

The Trespassing Cyborg: Technology, Nature, and the Nation in *Wild Wild West*

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Abstract: Drawing on the studies by Leo Marx and Henry Nash Smith, this paper analyzes the 1999 Western comedy *Wild Wild West* as negotiating the boundaries of nature and technology. Set in 1869 and taking place mostly in the American West, the film depicts a clash of civilization/technology and wilderness/nature and, with its resolution of the conflict, attests to the ideal of the ‘American Garden.’ Furthermore, *Wild Wild West* is infused with ideas related to westward expansion and Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis. By partially revising and thereby affirming and refitting the frontier myth for the twenty-first century, the film can be interpreted to reimagine the American nation. In terms of terrorist threats and the fear of weapons technology possibly falling into ‘wrong’ hands, the beginning of this century presents the United States with hazards very similar to the ones which Jim West and Artemus Gordon, the film’s protagonists, have to face as they set out to defend the nation.

Full of impressive machines and little gadgets put to use in the vastness of the American West, *Wild Wild West* can easily be perceived as a film negotiating the borders of technology and nature. Set in the Reconstruction era, the 1999 Western comedy displays the United States recovering from the Civil War—but also as a “nation on the move” (Wesley xii) celebrating mobility and subscribing to a general belief in progress and development. Technological advances and inventions play an important role, and the railroad becomes the motor unfolding the story as it transports Jim West (Will Smith) and Artemus Gordon (Kevin Kline) to their sites of investigation. Starting in Washington, DC, they continually advance westward until they confront Dr. Arliss Loveless (Kenneth Branagh) at Promontory Point for the final battle. Therefore, the westward expansion, and subsequently the frontier myth, provide a basis for my analysis.

For Richard Slotkin, however, this myth is outdated and needs to undergo substantial revision. In *Gunfighter Nation*, he states that

[e]ven in its liberal form, the traditional Myth of the Frontier was exclusionist in its premises, idealizing the White male adventurer as the hero of national history. A new myth will have to respond to the demographic transformation of the United States and speak to and for a polyglot nationality. Historical memory will have to be revised, not to invent an imaginary role for supposedly marginal minorities, but to register the fact that our history in the West and in the East, was shaped from the beginning by the meeting, conversation, and mutual adaptation of different cultures. (655)

I claim that *Wild Wild West*, to a certain degree, works to revise the frontier myth and thus reimagines the nation as it challenges both whiteness and masculinity of the national hero. The film undercuts the idea of the white hero with the character West who, in contrast to the 1960s television series the film is based on, is presented as an African American and former slave. Yet the film does not simply replace the white hero with a black one. Rather, it relies on the ‘buddy formula’ since it is only by teaming up and combining their respective skills that Gordon and West manage to overcome their enemy. Furthermore, the frontier as a male-dominated space and the masculinity of the heroes are questioned. When first introduced, Gordon is shown in drag. Similarly, West employs cross-dressing as a means to beguile Loveless, whose hench(wo)men are overtly female.

Drawing on the contrasts between a civilized and peaceful East and a savage and dangerous West, the film echoes Leo Marx’s interpretation of Jeffersonian politics,

[t]he controlling principle of [which] is not to be found in any fixed image of society. Rather it is dialectical. It lies in [Thomas Jefferson’s] recognition of the constant need to redefine the “middle landscape” ideal, pushing it ahead, so to speak, into an unknown future to adjust it to ever-changing circumstances. (The ideal, in fact, is an abstract embodiment of the concept of mediation between the extremes of primitivism and what may be called “over-civilization.”) (139-40)

In the film, the mediation between ‘primitive’ and ‘over-civilized’ is acted out by the movie’s protagonists, who—as the trigger-happy cowboy West on the one hand and the Harvard-trained inventor Gordon on the other hand—have to reconcile their differences to defeat their archenemy Loveless. I will interpret this steam-driven villain with the help of Marx’s notion of the “sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction” (29). This intrusion of the man-machine cyborg into the ‘American Garden’ proves to be a serious threat to the United States exactly because Loveless, too, combines the ‘primitive’ and the ‘over-civilized.’ Moreover, I propose Loveless to

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be read as the representation of a very common fear: technology in the ‘wrong’ (i.e. non-American) hands and the threat of terrorism increasingly directed against the United States, which are general concerns for the country at the end of the twentieth century. The American West of the film, in this sense, becomes the frontier for the United States’ political challenges at the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹

WESTWARD EXPANSION AND MOBILITY

It is impossible to talk about the westward expansion of the United States without mentioning Frederick Jackson Turner. With his paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” he laid the foundation for the frontier myth, which has proven to be a very powerful discourse for and in US history. At the 1893 American Historical Association meeting in Chicago, the historian proposed to interpret the first hundred years of the country’s history as a century shaped by the existence of the frontier. Turner concluded his paper with the statement that “at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier ha[d] gone, and with its going ha[d] closed the first period of American history.” In giving the frontier such a central role and at the same time submitting it to history by declaring it closed, Turner created the myth and established his own legacy that historians have struggled with ever since:

The New Western Historians, for instance, [...] for a time challenged the frontier thesis directly. Patricia Nelson Limerick [...] described the frontier as “an unsubtle concept in a subtle world” (*Legacy* 25). She called the frontier “the other f-word” and avoided its use in the classroom (*Frontier* 72, 78). Even so, one could arguably read her *Legacy of Conquest* as an extended essay on the frontier and its impact on American life simply by substituting the word “frontier” for her term conquest. (Popper, Lang, and Popper 91)

Instead of attempting to avoid Turner and his frontier thesis, I want to acknowledge it as the central and powerful myth in American culture that it has come to be. Hence, my reading will point out how the myth reverberates in the film *Wild Wild West*, which already in its title alludes to a central idea of Turner’s thesis: the frontier as the borderline dividing the wilderness of the American West from civilization in the East.

1 According to James Hanlan, the genre of the Western has always been “a vehicle for the exploration of contemporary social concerns” and “has proven remarkably adept in its ability to represent changing contemporary interpretations of [American] national life” (431, 435).

