

America as **Superpower**

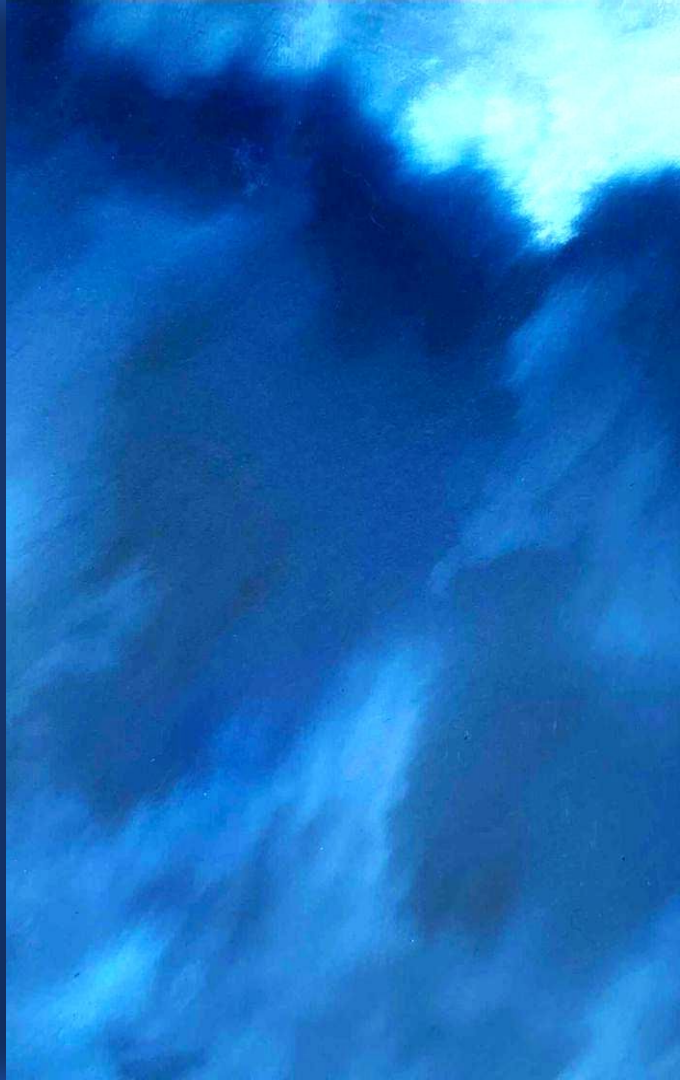
American History and Society

America Becomes A **Global** Superpower

The United States ascended to **global superpower status** in the first half of the 20th century largely due to its economic prowess, its industrial strength, and its emerging military power.

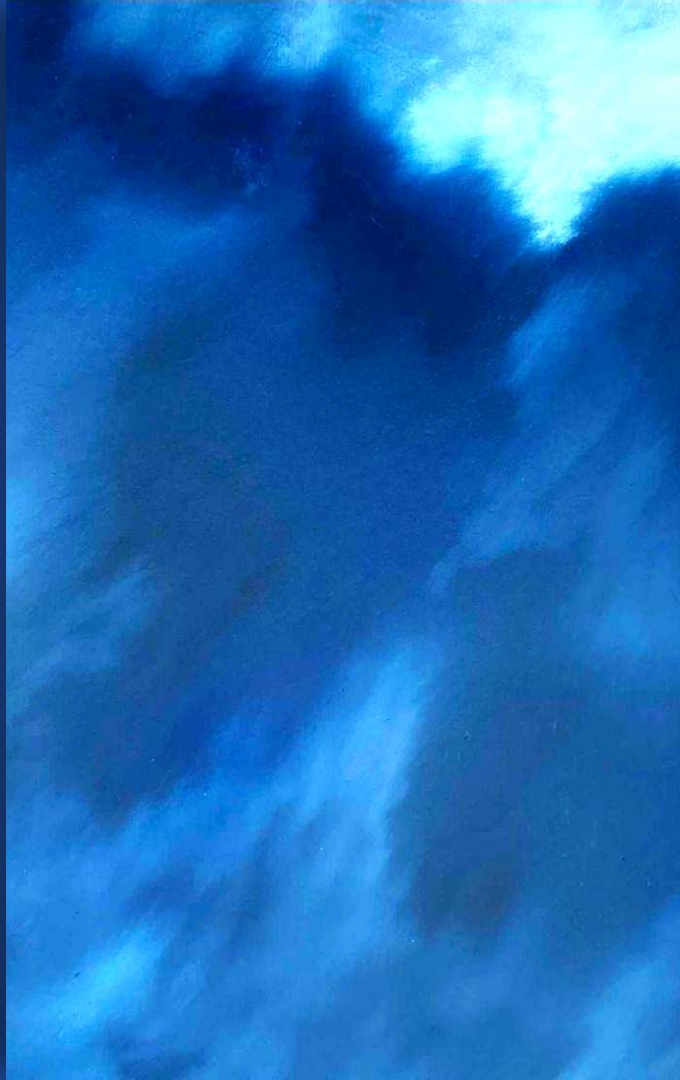
The country's vast natural resources and robust industrial sector, amplified by technological advancements, made it **the world's leading economic power by the 1920s**.

