

Westward Ho

This is a personal story about manifest destiny.

In 1966, my family and I emigrated from Philadelphia to Phoenix in a covered station wagon, becoming part of a great flood of latter-day pioneers who would change this great nation in ways no one could have imagined at the time. We crossed the Great Plains in a steady caravan of moving vans, sedans, and station wagons—dad behind the wheel, mom navigating, quarrelsome kids in the middle seat, dogs in the back.

We had one goal in mind—opportunity. There were innumerable reasons for leaving home: dank cities, dead-end jobs, misty woods, milk barns, slums, high-rises, boring parents, angry lovers, Eastern snobbery, northern snows, southern humidity, and anything else that humdrummed our lives. Seeking a brighter horizon, we went west as young men and women, drawn by the desert's promise of light, space, warmth, and a swimming pool in every backyard.

We were met with open arms. Homesteading a new land called Suburbia, we were greeted by town leaders who enthusiastically cleared the desert for settlement while their industrious partners planted cheap homes in the newly disturbed soil like row crops. Everywhere we looked, shopping malls and commercial clusters were springing up like patches of flowers (or weeds) after a spring shower. All was fresh, clean, and hopeful. Clearly, we had found the promised land. Cheap food and gasoline overflowed in conveniently located grocery stores and filling stations; wide, car-friendly boulevards stretched to the edge of the receding wilderness; the dust of a thousand construction projects filled the air like pollination; water flowed magically from our taps despite the near

absence of rainfall; seductive carpets of flood-irrigated Bermuda grass lawns tickled our toes; and glorious year-round sunshine fell on our peeling shoulders. Best of all, if it grew too hot while errand-running across the blazing asphalt, we could slip inside our new homes and relax in air-conditioned bliss.

I loved it.

For a young boy, pioneering Suburbia was a great adventure. Our first home backed onto a golf course, and I recall long, restless walks with my mother in late evenings across the trimmed fairways, dodging “tsk-tsking” water cannons and ducking into fairytale forests of oleanders and eucalyptus. A few years later, when we moved across town to a cinder-block house, I discovered the desert. Our new home sat on five acres of backyard wilderness that became both a personal refuge and a stage for elaborate games (alone, alas) that I created among the palo verde trees, creosote bushes, and sandy washes.

Later, we moved again, this time to a townhome in a generic subdivision with no wilderness anywhere. When I went outside to escape various family disharmonies, all I could do was go into the backyard to bounce a ball off the building’s sloped roof, over and over, or ride my bike around the cul-de-sacs. The move required that I switch high schools, which disoriented me as much as losing my cherished desert, though it eventually netted me a spot on the soccer team, the presidency of the backpacking club, and a girlfriend.

Soon, we moved again, this time to a spacious house near what was then the last stoplight on the edge of town. I could smell the desert. Liberated at last by a driver’s license and a new but mechanically challenged Jeep Cherokee (a source of many adventures in its

own right), I began to explore the rapidly expanding boundaries of Suburbia with delight. I dug in archaeological sites with an amateur society, prospected for photographs among the cactus and rattlesnakes, climbed hills, hiked trails, and drove that damn Cherokee back and forth relentlessly on unending blacktopped streets and highways, luxuriating in every unleaded moment.

It was 1976, our nation's bicentennial year, and the world was definitely my oyster.

I never asked, but I'm certain my parents enjoyed their roles as homesteaders too—at least in the beginning. Both had humble roots; my father was born in a shack in a dairy field near Hope, Arkansas, in 1926, and my mother grew up middle class in Charleston, West Virginia. Their journey from want and need to hard-earned success and (for a time) modest affluence was typical of their generation, my father's story especially. After enduring a hardscrabble childhood spent knocking around Tennessee, North Carolina, and Louisiana with an itinerant dad who at times was a teacher, lumberman, football coach, and preacher, my father determined at a young age to cut a different path. Over his mother's objections, he signed up with the Army, completed a tour of duty in Allied-occupied Berlin, and then attended Vanderbilt University on the GI Bill. Medical school and an MD in neurology followed. After graduating, he won a national award as an up-and-coming doctor, which he parlayed into an opportunity to cofound what is today a highly regarded national center of neurological medicine in Phoenix—a job he held for the rest of his life, earning the accolades of peers and patients alike.