CIVILIZATION AND THE *WILD WILD WEST*

According to Turner, “the frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization.” For John G. Cawelti, this conflict between savagery and civilization is also a core theme of the Western formula:

The Western story is set at a certain moment in the development of American civilization, namely at the point when savagery and lawlessness are in decline before the advancing wave of law and order, but are still strong enough to pose a local and momentarily significant challenge. (22-23)

With this in mind, the title *Wild Wild West* already serves as a comment on the idea of the West portrayed in the film. The doubling of the adjective ‘wild’ both puts an emphasis on the aspect of savagery and comically exaggerates and therefore undermines it. The same holds true for the film itself.

The movie’s plot revolves around the mad scientist Loveless, who was formerly in the service of the Confederacy, and his plan to defeat and destroy the United States. In order to reach his goal, Loveless has allied with foreign, mostly European, powers and kidnapped the world’s leading scientists, whom he forces to invent and build the most advanced weapons in his secret hideout at Spider Canyon, Utah. During their initially separate investigations, US Marshals Gordon and West both come across parts of Loveless’s plan. They are then ordered to team up by President Grant (also Kevin Kline), which they reluctantly do as they set out to chase the villain. From time to time, Rita Escobar (Salma Hayek) joins and simultaneously disturbs their party in pursuit of her goal to save her husband, who happens to be one of the scientists kidnapped by Loveless.

After their introduction, the two protagonists meet with President Grant at the White House for their mission briefing. The scene opens with two long shots of Washington, DC, which prominently feature the Capitol building with the new dome under construction. Even though an anachronism,² the work in progress can be read as a pars pro toto symbolizing the (re)building of the nation. What is more, this white building standing on Capitol Hill may bring to mind both John Winthrop’s famous phrase ‘city upon a hill,’ and—to propose yet another anachronism—the White City of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Slotkin describes this city as “an architectural extravaganza in ersatz marble representing the pinnacle of the Euro-

2 The film is set in 1869; the new dome, however, was completed in 1868 (“Capitol Construction History”).

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American civilization, the original ‘alabaster city . . . undimmed by human tears,’ ‘a little ideal world’” (63).

The depiction of Washington, DC, in the film offers a perspective similar to Slotkin’s description: Framed by the extravagant Capitol and White House, everything seems to be in place and order. The spacious dirt roads look nice and clean, all the people appear busy but not hasty, and the flock of sheep grazing on the White House lawn add an air of a pastoral idyll to the scene. In other words, the nation’s capital is presented very much like the Jeffersonian “middle landscape,”³ in which civilization and nature blend into an ideal world. What is more, in this version of the ‘American Pastoral,’ the President of the United States is imagined as a variation of the Virgilian theme of the good shepherd. It is from this idyllic and utopian epitome of American civilization that West and Gordon set out for their mission to confront the terrorist threat and save the nation.

As the heroes advance westward, the setting continually changes. The landscape becomes less and less densely populated until they arrive in the Utah desert, where they are captured and left to die by Loveless. Filmed in John Ford’s Monument Valley, the American West appears to be a deserted place empty of all civilization, the only visible population being ‘natural’—a tarantula and a desert wasp. At this point, the film’s portrayal of the American West is reminiscent of Turner’s idea of ‘free,’ or to use Henry Nash Smith’s term, ‘virgin land.’⁴ However, this impression drastically changes when West and Gordon stumble upon Loveless’ secret hideout at Spider Canyon and learn that their archenemy does not only have his own city hidden inside the canyon but also a menacing war machine: an eighty-foot mechanical tarantula—an exaggeration in itself. The contrast between Washington, DC, and Loveless’ city could not be more obvious.⁵ Whereas the capital of the United States is presented as the spacious white city upon a hill, Loveless’s hideout appears to be a city crammed into a canyon and rather black from the exhaust fumes of steam engines. Even though a city

3 Marx points out that “the pastoral ideal [...] is located in a middle ground somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature” (23). According to him, Jefferson develops a “syntax of the middle landscape” in his writings which “is a perfect expression of the American pastoral ethos” (121).

4 In his book *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Smith assesses that “one of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that [American] society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward” (3).

5 The opposition between the two places is also established through their location within the United States. While the dangerous enemy is located in the West—thereby subscribing to the idea of the dangerous wilderness lying behind the frontier and requiring civilization and control—the heroes and their safe place(s) are based at the East Coast.

and thus a form of civilization, it is reminiscent of the overcrowded, heavily polluted cities of nineteenth-century Europe and not the pastoral ideal.

Loveless's alliance with European powers and the fact that he is wearing a uniform with a German spiked helmet—a symbol alluding to the German Empire—reinforce the association with the 'Old World.' In this sense, Loveless and his machinery can be understood as a reversion of Jefferson's perspective regarding the use of machines on American soil:

[For Jefferson], the machine is a token of that liberation of the spirit to be realized by the young American Republic; the factory system, on the other hand, is but feudal oppression in a slightly modified form. Once the machine is removed from the dark, crowded, grimy cities of Europe, he assumes that it will blend harmoniously into the open countryside of his native land. (Marx 150)

Instead of harmoniously blending into the landscape, Loveless' spider blasts Monument Valley into bits and pieces. Moreover, this machine has to be understood as a double threat to the American Pastoral: It is shaped after an animal and, therefore, associated with the wilderness and danger of the uncivilized nature. However, as a representation of cutting-edge technology thought up by the world's leading scientists, the machine also represents the feared 'overcivilization.' With regard to progress, planning strategies, and technological innovation, Loveless, his city, and especially his war machinery are presented at par with the United States. However, the villain is also constructed as inferior because his use of technology is almost exclusively associated with negative aspects: ruthless savagery, antidemocratic values, and destruction. In fact, Loveless's various vehicles do not only compensate the loss of his legs but also confirm in an exaggerating way to an era which is largely defined by advances in transportation technology and, more generally, to the significance of mobility for the construction of national identity and superiority.