The two World Wars, while devastating Europe and Asia, largely spared American infrastructure, and American contributions to the Allied victories in both wars made it a dominant international political and military force.

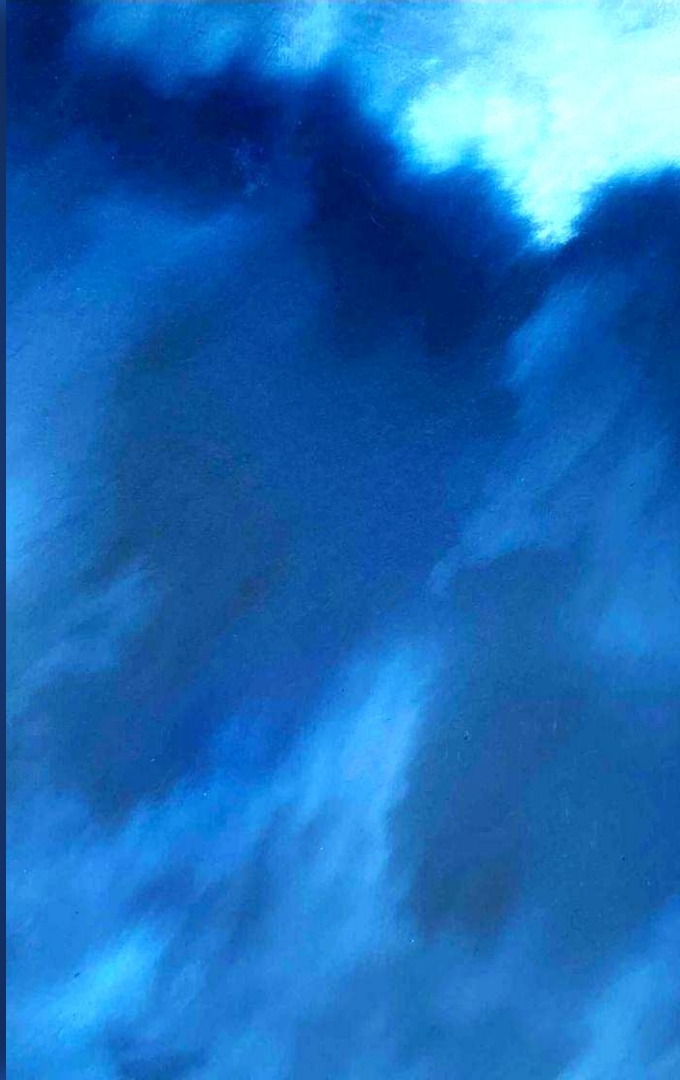


What made American **great**?

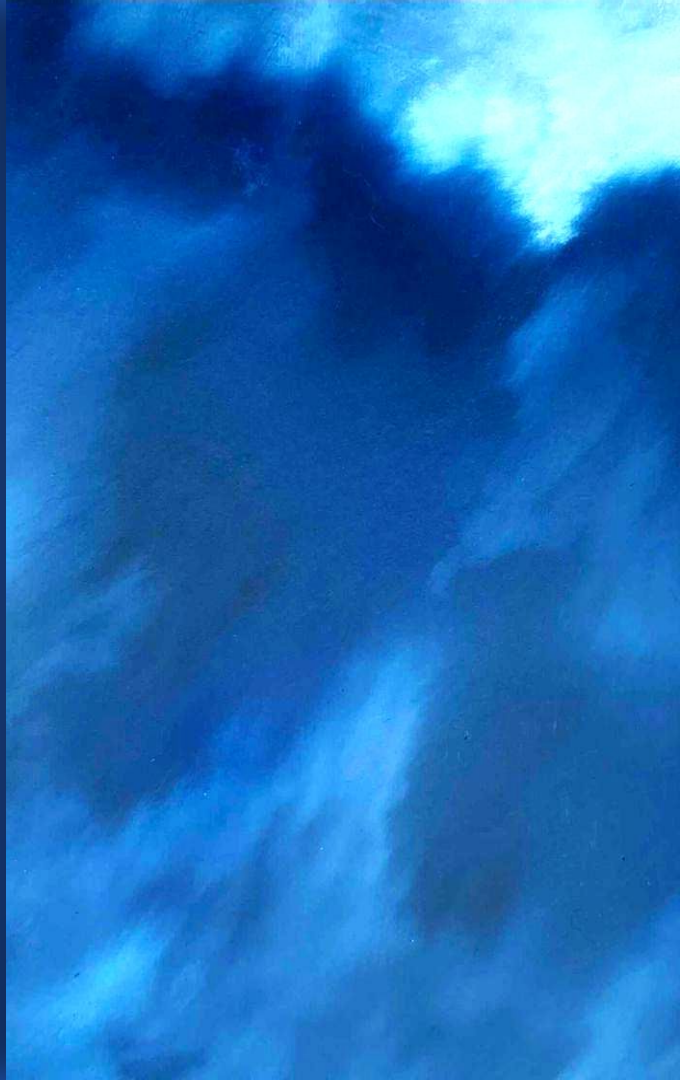
1. **Economic Power:** After World War II, the United States emerged as a global economic powerhouse. The nation's financial strength allowed it to exert considerable influence over global markets and to export its products (and its culture) worldwide.
2. **Technological Innovation:** The United States made many key technological advancements in the first half of the 20th century, such as the development of advanced electronics, telecommunications, and early computers.
3. **Media Influence:** Hollywood and the American entertainment industry, including film, television, and music, had a significant impact on global culture. American movies, music, and celebrities quickly developed global popularity.



