

[magazine]city SAVE NOW!
at MagazineCity.com **GO**

The Web's Largest Magazine Subscription Source

Click here to
**SUBSCRIBE—
No Risk!**

THE Atlantic online

The Atlantic Monthly | Digital Edition

Home
Current Issue
Archive
Forum
Site Guide
Feedback
Subscribe
Search

Browse >>
Books & Critics
Fiction
Food
Foreign Affairs
Language
Poetry Pages
Politics & Society
Science & Technology
Travel & Pursuits

Send this page to a
friend

MARCH 2000

NOTES & COMMENT

What Makes History



The lessons of a New England landscape

by **Robert D. Kaplan**

THE best thing about winter is that I can go cross-country skiing from my front door. I live in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where the sharp, determined lines of steeples and old houses manifest the tight certainties and revealed truths of the early settlers. The landscape is austere, and makes me long for the sensuousness of southern Europe, where I used to live. In fact, what I like about skiing here is that the perfection of the view concentrates my mind on the more troubled and passionate places on which I report.

Consider the Caucasus, the towering mountain system that separates Russia from the Middle East and is home to Chechens, Ingush, Georgians, Armenians, Azeris, and others. There, because of sectarian wars and internal rebellions following the fall of communism, more history has happened in the past decade than has happened in Stockbridge in the past 200 years. The Georgians alone have seen in just one century a Menshevist regime, civil war, Stalinist destruction and deportations, democracy, anarchy, and, finally, benign despotism, under Eduard Shevardnadze, which at this moment appears to be moving toward democracy.

That's history in heaps, and it's happening now. Where I

Discuss this article in
Post & Riposte.

More on **politics & society** in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Atlantic Unbound*.

From the archives:

"Four Star Generalists," by **Robert D. Kaplan** (October, 1999)
Military history

pierces the philosophical fog that often surrounds the other humanities.

"Travels Into America's Future,"
by Robert D. Kaplan
(July and August, 1999)

A correspondent who has long experience reporting from dimly understood regions of the world reports from his dimly understood native land, and his excursions expose the borderless forces that are pushing America into its next life.

"Was Democracy Just a Moment?," by Robert D. Kaplan
(December, 1997)

The global triumph of democracy was to be the glorious climax of the American Century. But democracy may not be the system that will best serve the world -- or even the one that will prevail in places that now consider themselves bastions of freedom.

"And Now for the News," by Robert D. Kaplan
(March, 1997)

The disturbing freshness of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*.

"Fort Leavenworth and the Eclipse of Nationhood," by Robert D. Kaplan
(September, 1996)

At Fort Leavenworth, where the Army trains its top brass, captains and colonels study high-tech warfare, read the classics, and

live, the history, and the violence, happened then. In western New England white settlers arrived, gradually replaced the Native Americans, and then prospered under a democratic government. Here the population has increased only modestly since 1900, unlike in most other places in the world. And because the Native Americans had no written language, much of what occurred before the seventeenth century is a void.

In places the windy emptiness of the landscape through which I ski, marked by a river and fieldstone walls, suggests the frontier that Stockbridge once was. In the early eighteenth century Stockbridge and other towns nearby constituted the real frontier in North America. Being on the frontier required doing rather than imagining: clearing land, building shelter, obtaining food supplies. Frontiers test ideologies like nothing else. That, ultimately, is why America has not been friendly to communism, fascism, or other, more benign forms of utopianism. Idealized concepts have never taken firm root in America, and so intellectuals have had to look to Europe for inspiration. People here are too busy making money -- an extension, of course, of the frontier ethos, with its emphasis on practical initiative.

Perhaps it was the extreme climate of eastern North America, with its heat, dampness, and freezing cold, that led not only the Native American cultures but also the European one that replaced them to be far more functional and utilitarian than Europe. Americans rejected every ism, and that has been to the good. Even the "European Enlightenment," Daniel J. Boorstin, the former librarian of Congress, has written, "was in fact little more than the confinement of the mind in a prison of 17th- and 18th-century design." The Enlightenment, Boorstin argues, "itself acquired much of the rigidity and authoritarianism of what it set out to combat." In western Massachusetts, and elsewhere along this icy, unforgiving frontier, the Enlightenment encountered reality and was ground down to an applied wisdom of "common sense" and "self-evidence." In Europe an ideal could be beautiful or liberating all on its own; in frontier America it first had to show measurable results.