THE RAILROAD AND OTHER MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION

The ways of transportation in *Wild Wild West* are endowed with symbolic meanings and, as means of mobility, become central elements of the story that they help to unravel.⁶ This particularly holds true for the railroad which, as Joseph Millichap points out, functions as a mediator between nature and culture because

6 Joseph Millichap observes that, very often, "[t]rains in American films function [...] to move along their characters, plots, settings, and symbols" (541).

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[i]n its most general definition, the railroad – the system of metal tracks over which locomotive engines draw trains of various vehicles on flanged wheels to transport people and cargo between terminals – is a technology for converting natural energy into cultural power. (541)

This mediating function is called upon in the reconciliation of West's and Gordon's differences. In the beginning, the two heroes are set up as competitors and opponents. Their race to the train station on horseback and a futuristic bicycle, respectively, represents a competition between the "primitive" means of transportation and the technologically advanced, modern possibilities of movement.⁷ This binary opposition between primitive/natural and civilized/technological is, however, immediately challenged by their train trip. Gordon wins the race and, in the beginning, seems to be superior due to his command of the technological innovations. West is in many ways introduced as the epitome of the cowboy hero, for example by his clothing, his preference for horse riding, and his rough masculinity. The latter is represented by his gun and underlined by his courageousness and aggressiveness. West combines these characteristics with a gentleman-like behavior. At first, he despises the Wanderer, the train put at West's and Gordon's disposal by the President.⁸ For him, the 'iron horse' is Gordon's territory in which he cannot move freely and which he cannot control.

In the beginning of the film, the train is associated with Gordon and the progress and technological advancement he represents. The train, compared to the horse, can be seen as representing an immobilizing cage or even prison while at the same time being a highly advanced means of mobility. While Gordon knows how to use the many technological gadgets, West's range of actions and decisions is limited on the train. Gordon even uses the technological equipment to completely restrict West's mobility when he has him strapped on the pool table and then lets him hang from the train, safely tied to its undercarriage. However, West adapts to the new circumstances and, finally, acquires some degree of control over and knowledge of the technological innovations. The train becomes common, or even communal, ground for the two travelers and foreshadows their being bound together by the adventures they have to face. They have to leave behind their individual means of transportation—horse and nitrogen-fueled bicycle—to go on their mission using a means of group travel.

The train serves as an ambiguous symbol, representing both mobility and a certain degree of confinement at the same time: As a means to cover great distances within a

7 Prompted by West whether he knows how to ride a horse, Gordon simply replies: "Yes, when the situation calls for something primitive" (1:08:54).

8 As Walter Metz points out, the Wanderer is an allusion to the film *The General*. Aside from looking alike, "the train in the 1928 movie was labeled 'W & A RR' ('wanderer,' if sounded out)" (157).

short time period it enhances mobility, while its being bound to follow the established tracks limits the options of free and individual movement. This ambiguity is also described by Ralph Harrington's account of the contradictory associations of railways. For him, railways in general are "a symbol of progress, promising economic and social betterment, democracy, energy, freedom from old restrictions, all the benefits and opportunities of the constantly circulating liberty of modern, mechanized civilization." However, they are also "associated with pollution, destruction, disaster, and danger, threatening the destabilization and corruption of the social order, the vulgarization of culture, the despoliation of rural beauty, the violence, destruction and terror of the accident" (229).

Wild Wild West portrays the possibility of technological and scientific progress to be put to the 'wrong' uses in Loveless and his war machinery. Loveless employs his amorphous tank-vehicle turned into a train to flee into the West. His means of transportation offers a greater freedom of mobility than the Wanderer, and the physically disabled Loveless is thus introduced as being able to move more freely than the able-bodied heroes. His vehicle can even move vertically and, thereby, opens up a new dimension of mobility that is the decisive feature that Loveless employs to trick his pursuers and to reverse the roles of the chased and the hunter. It is mainly his technological superiority that the two protagonists have to overcome in order to defeat him in the end.

Loveless's most important and significant military equipment, the tarantula, at first seems to be an invincible enemy. It combines the features of an animal (nature), its ways of moving and fighting, with technological innovations and progress into a highly advanced vehicle. However, when Gordon also takes nature as his inspiration and constructs a new vehicle inspired by the tarantula's natural enemy, the desert wasp, the technological hierarchy is reversed. The airplane named 'Air Gordon' is the means of transportation that allows the two heroes to emerge from the showdown as victors. In the end, the most advanced party with regard to technology and mobility wins, and both mobility and progress are thereby affirmed and revalidated. However, the facts that during the course of action horse riding proves to be useful in certain situations as well (e.g. West's escape from Loveless's party) and that the most advanced technologies on both sides are inspired by nature deconstruct the simple dichotomy set up in the beginning by the 'horse-versus-bicycle race.' Just as West and Gordon can stop the enemy only as a team, the film seems to suggest, nature and modern technology are both essential to the American nation and its (future) development.

PIONEER SPIRIT AND SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS

The importance of nature also comes up in Turner's frontier thesis. According to him, westward expansion and the development of the acquired territories are carried out in several successive waves, the first consisting of the pioneers who mainly depend on hunting and trading for their living. With regard to this first wave, Turner claims that

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.

This image of the frontier coincides with what Deborah Epstein Popper, Robert E. Lang, and Frank J. Popper call “[t]he public’s frontier of romantic possibility, of open-ended opportunity and adventure.” For them, the public imagination had been shaped by “[a] sizable frontier literature [...] [which] produced a well-developed myth of the pioneer that suffused later scholarly depictions of the frontier, especially Turner’s” (92). In this scheme, the scientific progress, exemplified by the railroad as a product of and motor for the industrial revolution, plays an important role since it allows for “sen[ding] an increasing tide of immigrants into the Far West” and for the ‘winning of the West’ to occur “at a swifter pace” (Turner). In addition, it provides for a continuing civilization of the acquired territories based on the transformation of already existing structures, which Turner sees as an inevitable teleological process:

The buffalo trail became the Indian trail, and this became the trader’s “trace;” the trails widened into roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads.¹⁰

Against this background, the pioneer becomes the central figure of this transformation of the wilderness as he opens the way for further development and a new wave of immigration.