4. **Political Influence:** The United States, as a superpower during the Cold War and beyond, has had significant political influence on the world stage. This influence extends to cultural aspects as well.
5. **Consumer Culture:** The United States is often associated with the development of a consumer culture, characterized by mass production and consumption of goods. This culture has been exported and adopted globally.
6. **Education and Research:** American universities and research institutions are some of the most respected and influential in the world, attracting students and scholars from around the globe. They contribute to the spread of American culture and values.



7. **Globalization:** Globalization processes, often driven by American multinational corporations and technological innovations, have facilitated the spread of American culture.
8. **English Language:** English, largely due to historical factors including British colonialism, has become the world's shared language. The dominance of English has facilitated the spread of American culture (even more so in the Internet age).
9. **Multiculturalism:** America's embrace of multiculturalism and selective open immigration policies drove technological innovation, and enriched its intellectual capital. Many important scientific discoveries (including the development of atomic technology) were accomplished by recent immigrants.

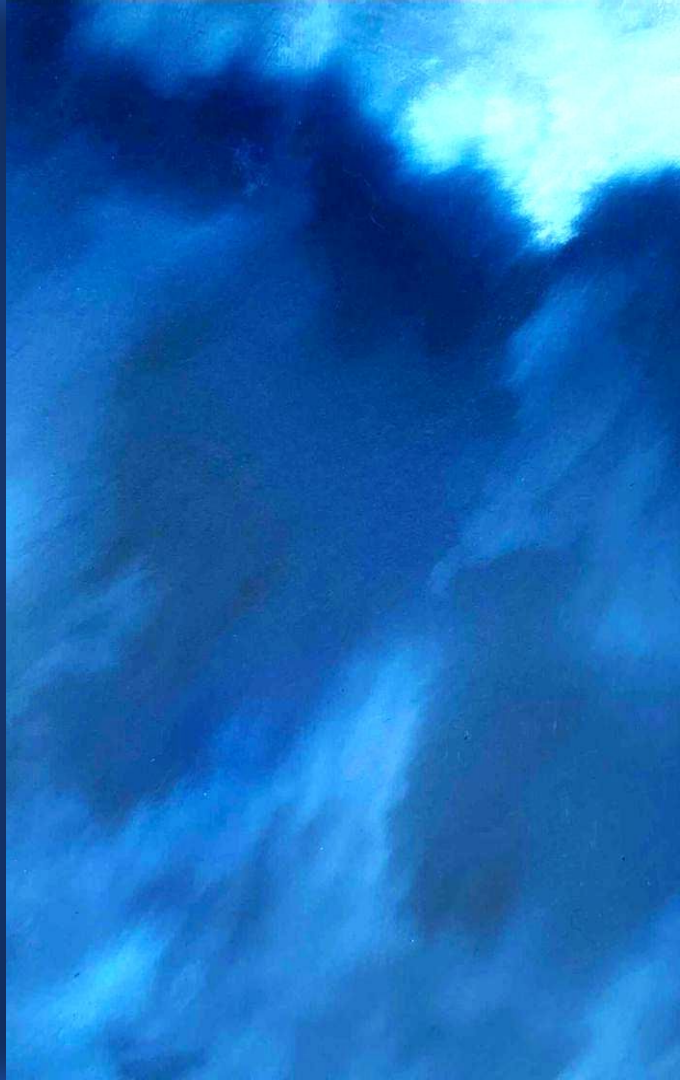


Examples of American Greatness

There are many things that contributed to the rise of American dominance in the early part of the 20th Century. I would like to focus on **two aspects of America's development** during this period:

1. Massive Engineering Projects
 - a. The Transcontinental Railroad
 - b. The Panama Canal
 - c. The Interstate Highway System
2. The National Park System

Note that I have avoided specific **economic, military, and technological factors** that may have been even more important.