Not bad for a boy born in a dairy field shack.

My mother's journey was no less typical, though it illuminates a darker side of

her generation's saga. As a spirited youth, raised in a book-loving but modest and unhappy family (the Great Depression knocked her father back on his heels emotionally as well as financially), my mother yearned to soak up the bright lights of big cities. After marrying my father in 1950, she spent the next decade absorbing every ounce of culture provided by Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Chicago, and other places my father took them to complete his medical training. They attended plays in New York City, vacationed in Boston, traveled to Paris and Prague, all of which made an indelible cosmopolitan impression on her expectations. She especially loved literature and ate up the lives of writers. Judging by the vast quantity and high quality of her correspondence during these years, as I discovered later, I'm certain she harbored ambitions to be a writer herself.

However, things got in her way—children, for instance. My father too, who held old-fashioned opinions about gender roles despite his liberal nature. Then there were my mother's personal demons, including bouts of crippling self-doubt. Part of her situation was beyond her control. As a young woman in the 1950s, she was caught between social riptides, liberation coming ashore and tradition ebbing out to sea. She felt confused, frustrated, and at times angry about both the opportunities and challenges confronting her, as did many women of her generation, I suspect. It also fed her demons.

Phoenix made it all worse. Moving to the suburban frontier in a desert was not on her "to do" list, and after an initial burst of enthusiasm for her new home, she came to resent the city, as well as her fate. Like other pioneering women who "went West" reluctantly but dutifully, leaving the sophisticated "East" far behind, my mother never got over her dislocation or her disappointment. She endured, but not well. She never found the footing she desperately craved in those vigorous times, slipped, and eventually fell.

My father also struggled, especially toward the end of his life, despite his achievements. I think they had trouble keeping pace with the rate of change both in Phoenix and in the world at large. Like many pioneers, my parents were engulfed by the economic fire they helped to light, though I'm certain they didn't see things that way. To my father, it was all progress—which he considered uncritically to be a *good* thing (recall the shack in the dairy field). To my mother, the changes were just part of her general discontent. Progress dog-piled her diminishing expectations, and as a consequence, she recoiled physically and emotionally, eventually embarking on a general retreat. Their home, in fact, became a sort of hermitage from which she emerged only occasionally. By the end of her life, I believe she was content to be engulfed by the city's expanding flames, perhaps hoping to rise again some day from the ashes.

It was much the same with Phoenix itself. What was once a small city with big dreams grew into a big city with big problems—and was ultimately consumed by its own success, though most residents didn't see it that way either, I suspect. Phoenix, too, endured, and not well.

To explain, I want to return to the Old West for a moment. Specifically, I want to review the nineteenth-century idea of manifest destiny and explore its role in the creation of the sixty-year post–World War II economic and cultural blowout of the Fiesta, using Phoenix as a prism.

Manifest destiny was a phrase employed energetically in the mid-nineteenth century by a variety of politicians, journalists, and economic boosters to express the general belief that the United States had an unstoppable destiny to expand from sea to shining sea in accordance with God's manifest will. The term was coined in 1845 by John

O’Sullivan, a prominent New York journalist, as part of his argument for the annexation of the Republic of Texas and for American claims to the whole of Oregon, whose northern boundary was disputed by Britain at the time. These claims, he wrote, were logical and necessary “by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.”

It was a moral call to action that was quickly picked up by less salubrious expansionists who used it to fan the patriotic flames of what became the Mexican-American War in 1846—a conflict that netted California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Utah and Colorado for the nation. The clarion call of manifest destiny eventually brought Hawaii and Alaska into the union too, as well as provided cover for our colonial adventures in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century. It has even been used by some analysts to defend (or criticize) American military adventurism in the twenty-first century, including our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to historians, one of the reasons why manifest destiny had such a big impact is because it resonated strongly with the concept of American exceptionalism among citizens. This is the idea that America, by virtue of its development as a revolutionary democracy, its novel Constitution, and its perceived divinely directed “destiny” to spread liberty as far and wide as possible, is different from every other nation on the planet, past or present, and thus exempt from the normal rules of history.