9 Variations of this phrase occur frequently in discourses dealing with the settlement of the American West, see for instance Theodore Roosevelt’s *The Winning of the West*, or the 1962 Western *How the West Was Won*.

10 This highly problematic notion can be complicated with Tim Cresswell, who observes that “mobility is not just a function of time and space, but an agent in their production” (6). Mobility has the power to contribute to the definition of concepts like time and space and, therefore, new kinds of mobility do not merely transform previously existing infrastructures but bring with them more far-reaching consequences.

GORDON AS A PIONEER FIGURE

Gordon has to be understood as a pioneer figure, which is made obvious at Loveless's 'coming-out' party.¹¹ At the ball, Gordon appears in the costume of a trapper, complete with fur cap, full beard, and fringed leather jacket and pants. He looks like the stereotypical image commonly associated with pioneers like Davy Crocket or Daniel Boone, which Gordon ironically comments on with the words: "I look like someone out of *Leatherstocking*." The connection between Daniel Boone and James Fenimore Cooper's hero is pointed out by Smith:

Cooper based a part of [...] *The Last of the Mohicans* on a well-known exploit of Boone in conducting the rescue of Betsey and Fanny Callaway and Jemima Boone, his daughter, from the Cherokees (59).

Thus, the rescue of Cora Munro in Cooper's novel is shaped after Boone's accounts. In *Wild Wild West*, the costumed Gordon adds another layer to the interpretation of the pioneer figure and its revision in American culture along this tradition when he frees Rita Escobar from Loveless's mansion. Ironically, this rescue can only be accomplished by the means of technology. To cut the bars of the gigantic bird cage which holds Escobar, Gordon uses an air-pressure driven miniature circular saw built into his costume. What is more, the rescue is a coincidence rather than the goal of his mission: As Gordon explains, he was actually trying to rescue the kidnapped scientists. Therefore, the scene provides a parody of the stereotypical pioneer figure. It does not only simply ridicule this central icon in the American imaginary, but rather "legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" at the same time (Hutcheon 101).

While affirming the continuing significance of the pioneer, Gordon undermines this image by his masquerade as well as through his own modern image of the pioneer. According to Linda Hutcheon, "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (93). This aptly describes Gordon's parody of the pioneer figure at the party. While the classic pioneer à la Boone/*Leatherstocking* may no longer be a model for the modern and technologically-equipped Western hero,¹² his image still looms large and Gordon can even be seen as a pioneer, albeit on another level.

11 With this I refer to the costume ball in the movie. Up to this point, Loveless is presumed dead, killed while experimenting with explosives. At the ball, he reveals himself to the audience (supporters of his plot to destroy the US) by blowing the head off a Lincoln caricature and then rolling out of it.

12 In fact, according to Smith, the dominant Western hero of the twentieth century is the cowboy (109).

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Gordon is a pioneer in the field of science. One could say that with the frontier coming to a close and the opening up of the country through the transcontinental railroad, there are no geographical boundaries left to be explored. Therefore, it is the limits of technological possibilities in all realms that Gordon seeks to transcend with his innovations, inventions, experimentations, and scientific genius. While the way no longer leads westward to explore new and wild territory, the new challenges lie in the fields of science and technological progress. Gordon does not rely on intuitions or experience. For him, everything needs a rational and empirical explanation rather than an emotional, impulsive, or intuitive approach. In his hands, a dead scientist's head becomes the means to reconstruct the last picture this man had seen before his death as a clue for the investigation. Here, his innovation seems to foreshadow the invention of media like the movie camera or the projector.¹³ Gordon is portrayed as the inventor of the airplane and the bulletproof vest. In this sense, he resembles the pioneer by opening up new spaces to be explored and creating a certain degree of security in a dangerous setting. With his construction of the Air Gordon, he takes the place of the Wright brothers, who are generally considered the “[p]ioneers of American [a]viation,” as the title of a book by Quentin James Reynolds has it.

The portrayal of Gordon as the reflective and rational scientist clearly contrasts with that of West, who is characterized by President Grant as having a “patented approach to shoot first, shoot later, shoot some more, and then when everybody's dead try to ask a question or two.” His impulsive and intuitive behavior is presented as essentially life-threatening when Gordon and West are left to die in the desert by Loveless. Instead of trying to think up a solution for their situation, as Gordon suggests, West immediately steps out of the circle to which they have been confined and thereby activates the flying saw blades designed to decapitate the two. However, West's character paradoxically completes Gordon's as most of the latter's inventions are presented as work-in-progress which need to undergo further testing.¹⁴ The test subject happens to be West, whose input concerning improvements is taken up seriously and valued by Gordon. Even though not comfortable with the dead scientist's head being used as a projector, it is West who comes up with the idea to employ eye glasses for a crisp picture. More decisive for the plot is of course West's proposition for Gordon to hide a gun rather than pen and paper up his sleeve because this gun makes the difference in the showdown with Loveless. West thus adds to Gordon's

13 As John C. Tibbetts points out, the movie projector can be seen as yet “another technology [...] disrupting the peace and harmony of the American Garden. Like the locomotive, it moved on gears and wheels and penetrated the darkness with its cyclopean eye” (591).

14 Of course, West's portrayal as Gordon's intuitive and impulsive counterpart can be seen as a feminization of the character. However, the cowboy image and the bravery and cunning associated with it immediately contradict this notion.

character exactly what Cawelti finds the pioneer typically lacks: “[the] ability to cope with savagery” (31). In this sense, Loveless is presented as a counterforce to the wilderness-transforming pioneer. His plan to revert the American westward expansion and destroy the United States effectively makes him an antipioneer.