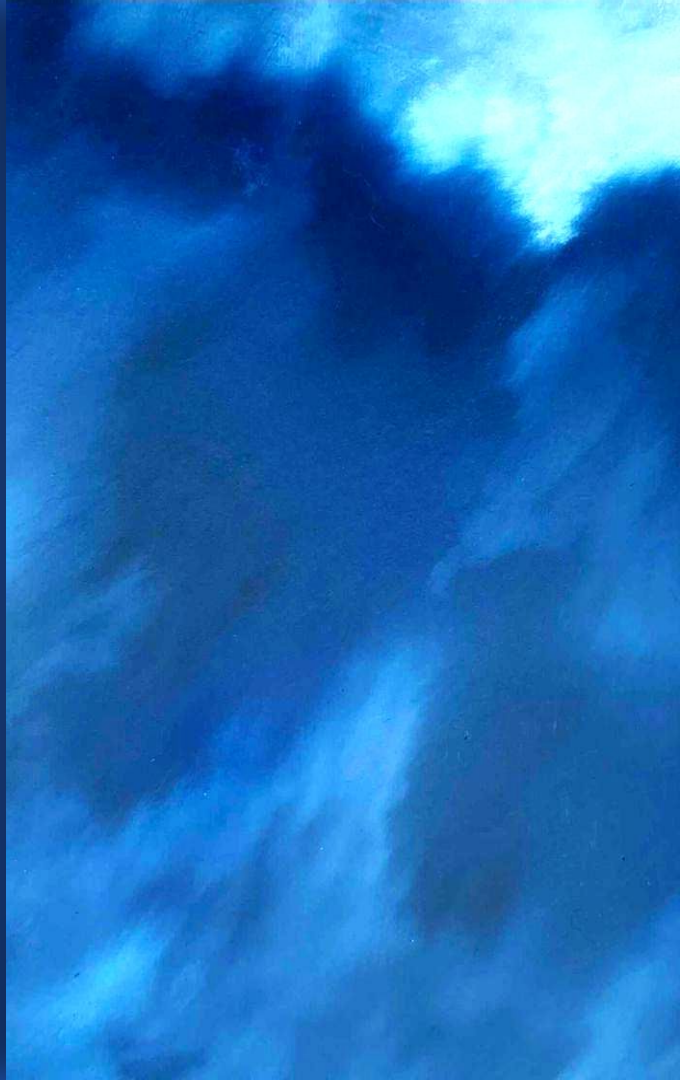
Massive Public Engineering Projects

As the United States population expanded and spread west, it faced **two problems**. First, **the size of the country**: nearly 4500 kilometers from coast to coast. Second, it's unique situation as **a country which bordered the world's two major oceans**, the Atlantic and Pacific.

Throughout the early part of the 20th century, the United States invested huge amounts of public resources to **major infrastructure programs**.

Today I will focus on three of the largest:

1. The Transcontinental Railroad (completed 1869)
2. The Panama Canal (completed 1914)
3. The Interstate Highway System (began 1956)



Project #1: The Transcontinental Railroad

In 1862 the United States government passed the Pacific Railroad act, providing land and other benefits to two companies, the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads, to build a rail line across the continent, from Sacramento, California to Omaha, Nebraska..

For the next seven years, the two companies raced to meet in the middle.

Watch the video about this incredible project.



Route of the transcontinental railroad, which was completed at Promontory, Utah on May 10th, 189.



Five Effects of the Transcontinental Railroad

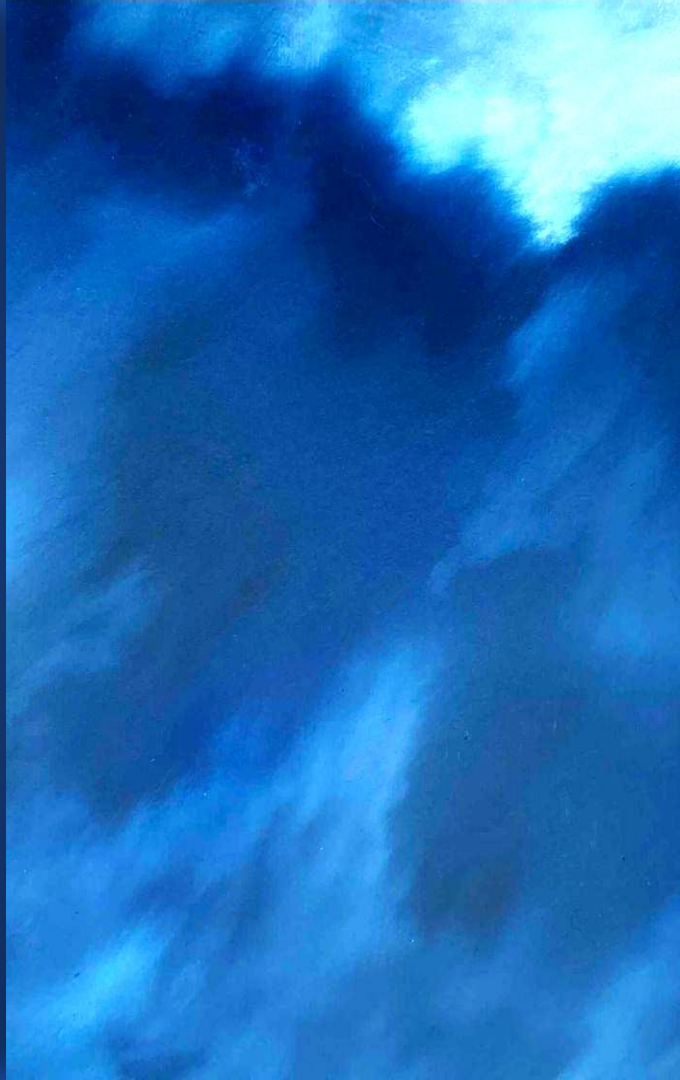
1. It instantly made the Western United States, especially California, a global economic force.



