

The American West  
A Very Short Introduction  
By Stephen Aron

### Questions for Thought and Discussion

- How has the conflation of myth and history made it hard to disentangle the stories we have told about the development of the West from our understanding of what really happened?
- In what ways has the gap between projections and reality shaped the development of the West and confounded our interpretations of its history?
- With what conceptions about the West and its history did you come to this book? How has reading it challenged those conceptions?
- In what ways do the maps in this book (and other books) distill history? In what ways do they distort it?
- Should the book have been titled “The American Wests” as opposed to “The American West”?
- How did “the preference for convergence over conversion” shape the history of North American frontiers and the modern American West?
- Mark Twain once said that history doesn’t repeat, but it rhymes. Can you find examples of such “rhymes” in this book?
- How did the precolonial experiences of American Indians prepare them for their encounters with Europeans? In what ways did it fail to prepare them?
- What do you make of the author’s claim that the witchcraft episode that occurred in Santa Fe in 1692 “better reflected and was more important to the broader colonial history of North America” than the far more familiar incident that year in Salem?
- To what should one attribute the differences in the relations between various Indian groups and Spanish, French, and British colonizers?
- How did the ebbing of imperial rivalries weaken the position of Indians and usher the Americanization of western North America?
- Is it appropriate to use anachronistic terms such as “ethnic cleansing” and “genocide” to describe the dispossession and decimation of American Indians?
- Why did Mexico invite American immigration if it feared American expansion? How might this policy have worked?
- What were the stakes of “whiteness” in the nineteenth-century West? How did the meaning and boundaries of this color line shift during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?
- How successful have reclamation and conservation efforts been? With the benefit of historical hindsight, what alternatives would you propose?

- What explains the often contentious relationship between westerners and the federal government?
- Which “westerns” make for the best history? Does that question matter when assessing the genre?
- The book includes an image of John Gast’s 1872 painting “American Progress.” How might you revise this picture to better reflect the reality of American westward expansion during the nineteenth century? How would you update it to incorporate more recent history?
- Critics of recent scholarship about the West have argued that “revisionists” have turned a once triumphant history into a course in “failure studies.” Should that critique be leveled at this book?
- Has the diversity of the American West made it “hopelessly heterogeneous”? Does this history recounted in this book offer any hope about western (and American) heterogeneity?

### **Other Books by the Author**

*How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay.*

*American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State.*

*Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World from the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present* (co-author).

*Trading Cultures: The Worlds of Western Merchants* (co-editor)

**Further reading suggestions can be found at the back of *The American West: A Very Short Introduction***