DR. LOVELESS, THE STEAM-DRIVEN CYBORG

With regard to savagery, Cawelti observes that

[one] important aspect of [it] in the Western formula is its relation to madness. [...] In general, its function seems to be one of distinguishing between the hero’s disciplined and moral use of violence and the uncontrollable aggression that marks the “bad” savage. (35)

Uncontrollable aggression is one of Loveless’ central character traits. As a scientist formerly in the services of the Confederate army, he lost the lower half of his body while experimenting with explosives. For this he seeks revenge, which he successfully acts out on General McGrath’s soldiers by demonstrating the firepower of his tank to the representatives of the European governments allied with him. Accused of betrayal by McGrath, he answers: “Having donated half of my being to create a weapon capable of doing this, how did you and General Lee repay my loyalty? You surrendered at Appomattox. So who betrayed whom?” Partly the cause of his insanity and rage, the loss of limbs during the Civil War also marks his weakness, which he tries to compensate with his machinery. His steam-driven wheelchair makes him a cyborg: It grants him the ability to move and is even equipped with four hydraulic legs to make up for the lacking natural two. How strongly the identity of Loveless as a man-machine hybrid depends on the machines becomes clear in the showdown when Gordon’s shot hitting the villain’s machine leg proves to be the lethal one sealing his fate.¹⁵

Loveless can be read as a reference to Edward Ellis’s novel *The Steam-Man of the Prairies*, which was published one year before the story of the film takes place. The novel’s protagonist is Johnny, a disabled young boy who builds a steam-man to compensate for his physical inability. Bill Brown establishes a link between this story and the “notorious loss of limbs suffered by Civil War soldiers.” For him, “*The Steam-Man of the Prairies* [...] legitimizes prosthetic technology, normalizing the (white) individual’s difference from, and artificial completion of, his body” (132). In Brown’s reading of the novel, the machine and the boy are described as staging “a master/slave

15 In this sense, he has to die twice—first, through Gordon’s shot killing the machine part, and second, through West’s killing of his biological remains.

dialectic wherein mastery depends not just on the compliance of the slave but on the slave's becoming a compliant extension of the master's body" (133).

For Loveless, the machinery also serves as compensation for his disability. He is at the same time in control of his machines as he is dependent on them. Moreover, his use of machinery might be seen as an attempt to reconstruct an antebellum Southern lifestyle by establishing a system of slavery in which Loveless presides as master over his machines. This kind of scientific progress is turned historically backwards rather than being orientated towards the future, just as Marx's interpretation of Jeffersonian politics suggests. Loveless's master plan includes not only the attempt to recreate a Southern lifestyle but even to establish a status quo ante the United States. He wants to redistribute the United States territory to their former owners; for example, the Southwest to Mexico, the original thirteen colonies to Great Britain, and Louisiana to France. In addition, Loveless wants to secure the greater portion of the United States' Northwest for himself on which to settle down and retire.¹⁶ This suggested change of roles from active aggressor to passive retiree points toward a domestication of the villain, a move from the public to the private sphere. It is but one of the film's numerous elements renegotiating masculinity, especially with regard to the presentation of hero(es) and villain(s) as male-coded.

MASCULINITY AND FEMINIZATION

Loveless's character immediately challenges the male-coding of the villain: Through his war wound he has lost his "ability to reproduce," as he states. This castration alienates him from humanity because the ability to reproduce is the decisive feature which distinguishes biological organisms from man-made machines (Emmeche 50). Moreover, he is thereby bereft of his masculinity and even feminized to a certain degree. Loveless attempts to compensate for this lack with the phallic devices that equip his bedroom and supposedly aid his sexual conquest of female bodies, as well as by surrounding himself with model-type, almost overfeminized hench(wo)men who, by contrast, make him appear masculine. Nonetheless, the partial feminization, or lack of manhood, differentiates him from the other male characters: Gordon as the pioneer, West as the quintessential cowboy, and President Grant as a celebrated war hero are clearly coded as epitomes of masculinity.

16 Loveless's idea of retirement, again, brings to mind Thomas Jefferson, who retired to his estate Monticello after his political career, during which "he insist[ed] that his true vocation [was] farming; that a rural life [was] the proper and the 'natural' life for an American, and that he only emerge[d] from his sylvan retreat when a nefarious 'other' threaten[ed] the peace" (Marx 137).

This gendering stays intact even though both Gordon and West appear in female disguise at certain points in the film. Masquerade, however, is not one of West's favored strategies. When Gordon attempts to convince West of the strategic advantages of proper disguises for Loveless's costume ball, the latter makes clear that he will not yield to his partner's plan by pointing out that his cowboy outfit is the only costume he needs. It is only for the lack of better options that West resorts to cross-dressing. After the rest of his party has been kidnapped by Loveless and after the Wanderer's secret weapon compartments have been emptied, he appears at Loveless's hideout disguised as an exotic belly dancer, thereby causing the necessary distraction to prevent Gordon's execution. This very short episode of feminization, however, does not really challenge West's masculinity. The illusion of his disguise becomes ruptured immediately when he turns from belly dancing to fighting. The beguiled Loveless clearly attests to this fact by shouting "shoot *him!*" (my emphasis).

Gordon, in contrast, is presented as a master of disguise. When first introduced, he is wearing drag as a means to infiltrate Loveless's organization. Throughout the scene, he is presented as successfully fooling all the other characters, including Loveless and West, who both learn about his true nature only when he deliberately gives up his disguise. Despite this mastery of cross-dressing, the femininity of his masquerade is presented as inferior to a true woman. His attempt to become the new addition to Loveless's harem fails, and, instead of him, Rita Escobar is chosen from the audition. Nonetheless, when compared to West, Gordon is depicted as somewhat effeminate, which is emphasized by his choice of clothes, him performing traditionally female-coded tasks such as knitting and cooking as well as his reluctance to resort to physical violence. This latter aspect is comically exaggerated during the showdown: While West fistfights with the (male) machinists of Loveless' spider, Gordon is attacked by the villain's hench(wo)men. Instead of engaging in a fight with these women, Gordon's solution is to outdance the attackers, causing them to fall off the spider without him even touching them. While his mastery of dancing might be regarded as yet another aspect adding to Gordon's effeminate appearance, this fighting strategy ultimately serves to uphold ideas of civilized male demeanor: By refraining from the show of physical violence against women, Gordon acts as the perfect gentleman. Altogether, his use of female disguise and his performance of traditionally female-coded tasks¹⁷ has to be seen rather as an enhancement to, than a destabilization of, Gordon's masculinity as it expands his scope of action beyond the limits of the traditional male hero-figure.