2. It made **the trade of domestic and international products** possible on a massive scale and led to an explosion in America's economic and political standing in the world, providing "the basis for the rapid expansion of American industry and agriculture to the point where the U.S. by the 1890s had **the most powerful economy on the planet.**" (Brands, 2019)

3. It made travel much cheaper. Before the completion of the railroad the only way to get to California from the east was to take a ship or a stagecoach, which could take up to six months and cost ₩25,000,000 in today's money for a family of four. A train ticket across the country cost only ₩4,500,000 (150USD in 1869), which is still expensive but much cheaper than before.

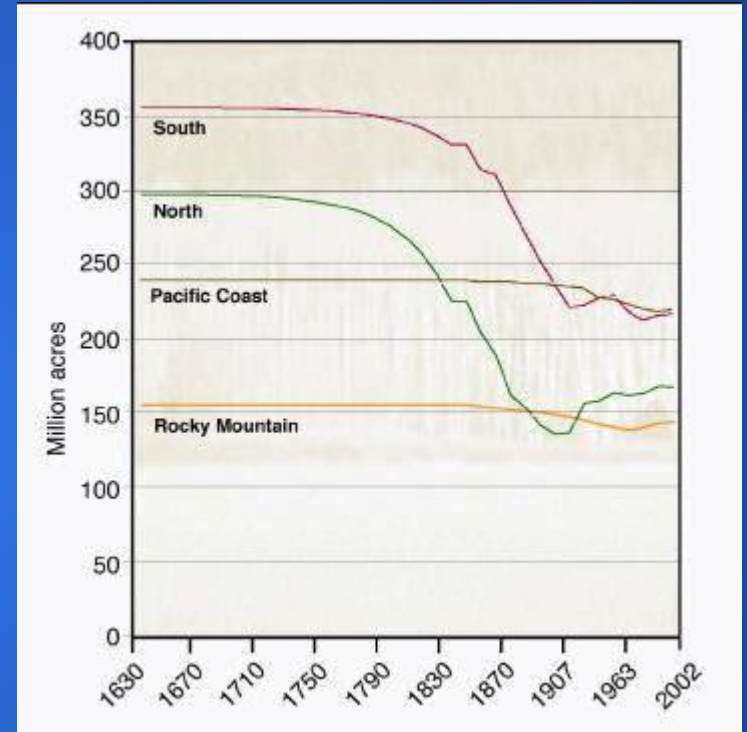
(Brands, H. W. (2019). *Dreams of El Dorado: A history of the American West*. Basic Books.)



4. According to John Muir, the railroad “**annihilated time and space**,” fundamentally altering American’s concept of reality. “When you’re walking or riding a horse, you experience the world one way, but when you’re sitting in a railroad car, **you see it differently**,” he says. (Muir, 1872)

5. It started a trend toward **massive environmental destruction** in the Western United States. Entire forests were cut down to provide lumber for the railroad.

(Muir, John, "Rambles of a Botanist Among the Plants and Climates of California" (1872). In *John Muir: A Reading Bibliography* by Kimes. 16.)



Asian Laborers

By the time the line was completed over 14,000 Chinese workers were employed on the western half of the line.

They endured persistent racism despite the fact that they were seen as tireless and skilled workers.



Destruction of the American Bison

The near-extirpation of the American bison (also known as buffalo) in the 19th century was a devastating event with significant consequences for Native American tribes and the ecosystem of the Great Plains.

Driven by a combination of factors including westward expansion, the transcontinental railroad, and a surge in hunting activity, the bison population plummeted from millions to near extinction by the late 1800s.