The idea that America is exceptional has its roots in the colonial Puritans’ vision of a virtuous “shining city on a hill”—a vision that stood in deliberate contrast to the

decadence of the recently abandoned Old World. This vision was reinforced by pamphleteer Thomas Paine, who in 1776 argued that the American Revolution was an opportunity, for the first time since the “days of Noah,” to “begin the world over again.” Abraham Lincoln reiterated this idea in a message to Congress in 1862, arguing that the nation’s great experiment in liberty and democracy—the triumph of republicanism over monarchy and oppression—made America “the last, best hope of Earth.” In his famous address two years later at Gettysburg, Lincoln would call the Civil War a great test to see if American ideals would survive.

That they did survive that bloody conflagration served to bolster our sense of exceptionalism and destiny, providing a great deal of motivation for much of what Americans did henceforth, including the abolition of slavery and the settling of the American West. These ideals created a desire to extend freedom and democracy not only throughout the continent, but to the world as well, and became, in the process, an important part of our national mission in the twentieth century. Historical events confirmed this calling, from our triumph over Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in World War II to our victory over the despised Soviet Union in the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Like a yeasty loaf of bread dough, our sense of exceptionalism kept growing. Mix in our unparalleled economic prosperity, abundant natural resources, a high standard of living, and a huge helping of technological prowess, and you have a recipe for an undisputed American self-confidence that serves millions.

I know, because I saw it all over my hometown.

Phoenix officially came into being on May 4, 1868. The original town site was

located on 320 acres of scorching desert. In 1870, the U.S. Census found only 240 people living in what today is called the “Valley of the Sun.” By 1950, largely thanks to the invention of air-conditioning, there were over one hundred thousand people within the city limits, plus many more in surrounding communities. There were 148 miles of paved streets. Today, the Phoenix metro area is home to more than four million residents, making it the twelfth-largest city by population in the United States. It covers over five hundred square miles, making it the largest in the nation physically, even beating Los Angeles (at a mere 469 square miles). Since 2000, Phoenix’s population has grown by 24 percent, second only to Las Vegas, which grew by nearly 30 percent, and is expected to keep growing by double digits, despite the current economic downturn, well into the future. That sounds like manifest destiny at work to me.

One of my indelible memories of growing up on the edge of Phoenix was the procession of hardware-laded pickup trucks zooming ceaselessly to construction sites everywhere. Festooned with ladders, water igloos, tool boxes, and whatnot, they zipped up and down the fresh streets like bees buzzing around a very large hive. They didn’t have to fly far to find nectar either. Cheap housing developments, mini-malls, and office complexes exploded across the desert with a fury that had all the hallmarks of an Old West land rush, only without the horses and revolvers. Certainly, the zeal was the same, as was the sense of unstoppable destiny, though perhaps without the religious motivation. Instead, we worshipped a lesser god—Moola—whose divine will directed us to overflow Phoenix with homes, schools, businesses, churches, restaurants, fast-food joints, sports bars, shopping malls, and highways. The only things an Old West miner or cowboy would have missed in 1966 were brothels and livery stables.

If Phoenix in the late 1960s represented a new frontier, marching to the updated tune of manifest destiny, it differed in one important respect from its predecessor: it exhibited a palpable sense of loss. I have a vivid memory from my teenage years of a silent protest. All over the edge of town, numerous real estate signs, each announcing vacant land for sale, had been defaced with a spray-painted lament: save our desert. During a visit one day to a dilapidated horse stable my parents rented way out in the desert, I asked my father what the protest meant. I don't recall his response, but I do recall my feeling of uneasiness, especially as the signs were pushed farther and farther into my beloved desert.