17 Gordon tries to impress Rita Escobar with his cooking skills and knitting bulletproof vests.

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Regarding the characters' scopes of action, a brief second look at the means of transportation and their use becomes necessary. As Tim Cresswell states, "[m]ovement is rarely just movement; it carries with it the burden of meaning" (6). Mobility in the film is clearly associated with masculinity, and the vehicles employed constitute male-dominated spheres: When, for example, Gordon and West set out for their train chase of Loveless after the costume ball, Rita Escobar is intentionally left behind at the train station even though she begs to be taken along. The female character seems to be safely put into place and remain behind while the two male heroes go west to follow Loveless. However, she reappears on the train and, thus, challenges the male-coded realm of mobility and, in West's view, disturbs their heroic mission. In this male-dominated space, she thus appears as the only woman with an agenda of her own and is finally allowed to stay on the train. While her intrusion briefly unsettles the male figures, it does not seriously destabilize them as active agents who are in control of technology and mobility.¹⁸ Ultimately, she is taken along by West and Gordon rather than being active and mobile herself. Moreover, her agenda is not to be considered emancipatory at all since the rescue of her husband in the end leads to the Escobars' return to their lives in Texas and implies her return to the domestic sphere as an obedient wife. This implied return to the traditional roles of husband and wife can be interpreted as a reinstatement of established and supposedly good (core) values of American society.

IMAGINING THE NATION

The juxtaposition of building a good society and a terrorist threat spurred by individual greed is the key factor which differentiates the United States depicted in the film from the Loveless alliance. Loveless certainly asserts Cawelti's notion that

[the villain] represents the decent ideals of the pioneer gone sour. In him the pioneer goal of building a good society in the wilderness has become avarice and greed for individual wealth and power. (33)

Paid in gold by his European allies, Loveless wants to establish his new world order by all means necessary. In contrast, the US is presented as longing for peace after the Civil War and merely defending itself against the destructive force of the warmonger

18 The fact that she can stay on the train points to the democratization of travel which the railroad is thought to have brought along. Social groups who had previously been excluded from travel and, of course, a much larger percentage of the population were turned into modern mobile subjects by the new means of travel.

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Loveless. This juxtaposition becomes most evident during the film's climax, when Loveless interrupts the proceedings of the ceremony taking place at Promontory Point. President Grant is about to drive the golden spike into the track bed in order to complete the transcontinental railroad and with it "[fulfill] this nation's Manifest Destiny" (Metz 160). However, the approaching mechanical spider causes the earth to tremble and the spike to fall out of place. As a result, the completion cannot take place. Instead, Loveless kidnaps the President, demanding an unconditional surrender of the US.¹⁹ Moreover, when Loveless has to learn that the kidnapped Grant is not going to give in to the extortion, he performatively declares war on the United States by attacking and destroying the next best town with this spider.²⁰ The dichotomy of war and peace presented in the film is once again reminiscent of what Slotkin observes with regard to the Columbian Exposition:

On the one hand, the contrast between Wild West and White City teaches us that the war-making spirit is an attribute of man in the "savage" state and that civilization requires the substitution of peace for war. But though war is denigrated as an end of civilization, it is exalted as a means to peace and progress. (80)

Thus, the violent force used by West and Gordon becomes morally sanctified since it is employed as a means to defending the nation and its peace. In addition, the mission carried out by the two can be interpreted as a presentation of their patriotism and loyalty to republic and president, characteristics which make them quintessentially American.

AMERICANNES

The setting of the film is already quintessentially American. The American West "became a metaphor for the character of America. For generations, it stood as the quintessential symbol for everything that made the country unique" (Ward 94). The term 'unique' references American exceptionalism, which defines the United States as an outstanding example of civilization, especially in contrast to Europe. Once again,

19 Loveless's demand of an unconditional surrender alludes to the personality cult surrounding Ulysses S. Grant. Due to his achieving an unconditional surrender of the Confederate forces at the battle of Donelson, Grant's first and middle initial were used to coin his nickname 'Unconditional Surrender Grant.'

20 Ironically, the town's name is Silverado, which is also the title of a western starring, among others, Kevin Kline.

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Turner's central text becomes an important point of reference for the analysis of the film. As Brook Thomas points out,

Turner's narrative remains a document of American exceptionalism because it maintains a westward movement in which the United States, not Europe, becomes the site where history unfolds. (279)

In *Wild Wild West*, this contrast between Europe and the United States is established as a contrast between the Loveless alliance on the one side and Gordon and West on the other. In his attempt to destroy the US, Loveless relies on European partners. This can be regarded as a violation of the Monroe Doctrine issued in 1823, which forbids any future interventions of European nations in the western hemisphere. The defeat of Loveless in this sense can be seen as an assertion of the Monroe Doctrine in particular and American exceptionalism in general. The completion of the transcontinental railroad at the end of the film works to further underscore this notion. As James Ward argues, "[r]ailroads and the West naturally joined together metaphorically and otherwise to illustrate the character of the nation" (95). The progress of the United States as emphasized by the railroad and westward expansion proves to be victorious over Loveless's plot of sociopolitical regress.

Set in the Reconstruction era, the film almost demands the renegotiation of Americanness and the challenge of uniting a country after it had been divided over central issues during the Civil War. For the Southerner Loveless, the redefinition of Americanness obviously does not work as an integrative force even though he does superficially share certain American core values and myths. He apparently pursues his idea of the American Dream in seeking life, liberty, and happiness for himself as well as sharing the individualism, competitiveness, and subscription to technological progress and mobility that can also be found in the two heroes. Paradoxically, his plot to destroy the United States does not work out exactly because he opposes certain core values ascribed to it. The most significant of these are certainly democracy and freedom. While the two heroes are portrayed as defenders of American democracy, law, and order, Loveless acts as a dictator or monarch and rules within his sphere of influence according to his will and wants.

