

an Hammond finds that President Nixon's tortuous effort to achieve "peace with honor" was marked by so many contradictions that widespread skepticism among journalists was almost guaranteed.

Attempting to placate the "doves" in Congress and the clamorous middle-class peace movement, Nixon began in 1969 to withdraw American troops and "Vietnamize" the war. At the same time, he sought to pressure Hanoi into a settlement by ordering secret B-52 bomber raids and (in 1970) the invasion of communist bases in Cambodia. Many newsmen, who expected the troop withdrawals to lead soon to a U.S. disengagement, were outraged. The credibility of Nixon and his top advisers further declined among journalists just as the White House began to treat reporters as implacable foes, rebutting their coverage and seeking to control information. When the 1972 "Christmas bombing" occurred, the media were ready to believe the worst—including unwarranted enemy claims of massive civilian losses.

Given access to hitherto classified Nixon papers, Hammond dwells overmuch on the White House's machinations. The strengths of his chronicle are clarity, detail, and balance. While granting the accuracy of much reporting—on Cambodia, on drug abuse and racial clashes among U.S. soldiers, on the enemy's abortive 1972 Easter offensive—he also traces the media's shift of focus from combat reporting in Vietnam to feeding frenzies at home over horror stories such as the My Lai massacre.

Hammond concludes that adversary journalism as such did not undermine domestic support for Nixon's war. As the casualty list grew, the public's patience slowly ran out. Nevertheless, he adds that by "remaining in Vietnam to retrieve the nation's honor," many in the military "fixed their anger on the most visible element of the society that appeared to have rejected them, the press, rather than on the failed policies that had brought them to that point. When reporters took up the challenge, anger and recrimination on all sides were the inevitable result."

—Peter Braestrup

AMERICAN FRONTIERS:
*Cultural Encounters and
Continental Conquest.*

By Gregory H. Nobles. Hill & Wang.
286 pp. \$25

Long before Huck Finn vowed to "light

out for the territory" and escape the "civilizing" influence of Aunt Sally, the frontier was a potent symbol in American life. In works ranging from Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) to James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823–41), from Louis L'Amour's popular novels to Hollywood Westerns, the frontier has been depicted as the essence of America. So argued the historian Frederick Jackson Turner in his famous address of 1893, when, in bold defiance of the historical establishment that had trained him, he located the genius of American civilization not in the "seeds" planted by Europe but in the transformation that American soil had wrought upon European transplants. American history, Turner declared, was "the history of the colonization of the Great West." The existence of "an area of free land" continually receding before the march of settlement "explained" America. Period.

As the single most influential interpretation ever offered by an American historian, Turner's "frontier thesis" has been an inexhaustible source of research ideas—and a perpetually inviting target. In recent decades, the latter use has predominated, as many younger historians, reacting against the unconscious arrogance of Turner's Euro-American triumphalism and its implicit dismissal of Indians, have conjured his shade only to riddle it with ideological bullets.

Still, in the hands of a skilled and sensible historian, this new approach to the American frontier can greatly enhance understanding. While Nobles, professor of history at the Georgia Institute of Technology, is properly critical of Turner's frontier thesis (which has many grievous faults), his book also pays tribute to the enduring validity of Turner's great theme.

Rather than caricature the frontier story as a melodrama starring heroic (or villainous) Euro-Americans and villainous (or heroic) Native Americans, Nobles stages an immensely complicated drama featuring a crazy-quilt cast of characters and cultures, each altering and being altered by the others. For example, in outlining the great imperial rivalries of the 17th and 18th centuries, he includes the Indians not as passive or romanticized victims but as active, resourceful players in their own right, subject to their own political rivalries.

Yet this emphasis upon "intercultural con-

tact” as the defining characteristic of the American frontier does not lead Nobles to neglect the old story of “how the West was won.” That saga is also told, from the opening gambits of colonial times through the tragic endgame on the windswept Great Plains. By the time the frontier was consolidated into the American nation-state, every group—the Sioux, the Dakota, the French, the Spanish, the British, the Mexicans—had lost something. As indicated in its double-sided subtitle, this book would acknowledge the fact of Euro-American triumph without falling into the trap of Euro-American triumphalism.

The only lapses in the book are Nobles’s occasional preaching about Euro-American sins—as if the grim events, fairly related, did not speak for themselves—and his occasional genuflections before contemporary pieties. One example: after describing the tendency of Indian men to treat their women as beasts of burden, he adds, a bit nervously, that “after all, Europeans were themselves hardly in the vanguard of gender equality.” (If they were not, then one wonders who was?) Fortunately, such lapses—the stigmata of our era’s anxiously revisionist historiography—are rare. Not only does Nobles synthesize the fruits of an enormous body of scholarship, he writes graceful, even elegant prose that occasionally sparkles with wit, as when he refers to the relationship between the United States and the post-revolutionary Lone Star Republic as a state of “suspended annexation.”

—Wilfred M. McClay

**THE DENG XIAOPING ERA:
*An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese
Socialism, 1978–1994.***

By Maurice Meisner. Hill & Wang.
544 pp. \$30

The current faith that market economies inevitably foster democracy comes in for hard scrutiny in this study of China under Deng Xiaoping. Meisner, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, grants that China has made spectacular economic gains since Deng came to power in 1978. But the social effects of this particular “great leap” have been calamitous.

Meisner argues that Deng’s dismantling of the centrally controlled economy has

failed to create a bourgeois class that is independent of the state and therefore potentially capable of building a new civic culture. Instead, economic liberalization has benefited chiefly “officials or the relatives and friends of officials.” Reformed China, he writes, is not a “socialist market economy” but “bureaucratic capitalism.” While he does not dispute the dramatically improved standard of living of vast numbers of ordinary Chinese, Meisner also notes mushrooming inequalities and injustices: millions of workers deprived of their “iron rice bowls” (job security), hundreds of millions of uprooted peasants converging on cities in search of work, frightful levels of workplace regimentation and exploitation, and rampant corruption.

Meisner’s hope, dashed by Mao and Deng alike, was that China would become a socialist democracy stripped of any Leninist overlay, and this preference frequently colors his analysis. For instance, when he claims that the new Chinese “capitalist class” is “perhaps unique in world history” because it is not “firmly rooted in private property,” the reader is left to wonder whether such a class can truly be called capitalist. Meisner’s description of the Democracy Movement of 1989 is vivid and accurate. But when he quotes the demonstrators calling themselves *shimin*, or “city people,” he assumes that most belonged to the urban working class. Many demonstrators, though, were government employees, and some were members of the Communist Party. *Shimin* was an all-embracing term, “we” the people against “them” the government.

Meisner rightly admires the political awakening and moral courage of the ordinary citizens of Beijing. He notes that, to many, “democracy” meant less a particular form of government than freedom from the bureaucratic tentacles of the state. (“Democracy,” one participant told me at the time, “simply means fair.”) Can China ever build the institutions and political culture capable of supporting democracy? Meisner makes no predictions. But this excellent book makes the sobering case that if democracy ever does arise, it will not be from China’s new class of bureaucratic capitalists but from the ranks of the discontented and disenfranchised.

—Anne F. Thurston