* * *

The Enlightenment *philosophes*, comfortable in their salons, saw the state as the proper and rational instrument of progress; on the virginal slopes of the Appalachians the state was fine so long as it didn't get in the way of development. Because the Enlightenment was an intellectual discovery, it was, inevitably, elitist, whereas an oral philosophy of common sense issued from the ground

ponder what will be left to defend in a transnational world.

"The Problem of the West," by Frederick Jackson Turner (September, 1896)

"The West, at bottom, is a form of society rather than an area. It is the term applied to the region whose social conditions result from the application of older institutions and ideas to the transforming influences of free land."

"A Year in Montana," by E. B. Neally (August, 1866)

"While welcoming all changes tending towards refinement and a higher civilization [in Montana], the careful observer of the life of these remote people can point to some qualities among them which he would have unchangeable as their grand old mountains, -- their frankness and honesty of purpose, their love of justice, and their sturdy democracy."

"American Civilization," by Ralph Waldo Emerson (April, 1862)

"I see what cubic values America has, and in these a better certificate of civilization than great cities or enormous wealth."

up. To wit, the separation of Church and State in America was no *beau idéal* but a practical response to the fact that the rugged pioneer spirit of optimism and free thought begot different Protestant sects, and none of them held sway over the new political establishment. These sects competed fiercely for souls throughout New England. For the first time in recorded history faith became purely a matter of choice. Such free religious competition and the fervor that ensued became known as the Great Awakening. Democracy in America was the product of a specific culture's interaction with a harsh landscape.

The native inhabitants were part of that landscape. The Stockbridge Indians soothed the soul of Jonathan Edwards, the severest Calvinist of the Great Awakening, who came here in 1751 to write and to minister to them as part of an exile from the swirl of doctrinal controversy he had stirred up in Northampton. The Native Americans here were the first to be granted U.S. citizenship, in honor of their service as scouts in the Revolutionary War. But that is local minutiae, and the broader picture counts for more.

King Philip's War, in 1675-1676, was as brutal as any spate of Balkan atrocities, with native and white civilians, many of them children, central to the carnage. The settlers' losses were awful, but the war's end saw the virtual extinction of native life in southern New England. Though Native Americans fared better in western Massachusetts, the very process of development, combined with unsavory land deals, drove them onto reservations. The fact is, as King Philip's War proved, removing the Indians was eminently practical: the same applied wisdom that had made the rarefied notions of the Enlightenment usable for ruthlessly pragmatic settlers in North America also closed the door on accommodation with the native inhabitants. Here is an even more troubling reality: much or all of what America has achieved domestically and internationally might have been impossible had its dynamic new capitalist society -- which emphasized self-discipline and industry and allowed the individual to rise above the group -- been diluted by the mores of the native culture.

* * *

"History," according to its Greek root, means merely a narrative, and a narrative that is rich and deep is often unresolvable. The Caucasus still endures such bloodshed because all the isms that promised utopia there have been reduced to ethnic blood feuds. The American narrative is morally unresolvable because the society that ultimately saved humanity in the great conflicts of the twentieth century was built on enormous crimes -- slavery and the extinction of the native inhabitants.

History, though, can also be the story of ideas -- and the more useful the idea, the greater the history. America's was an anti-idea: all philosophers are finally wrong, and the masses -- left alone to seek their own interests -- know best. Such democratic populism tempts cruelty and barbarism, and it cannot be successfully applied everywhere, even if Americans -- the missionary zeal of the Great Awakening still within them -- believe otherwise. Nonetheless, America's democratic populism broke ground in New England, where the necessities of frontier life overthrew Europe's established hierarchies. That, along with the removal of the native inhabitants, is the sum of history in western Massachusetts. Judging by its effect on the rest of the world, perhaps no other place has produced more history in these past thousand years.

Robert D. Kaplan is a correspondent for *The Atlantic*, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, and the author of *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War*, to be published this month.

Illustration by Wendell Minor.

*Copyright © 2000 by The Atlantic Monthly Company. All rights reserved.
The Atlantic Monthly; March 2000; What Makes History - 00.03; Volume 285, No. 3; page 18-20.*

[Home](#) [Atlantic Unbound](#) [The Atlantic Monthly](#) [Post & Riposte](#) [Atlantic Store](#) [Search](#)

Subscribe to THE Atlantic
Guaranteed savings, no risk. [Click here.](#)

Get an **Orange Mortgage**

[CLICK HERE](#)

Advertisement:

[Travel Guides](#)

[Guide to Hotels](#)

[Discount Hotels](#)