With his plan to destroy the United States, Loveless poses a terrorist threat to the democratic nation, which Gordon and West have to counter and encounter fittingly in the West at the frontier. For Turner, "the most important effect of the frontier has been the promotion of democracy." The film offers a similar approach as it depicts the defense of democracy taking place at the frontier. What is more, yet another effect proposed by Turner can be observed here. He states that the frontier works as a "consolidating agent" since the "common danger" presented by it "[demands] united action." Only by working as a team can the two individuals West and Gordon

overcome their enemy. The united action of the two can only come about because of their shared set of beliefs. This brings to mind Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community," which "is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). The completion of the transcontinental railroad in the film can be seen as an event fostering the idea of the United States as an imagined community—one that is defined by its imagined unity as well as its (albeit shifting) boundaries.

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

Crucial for the (re)definition or (re)imagination of a national identity are the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, the differentiation between the Self and the Other. Unsurprisingly, Americanness in the film is also defined via a scheme of inclusion and exclusion, especially of ethnic groups. Included are, of course, Gordon, Grant, and the African American West, the latter's telling name boldly pointing towards the American character. The depiction of Chicanas/os in the film shows a certain degree of ambivalence. Whereas Mexico is presented as Loveless's ally, Rita Escobar and her husband can be seen to side with the United States. However, for Rita Escobar, the case is not quite clear. Throughout the film, she changes sides several times, opportunistically choosing the party which looks to be more promising to the achievement of her goal: the rescue of her husband. Moreover, with their return to Texas, the Escobars are no longer part of the continuation of the westward advance which is carried out by West and Gordon as they ride the mechanical spider into the sunset. This final reconciliation of the two protagonists serves to disguise racial inequality and discrimination. As a matter of fact, issues of discrimination and racism are hardly touched upon in the film, and the African American character is assimilated in the end "through the association with his white counterpart" and the conventionality of the buddy formula (Metz 162).²¹

Considering Native Americans, *Wild Wild West* shows similar ambiguities as Turner's essay. On the one hand, for Turner,

[t]he frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization.
The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress,

21 Metz correctly states that the film has to be critiqued for "liberal assimilation" and points out that the changing of the Captain West character from a white man in the TV series to an African American in the film offers merely a slight hint at liberal progress (162).

industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off his garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. [...] Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick, he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion.

In this sense, the Native American lifestyle presents a condition which serves as the basis for the Americanization of (European) immigrants. In the film, this notion is picked up by West's character. When camping in the desert, he explains to Gordon the reason for his knowledge of the West: As a boy, he ran away from slavery and was adopted by a Native American tribe in the West. Thus, his character is infused with 'Native Americanness,' so to speak. On the other hand, he is depicted as the epitome of the cowboy, who in popular narratives and stereotypical notions of the American West is usually represented as the opponent of, or at least a counterpart to, Native Americans. What is more, in *Wild Wild West*, they belong to the enemy's party. Here, Native Americans are depicted as the kidnappers who capture the scientists for Loveless's cause. The only other Native American physically present in the film is one of Loveless's henchmen. The character, who strikingly remains nameless, is killed by West during the train chase. Armando José Prats points out that Native Americans in Westerns are often present only to be absent:²² "Moreover, the conqueror must produce an Other whose destruction is not only assured but justified" (2). Turner justifies the destruction by calling Native Americans the "common danger, demanding united action." The film repeats this notion, only with a difference: The real menace is Loveless—Native Americans become even more marginalized and less visible.

The villain Loveless also functions as the consolidating agent as pointed out by Turner, because the threat he poses calls for the resolution of the conflict between the former enemies of the Civil War. From the beginning of the film, West seeks justice for the decimation of African American war refugees in the town of New Liberty, among them his family. He suspects McGrath to be the 'Butcher of New Liberty' and consequently tries to hunt him down. When West finally gets hold of him, the latter has already been shot by Loveless, who turns out to be the one truly responsible for the massacre. As his last wish, McGrath asks West to avenge him and 'his boys,' the Confederate soldiers killed by Loveless. At this point, the conflict between North and

22 Yet another explanation for the absence of Native Americans comes from the editor of *Indigenous Thought*, Jan Elliott. For him, "Indians are the only minority group that the Indian lovers won't let out of the nineteenth century. They love Indians as long as they can picture them riding around on ponies wearing beads and feathers, living in picturesque tepee villages and making long profound speeches. Whites still expect, even now, to see Indians as they once were, living in the forest or performing in the Wild West shows rather than working on the farm or living in urban areas" (Weaver qtd. in Kilpatrick 286).

South is resolved and the nation is reconciled. Moreover, by killing McGrath and his soldiers, Loveless has placed himself outside the imagined community of the United States, which in terms of space is asserted by his westward movement to Utah, which in 1869 was still a territory and not yet an official part of the United States. In terms of the myth of the American Garden, Smith observes a

tendency to account for any evil which threaten[s] the garden empire by ascribing it to alien intrusion. Since evil could not conceivably originate within the walls of the garden, it must by logical necessity come from without. (187)

Therefore, Loveless's placing outside of the US performatively affirms the myth.²³

TECHNOLOGY IN 'WRONG' AND 'RIGHT' HANDS

Taking into account the sociopolitical circumstances of the film's production, Loveless, the cybernetic mad scientist turned dictator, can be interpreted as the epitome of the terrorist danger threatening the US at the brink of the twenty-first century. During President Clinton's administration, the country witnessed an increase in terrorist attacks on American soil—the letter bombs of the 'Unabomber' Theodore Kaczynski, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and the 1998 al-Qaeda bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In his 1998 State of the Union Address, Clinton dedicated a fairly large portion of his speech to the

unholy axis of new threats from terrorists, international criminals and drug traffickers. These 21st century predators feed on technology and the free flow of information and ideas and people, and they will be all the more lethal if weapons of mass destruction fall into their hands.

Clinton's use of words in this passage is striking when read with the idea of the American Garden in mind. On the one hand, he calls the menaces to US society 'predators,' thereby alluding to the savage, 'primitive' intrusion into the garden. On the other hand, it is the notion of an 'overcivilized' technology in the 'wrong' hands²⁴ allowing for the construction of deadly weapons that threaten the middle landscape.

