The Significance of the Frontier in American History

by Frederick Jackson Turner

1. In a recent bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890 appear these significant words: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports." This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development… The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people  to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life.

2. …In this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave-- the meeting point between savagery and civilization. Much has been written about the frontier from the point of view of border warfare and the chase…

3. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American.

4. Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic, and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history.

5. In the course of the seventeenth century the frontier was advanced … and the tidewater region became the settled area. In the first half of the eighteenth century ... Traders followed the Delaware and Shawnee Indians to the Ohio and in 1714 across the Blue Ridge. The King attempted to arrest the advance by his proclamation of 1763, forbidding settlements beyond the sources of the rivers flowing into the Atlantic, but in vain. In the period of the Revolution the frontier crossed the Alleghenies into Kentucky and Tennessee. The isolation of the region increased its peculiarly American tendencies, and the need of transportation to connect it with the East brought internal improvement, The "West," as a self-conscious section, began to evolve…

6. …Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves. For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant

Questions:

1. Part 1 sets up the thesis of the essay, in your own words what is this thesis?
2. How can part 2 be seen as a racist argument for expansion?
3. Parts 2-5 frame American History in terms of expansion, how does Turner believe expansion has affected the development of America since its settlement?
4. In part 4 how does Turner believe westward expansion has affected the United States?
5. In part 5 what was the Proclamation of 1763 and what major event in American history did it cause?
6. How can part 6 be seen as an argument for American imperialism? Be sure to directly reference the document.