IDEOLOGY OF PROGRESS II: 1800S TO TODAY

The Frontier Spirit
● Settling the frontier involved leaving the relative security of village or city to move to an unsettled land.
● It required courage, ingenuity, and perseverance.
● It is also tended to foster an extreme individualism, resistant to restrictions imposed by a community for the communal good.

The Frontier Spirit: Attitudes Towards Nature
● To a certain degree there was a sense of nature as “chaotic” needing to be conquered and tamed.
● It accentuated the anthropocentric view of nature as mere resource to be controlled and exploited.
● Despite the difficulties and dangers faced, the vastness of the West suggested nature as being an endless supply of resources.

The Frontier Spirit and the Ideology of Progress
● It is linked to the ideology of “progress” and “manifest destiny.” “Conquering” or “taming” the “wilderness” is part of progress and our destiny.
● This ideology usually involved the ethnocentric view that indigenous peoples (Native Americans) are obstacles without rights to the land and can be removed or destroyed.

The Legacy of the Frontier Spirit
It continues today in
– individualism
– resistance to society establishing codes of community behavior (seen as restricting individual liberty)
– unqualified value of private property
– belief that property owners have the right to exploit their land in whatever way they see fit
– a distrust of public land and the notion of the commons
– distrust of communal organizations (e.g., co-ops and unions)

The Progressive Era
● Complex phenomenon around 1895-1925.
● Social progress through government activism and reform.
  – concern for the increasing urban poor
  – call for democratic, economic, & social reforms
  – increase of government regulation of finance & industry
  – environmental conservation
● Rise of American political and economic power.
  – Spanish-American War (1898) & acquisition of Philippines
  – Panama Canal and dominance in Caribbean
  – Intervention in Mexican politics in 1910s
Post-World War II

- War ends in 1945, with the U.S. as principal victor and dominant world power.
- Rapid expansion of technology throughout everyday life and the industrialization of agriculture promises unending rise of affluence.
- This technology is exported to “Third World” countries to create an international market.
- The self-image: U.S. is bringing prosperity to a grateful world, proving the U.S.’s exceptional moral standing. (Meanwhile the resentment of and resistance to the U.S. increases.)

“Development”

- The explosive growth of suburbs and sharply increasing use of the automobile spurs urban sprawl as inner cities decline.
- Family farms are rapidly lost as federal policy supports industrial agriculture based on expensive machinery and chemicals.
- Logging, mining, dam-building, grazing increase in the West.
- This is presented as “progress” and “development”: economically good, morally right, and inevitable.
- Development is the new Manifest Destiny.