23 The exclusion of Loveless and his alliance from the United States is even carried out on the level of the film's production: With the notable exception of McGrath, all major and most of the minor characters of the alliance are portrayed by non-Americans.

24 The idea of technology put to 'good' or 'bad' use is challenged by Kaczynski's manifesto. He states that "[a] further reason why industrial society cannot be reformed in favor of freedom is that modern technology is a unified system in which all parts are dependent on one another. You can't get rid of the 'bad' parts of technology and retain only the 'good' parts."

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Moreover, Clinton clarifies whose hands, in his opinion, can be trusted. When he talks about the progress made in banning weapons of mass destruction as well as preventing the spread of these “new hazards” to “outlaw states, terrorists, and organized criminals seeking to acquire them,” he singles out Iraq’s dictator, Saddam Hussein. For Clinton, Hussein “has spent the better part of this decade and much of his nation’s wealth not on providing for the Iraqi people but on developing nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the missiles to deliver them.” The picture painted by Clinton bears strong resemblance to Loveless’s character in the film, who is portrayed as having spent a large portion of his life (and even his body) as well as the lives of his fellow Southerners on developing his deadly war machinery to annihilate the United States and destroy the American Garden.

Regarding hazardous technology in the realms of the American Garden, the question arises at which point the Garden might become oversaturated with technology; or rather, which technology might be undesirable or even prove destructive for the imagined pastoral. Marx provides an answer when he states that

no one, not even Jefferson, had been able to identify the point of arrest, the critical moment when the tilt might be expected and progress cease to be progress. As time went on, accordingly, the idea became more vague, a rhetorical formula rather than a conception of society, and an increasingly transparent and jejune expression of the national preference for having it both ways. In this sentimental guise the pastoral ideal remained of service long after the machine’s appearance in the landscape. It enabled the nation to continue defining its purpose as the pursuit of rural happiness while devoting itself to productivity, wealth, and power. (226)

At the end of the twentieth century, this observation can be affirmed for Clinton’s address. It is rather technology in the ‘wrong’ hands than technology per se which threatens the US. What is more, the speech even attests to Jefferson’s notion that technology will almost naturally be beneficial if put to use by Americans. When Clinton talks about the nuclear test ban, his concern is primarily the technology spreading to “non-nuclear states.” The idea is implied that those countries already in possession of nuclear technology, among them the US, of course, do not pose a threat. To speak with Marx, even this deadly technology blends into the middle landscape. This also holds true for the movie *Wild Wild West*, the last scene of which shows the protagonists riding the mechanical tarantula into the sunset and the west, towards new challenges, new frontiers.²⁵ Having reconciled their differences and having claimed and

25 Like many of his precursors in office, Clinton in his speech, too, employs the idea of new frontiers to be faced by the American people. Of the two he explicitly names, one unsurprisingly is space, the other, more strikingly, is child care.

appropriated Loveless's technology with their 'right' hands, they suggest a bright and safe future for the United States.

CONCLUSION

The revision of the frontier myth that Slotkin has called for is put into practice in the film *Wild Wild West*. The frontier myth is revised and at the same time (re)affirmed by representing ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans, as being included in the frontier narrative. The introduction of Rita Escobar as a female character with an own agenda as well as the partial feminization of both heroes and villains further revises this narrative. It is thereby, on the one hand, further democratized and rewritten; on the other hand, it serves to disguise a history of racial and gender inequalities, racism, and discrimination. This is well in line with the statement that “[t]he vagueness of Turner’s frontier thesis, often considered an academic weakness, in fact helped increase its impact” (Popper, Lang, and Popper 98). As I have shown, the frontier thesis continues to be a powerful myth that contemporary popular culture and the American imaginary rely on. It is, once again, revalidated and justified in *Wild Wild West* by its portrayal of the clash between nature/savagery and technology/civilization in America’s West. Loveless is an enemy who ultimately needs to be defeated to preserve the United States. In combination with the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the film leaves no doubt about the legitimacy and justification of the westward movement in the fictional world.²⁶ In the words of Patricia Nelson Limerick:

As a mental artifact, the frontier has demonstrated an astonishing stickiness and persistence. It is virtually the flypaper of our mental world; it attaches itself to everything [...]. Packed full of nonsense and goofiness, jammed with nationalistic self-congratulation and toxic ethnocentrism, the image of the frontier is nonetheless universally recognized, and laden with positive associations. [...] [T]he concept works as a cultural glue – a mental and emotional fastener that, in some curious and unexpected ways works to hold [the United States] together. (94)

Limerick’s observations are confirmed by Clinton’s 1998 address. The speech not only explicitly mentions new frontiers for the American people at the brink of the twenty-first century but also implicitly invokes central aspects of Turner’s thesis, for example

²⁶ Here, a parallel to Marcus Klein’s interpretation of the Buffalo Bill Wild West shows can be observed: “Buffalo Bill and his entourage were the comedy of conquest. They exaggerated outrageously. They were glamorous—and it was their glamour, in this version of the Winning of the West, that in effect was offered as legitimacy, or as a circus pretense to the same” (73).

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the notion of a common danger posed by terrorists or the frequent calls for united action.²⁷

Regarding the American Garden and the intrusion of machines into it, the movie attests to the centuries-old idea that any technology can be made to blend into the pastoral ideal. West and Gordon riding Loveless' spider into the sunset shows as much. Moreover, this Hollywood happy ending even challenges Marx's findings. For him,

in the end the American hero is either dead or totally alienated from society, alone and powerless, like the evicted shepherd of Virgil's eclogue. And if, at the same time, he pays tribute to the image of a green landscape, it is likely to be ironic and bitter. The resolutions of our pastoral fables are unsatisfactory because the old symbol of reconciliation is obsolete. (365)

Neither powerless nor alone and, as quintessential Americans, certainly not alienated from society, the protagonists have not only reconciled their differences but also resolved some of the nation's major conflicts.

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²⁷ At various points in the speech, Clinton points out what can be achieved if the nation only stands together.

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