A torn feeling crept into me. I was a suburban kid. I loved all that asphalt and the liberty and convenience it symbolized, especially when behind the wheel of my adventurous Jeep Cherokee. But I also lamented the disappearing desert, its living edge harder to find with each passing month. I understood that my two halves were linked together—one depended on the other—and were like squabbling siblings doomed to quarrel endlessly. As I grew older, however, this torn feeling deepened, until I didn't know what to make of the tension anymore. So I did what many of my peers did to resolve their teenage angst—I moved away and went to college.

The torn feeling nagged at me, however. On trips home, I tried to shield myself from the expanding signs of manifest destiny that I saw everywhere, preferring to cocoon with my parents in their downtown apartment, far from the still-vigorous frontier. It helped that my mother had finally made peace with Phoenix. They now lived close to the main library, the art museum, and other cultural amenities, which had encouraged her to engage once more in the outside world constructively. She became cheerful again, and I

recall many happy conversations in their living room revolving around books, authors, movies, and current events.

My father, too, had made peace of a sort with his shortcomings, though not with his deteriorating health. He had contracted adult-onset diabetes in the 1970s, and by the time he was due to retire, his health had declined substantially, requiring daily dialysis treatments. It made him cranky. At the end of their lives, they had reversed roles—my sweet-tempered, generous, optimistic father became grumpy and despondent, while my conflicted, restless, unsatisfied mother mellowed into a cheerful, if still reclusive, angel.

It made for unpredictable visits home.

In a way, their lives continued to reflect the changes consuming Phoenix. Rapid growth, especially the proliferation of new highways in and around the city, created a type of urban-onset diabetes that required daily transfusions of fossil fuel and water to keep the megalopolis alive. It also mocked the proclamation I heard throughout my youth that “We’ll never be another Los Angeles!” This type of daily dialysis made residents cranky too, especially those citizens who felt helpless to stop, or even slow, the city’s relentless growth. At the same time, Phoenix tried to make peace with itself, or at least with its expectations. It stopped fighting its fate. It stopped pretending it was still a frontier cow town and embraced instead its role as a major cosmopolitan city, with all the traffic congestion and good coffee that came with it. But most of all, it stopped trying to have its desert and eat it too. It just ate and ate.

It was manifest destiny at work, of course, but it was also the American sense of exceptionalism in action. Not only did we believe in the “rightness” of our cause—to conquer and overspread the continent—we grew increasingly confident that we were

exempt from any negative consequences of our actions. If they existed, we were told they either would be (1) fixed by the free market, (2) fixed by government regulation, or (3) pushed far enough into the future to not matter. Phoenix was a perfect illustration. At no time did I hear any second-guessing about limits to growth in a desert. Nothing checked Phoenix's destiny—not concerns about water supplies, cheap gasoline, loss of local agriculture, smog, or what it would take to keep four million people alive in a desert. It was as if we ignored the laws of physics along with the lessons of history.

Progress was good for my parents. They came to a strange land as poor pioneers and prospered along with Phoenix. They lived the American Dream—not the pursuit of material manifestations of success as much as their steady improvement over time. Their lives were better than their parents'; they had more security, more opportunity, more comfort. They didn't do without, go hungry, or stand in unemployment lines; they were well-educated, well-fed, and well-blessed with the fruits of a robust and expanding economy. Best of all, especially for my mother, they could travel, and they saw parts of the globe that deeply impressed them. If they had second thoughts or misgivings about progress, I never heard a word. For them, the future was always bright.

I developed a different perspective. I came of age during the heyday of progress, witnessing the good, the bad, and the ugly. Impressed at first, I have now lived long enough to see that manifest destiny was not necessarily a positive force in our history. I will likely live long enough to see evidence that America is *not* exceptional after all—that despite this nation's many admirable qualities, it is subject to the same historical forces that have worn down all great nations and empires throughout the ages. I know that I've already lived long enough to see us enter the Age of Consequences.