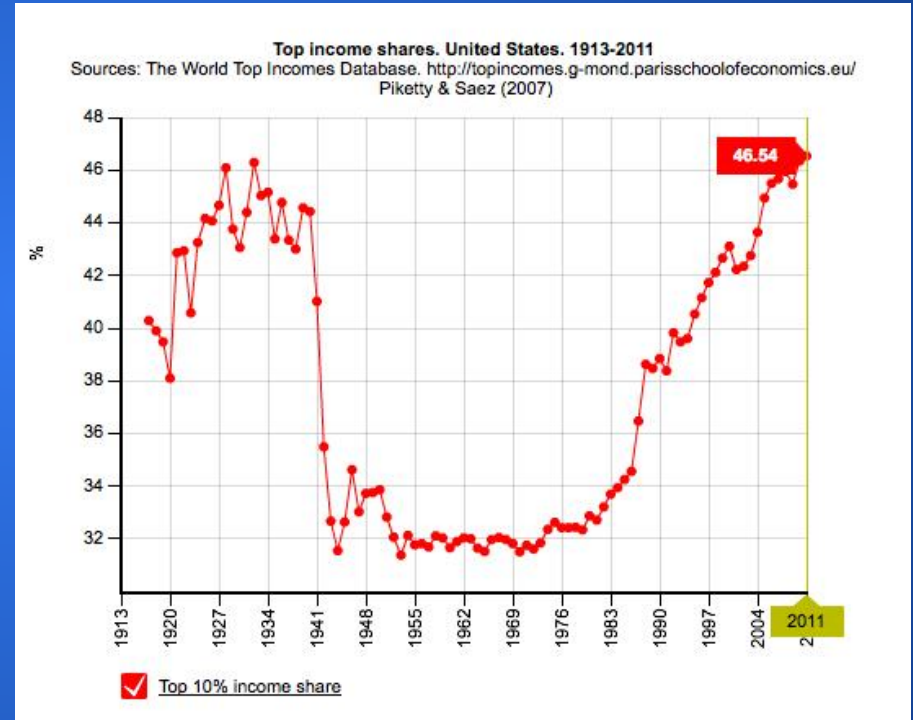


The Rise of the Super-rich

The railroads also led to **a new economic class, the super-rich**. Individuals and families who owned the railroads and associated companies (especially steel, oil, and coal) became incredibly wealthy.

This period, sometimes called **the Gilded Age**, saw the rise of incredible income inequality, with the top 10% controlling nearly 50% of the country's wealth.

This level of income inequality has only recently been reached again.



Discussion Question

Think about the history of your country's development. Has your country experienced rapid economic and/or social change due to a major government-sponsored infrastructure program similar to the American Transcontinental Railroad?

1. What was the infrastructure project?
2. How did it affect your country's economy?
3. How did it affect your country's society?
4. Overall, would you say that the project had a positive or negative impact on your country?

One answer per team. No AI but you can do your own research using the Web.



Project #2: The Panama Canal

The Transcontinental Railroad was at its completion the largest engineering project ever. However, one still larger remained: **the building of a canal across the narrowest point of Central America, linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.**

This would have two primary benefits for the United States. First, **it would open international trade routes** between the Eastern Coast of the United States and the Pacific rim countries. Second, it would make **the United States Navy** much more powerful.

The only problem was that as an engineering problem, **the building of the canal was nearly impossible.**



A History of Failure

The idea of building a canal in Panama wasn't new. The French, who had successfully completed the much easier Suez Canal in Egypt, started a canal project in 1881 but **abandoned it due to investor insecurity and the high rate of mortality among workers due to malaria.**

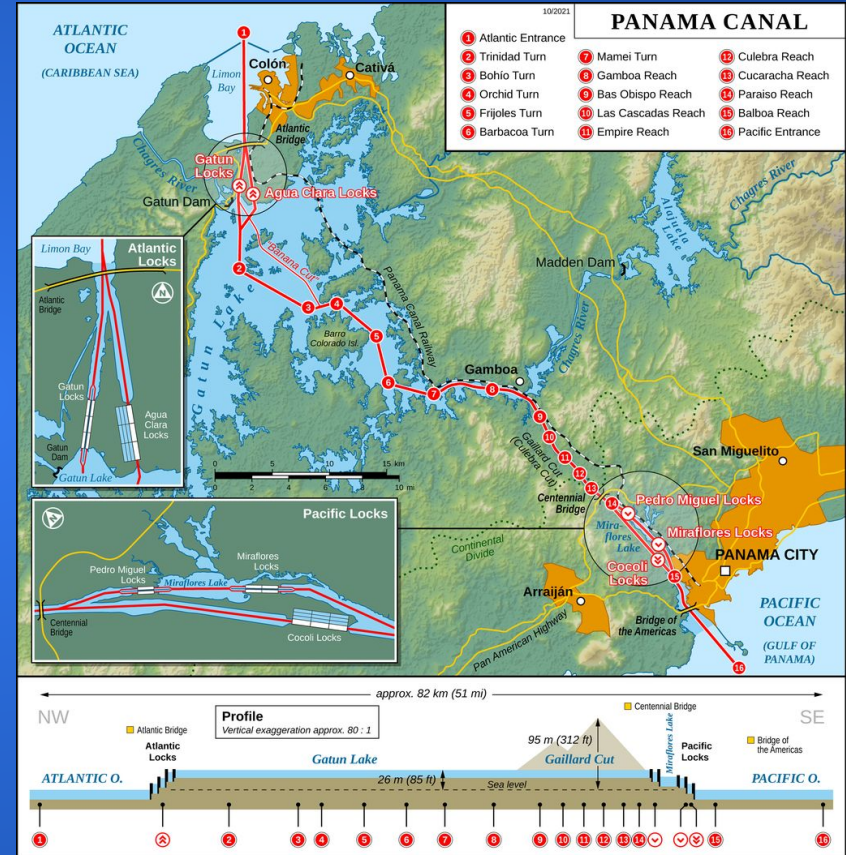
Another problem was **the Colombian government,** which controlled the region at the time and demanded a massive bribe in order to allow the project to go forward. The United States government, using **“gunboat diplomacy,”** supported (instigated?) a revolution that **installed a new government in Panama and created an independent country.**



One of the main reasons that the French engineers failed was that they insisted on digging a **“sea level” canal**, as they had done in Egypt. This would have involved the removal of a huge amount of earth and rock.

