states during reconstruction. Southern newspapers expressed fear of the growing power of the government after the war. The *Atlanta Constitution* once reported that “the great danger of our government has always been from the encroachments of Federal power on our State and domestic institutions” (Richardson, 85). These fears came in great waves when President Ulysses S. Grant took office in 1869. Infuriated by President Johnson’s relaxed punishment on former rebels, President Grant took a heavy handed approach to controlling the turbulent Southern States. Like the majority of the Republican Party, Grant championed free labor and appalled the South’s attempts to reinstate the old aristocracy. When Carl Schurz, a more moderate Republican in Missouri, challenged Republican placed

voting restrictions in 1870, Grant “publicly accused him of trying to turn the government over to the Democrats” (Richardson, 109). This power was also increased when, in 1871, congress passed the Ku Klux Klan Act in an attempt to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment in the Southern States. The act “permitted the president to declare martial law in nine South Carolina counties” (Richardson, 110) allowing president Grant to use military might to keep Southern African Americans safe from members of the Ku Klux Klan. Military might was not the only strengthening of the government after the war. In 1905, Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinot were able to grow the powers of the federal government to protect federal land and forests (Limerick, 289). By moving the national forests from the Secretary of the Interior to the Secretary of Agriculture, Pinot was able to strengthen the government’s laws and regulations of the nation’s federal forests. This move was an incredible win in the governments attempt to regulate the West’s natural resources, ensuring that the bounty of the West be profitable for generations.

While the West has always held the ideal of independence from the federal government, the two entities have never been separate.