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Manifest Disaster: Climate and the Making of America

Manifest Disaster: Climate and the Making of America (forthcoming) will examine how Americans have perceived—and often misperceived—the climates and ecosystems of North America. In this new book, I aim to connect the current debate over climate change to a much longer history of how Americans have thought about climate, from the continent they imagined from early exploration and settlement, to the ideology of Manifest Destiny, to the climatic myths that spurred development on the high plains and in the arid Southwest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From early explorers to nineteenth-century settlers to regional promoters, Americans have long expressed a deep interest in climate and landscapes, and the places that seemed most suitable for settlement and development. They analyzed climates and landscapes through a prism of folk beliefs, European worldviews, and differing degrees of scientific knowledge. Americans discussed air, water, land, soil, plants, and animals in diaries and letters; described them in newspapers, books, and promotional materials; and depicted them in art.

In *Manifest Disaster*, I aim to address two central questions: How did ordinary people perceive climate and environment, and how did those perceptions shape the future course of the United States? Historians of the American West are familiar with the ideology of Manifest Destiny, and how its ideological assumptions of Anglo-American superiority spurred westward expansion. What historians have overlooked, however, are the ecological assumptions implicit in Manifest Destiny. Anglo-Americans believed that climates, soils, ecosystems—indeed, the entire continent—would cooperate with their transcontinental ambitions.

Such confidence, however, was repeatedly confounded. As early as the 1830s, novelist Washington Irving, who had accompanied a survey party into Indian Territory in 1832, wrote a fictionalized account of the fur trade in the far West, *Astoria*, published in 1836. While the book offered a flattering depiction of John Jacob Astor's fur trade empire, it presented the far West as a hostile "Great American Desert" unfit for human development. In the 1840s, in the aftermath of the U.S-Mexico War, a federal boundary survey reported that much of the new US Southwest was barren desert. Infuriated, slave-owning members of Congress, intent on expanding their cotton empire to the Pacific, disbanded the survey, and replaced it with one that provided a more promising picture of the region. After the Civil War, Congress would do essentially the same thing to John Wesley Powell's magisterial *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region* (1878), with its calls for careful planning and extensive irrigation projects in the far West. Instead, Congress accepted climatic pseudo-science, which promised that "rain would follow the plow." Similar theories spurred development on other dry frontiers, particularly in Australia, where warnings of climatic aridity likewise went unheeded.

It was in fact after the much-noted "closing" of the US frontier in 1890 that most of the settlement on the high plains actually took place. Indeed, such settlement and migration in the face of climatic reality was not just a hallmark of the nineteenth century. It

continued across the twentieth century, as Americans migrated to the arid Southwest, hurricane-prone Florida, and other regions of environmental hazard. Indeed, in examining the federal promotion of settlement, *Manifest Disaster* can illuminate the linkages connecting federal initiatives from the frontier era to the modern United States, linking the Homestead Act of the 1860s and its efforts to create an agrarian republic to F.H.A. loans, aimed at securing homebuyers in the suburban Sunbelt after 1945.

For that matter, dubious climatic thinking and pseudoscience endures today. Despite strong scientific evidence, a significant number of Americans do not believe in climate change. *Manifest Disaster* will help provide a historical context for this current debate by illustrating how Americans have long contested perceptions and theories of climate.