American engineers avoided a great deal of digging by designing a **“lock canal,”** creating a massive lake which could be used to navigate across most of the land, with locks at the two shores to lift boats to the level of the lake.

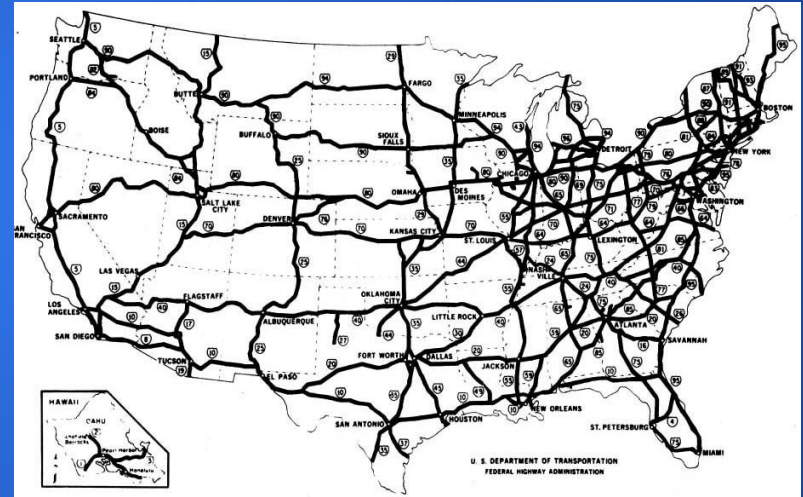
They also dedicated a massive amount of scientific study and resources **to protecting the workers from malaria**, essentially eradicating the species of mosquito which carried the disease.



Project #3: The Interstate Highway System

Fact Sheet:

- Over 47,000 miles (75,000 km) with over 55,000 bridges, 82 tunnels, and 14,750 interchanges.
- The longest route is I-90, from Boston to Seattle: 3222 miles (5185 kilometers)
- One out of every five miles is straight to allow airplanes to land if necessary.
- The highway system is designed to assist the US military in time of war. The actual name of the system is the “Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.”
- Original schedule and budget: 12 years and \$25 million (KRW 30,000,000,000)
- Actual schedule and budget: 35 years and \$114 billion (KRW 144,000,000,000,000)



Effects of the Interstate Highway System

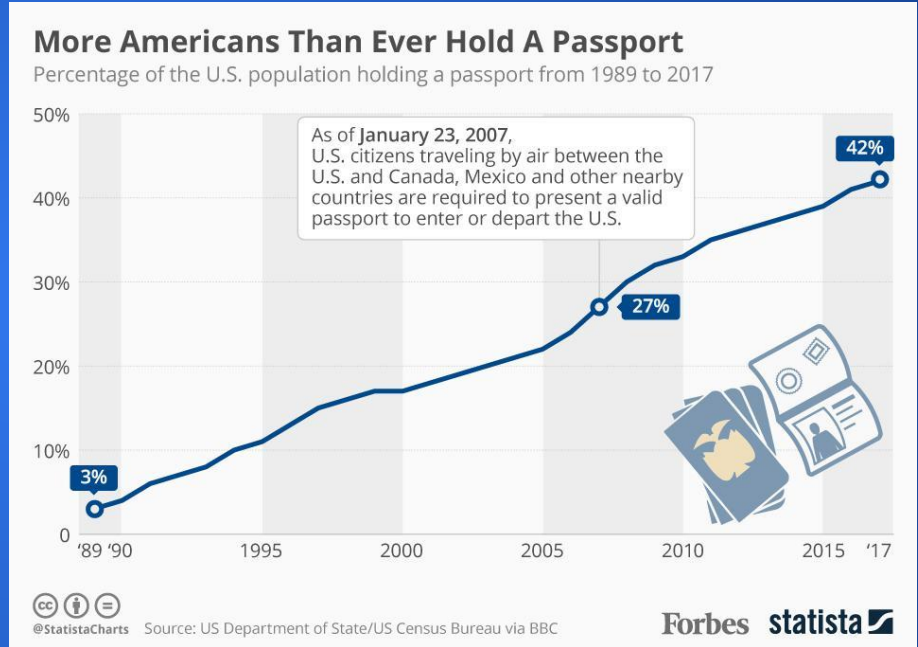
1. **Vacation destinations**, like **Disneyland**, became very popular. Local attractions, often displaying bizarre objects, were designed to lure people off the highway and spend money.
2. **Fast food restaurants** were designed to provide people travelling by car a quick option to eat on the go. **McDonald's**, the world's most popular restaurant, began as a single small shop near a busy highway.
3. **Motels**, a cheap option with parking near the door of each room, also began popping up all over America. These chains introduced a new level of simplicity and economy: budget travel.
4. **Radios** became common in cars in the 1950s and music was never the same. **Rock and Roll**, a new form of music, became popular at this time. The motion of the music was perfectly suited to driving.
5. **Car culture** was also changed as cars became bigger, faster, and more comfortable. Soon cars had options like power steering, air conditioning, and many other luxuries.