One afternoon, when I was thirteen, I rode my mother's favorite horse alone into the desert. Valentine was a huge quarter horse, as sturdy and dependable as she was large. I don't remember why I was allowed to ride alone into the wilderness; perhaps I snuck away. I didn't go far, in any case, just to my favorite place—a remnant of a prehistoric canal that sliced across the desert like a large groove made by a dull knife. It was a subtle feature on the land; to many, I imagined it looked like just another dry wash to cross. But I recognized it as man-made, an artifact of an earlier version of manifest destiny. I loved its subtlety, its muteness, its mysterious origins, and the way it lay on the land. Where did it start? Where did it go? Why was it there?

Our old stable was called Powderhorn, and it sat at the end of a long dirt road in the middle of nowhere, east of town, its only neighbor a funky palm tree plantation. I don't know when the stable had been built, possibly in the 1920s during the heady years of dude ranching and Hollywood Westerns, but by the time we took it over in the mid-1970s, it had lost its shine. Fences sagged, weeds proliferated, old feed rotted in bags, dust gathered, neglect ruled. I loved it. For a thirteen-year-old boy with too much creative energy and not enough friends, the stable became a castle to rule. A fortress to storm. An archaeological ruin to explore. A maze to chase Soviet spies, BB gun in hand. And a backdrop for the nine-hole miniature golf course that I designed and built—whatever it took to keep loneliness at bay.

For my father, then in his midforties, the run-down stable was an important release from various mounting pressures in his life, a diversionary and bottomless bucket of chores—as well as a drain on our meager finances. Unlike many of his generation,

however, he was no cowboy wannabe (the horses were for my mother). Still, he loved to tinker, fixing this, building that, earning a tickle of sweat under the desert sun. I suspect the work transported him home to his childhood. Although he had become a neurologist and lived in a big city, the old adage was still true: you can take the boy out of the dairy field, but you can't take the dairy field out of the boy, even in a desert.

Leaving the stable that day, I could tell that Valentine was as eager as I to go exploring. Her huge frame moved along the trail with ease and grace. She spooked at rattlesnakes pretty badly, so I kept an eye out for the coiled menaces. With the other eye, I scanned the horizon. I wasn't playing imaginary games now. No valiant steed or drawn sword in hand. Instead, I opened all my pores and absorbed the desert—the soft wind, the morning smells, the light, the land. I loved the way the desert *looked* empty at first glance, but was actually filled to the brim with life. I had a boyhood fascination with Sonoran cacti that blossomed on these rides. I especially loved saguaros, whose stately, serene forms dot my memory like kindly uncles. I often steered Valentine as close as I could to their barbed, upraised arms, admiring their green skin, which I knew from (careful) experience was smooth and cool to the touch.

Valentine and I dipped into the dull groove of the prehistoric canal, built by the Hohokam people five centuries earlier, riding slowly along its length while I puzzled about the people who had built it. *Why was it so far from any river?* I wondered. *What were they trying to grow here?* Valentine wasn't as curious as I. After an hour, when it became clear that we weren't venturing any deeper into the desert, her thoughts turned toward home, and supper. Yielding to her impatience, I turned her head with one hand and grabbed the pommel of the saddle with the other. I knew what was coming next. As

we drew closer to the stable, she picked up speed, despite every attempt I made to prolong our journey. She paced, then trotted, then, because I wasn't careful, galloped. Her bulk and my skinniness meant that I soon abandoned all pretenses that I was in charge anymore. I gripped the pommel with both hands and prayed that I stayed in the saddle until we reached the stable.

These days, the memory of that ride, the open desert, and sturdy Valentine is tinged, not with sadness or regret, but with thankfulness. The stable, the canal, the wilderness are all gone, bladed and buried under a row crop of houses in a tidy subdivision called Powderhorn. But the memory endures. And it's a good memory. I feel fortunate to have experienced rides with Valentine, thankful to see and smell the desert before I became "educated" to the sins of manifest destiny, before the desert disappeared, before progress went on and on. As a youth, I restlessly explored the fine line between city and desert, nature and culture, fascinated by the influence of one on another, the slice of a canal across the land, the contrast of asphalt and desert pavement, a house on a hill, even a golf course set among stately saguaros. It all told a story of expansion and exceptionalism and our disregard for limits. But that knowledge came later. That day, on Valentine's back, all that mattered was the wind.

And freedom.