Travel Statistics

One way to tell how popular domestic travel is in America is by the relatively low number of people who have passports.

In 1990, **fewer than 5% of Americans possessed passports** and although the number has grown significantly, most people only use them to travel to Mexico or Canada. Less than 50% of Americans currently hold passports and 60% of those who have them have never used them.

By comparison, people in England (74%) and Australia (56%) are far more likely to possess and use passports. China (6%) and India (5%) are among the lowest, Sweden the highest (90%).



Discussion Questions

Talk with your partner about your experience travelling by car.

1. Have you gone on **“road trips”** with your family or friends?
2. Where did you go?
3. Did you see anything interesting?
4. What is your **favorite food** to eat when travelling?
5. How efficient do you think the highway system is in your country?

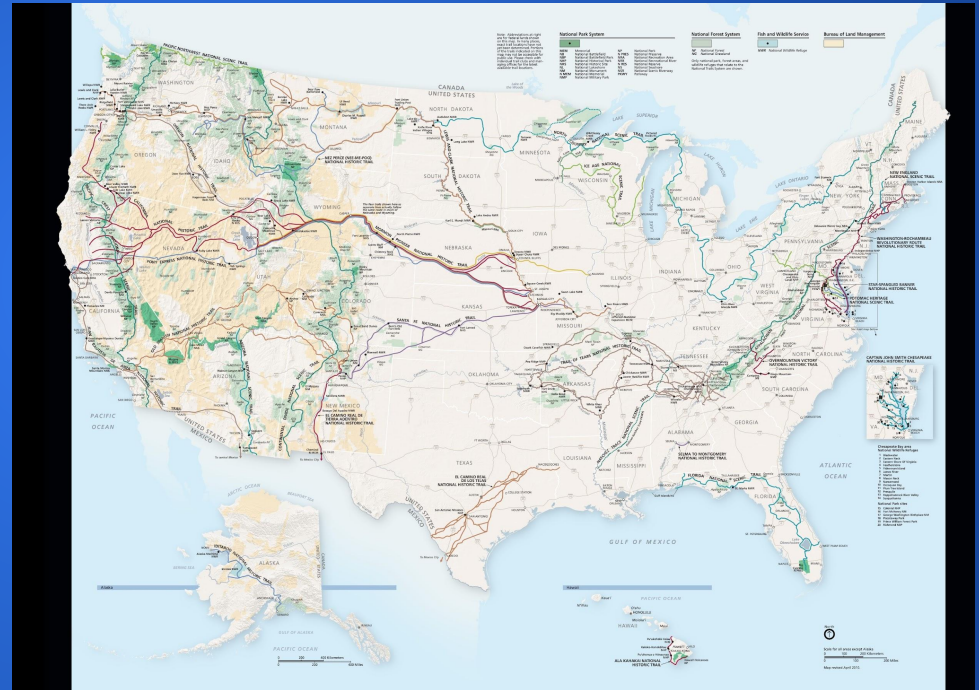


#2 The National Parks

The National Park Service oversees 211,000 square kilometers of parks, historic sites, nature preserves, and other protected lands. (By comparison, the country of South Korea is 99,720 sq. km.)

Over 84,000,000 people visited the 423 sites overseen by the National Park Service in 2017.

The protected lands of these parks include nearly every type of climate, including tropical, alpine, arctic, temperate, savannah, and desert biomes. The national parks include 14 UNESCO world heritage sites and 21 UNESCO Global Biomes.



George Catlin's Dream

According to National Park Service literature, **artist George Catlin was one of the first people to propose a federally-protected land system** to help preserve important natural resources and historical areas.

After visiting the western United States in 1832, Catlin wrote that he feared the treasures of American beauty would soon be destroyed unless they could be preserved "**by some great protecting policy of government...in a magnificent park.... A nation's Park**, containing man and beast, in all the wild[ness] and freshness of their nature's beauty!"



Westward Expansion

The rapid westward expansion of the United States was made possible in large part by railroads. The first transcontinental line was completed in 1869.

This was both good news and bad news for America's natural wonders.

It was bad because it made the destruction of the environment on a large scale economically feasible. Logging and cattle ranching in the West became very profitable as railroads made transporting these products to the large cities of the East profitable.



On the other hand, **the railroads made many of the beautiful places in the west popular with adventurers from the eastern part of the country.**

The large eastern cities were hot, dirty, depressing places for the most part. As travel became cheaper, a new form of recreation became popular: tourism.

Railroad executives in the West began to actively promote the beautiful places that people could visit using trains. In 1872, just three years after the transcontinental railroad was completed, the first national park, Yellowstone, was created.

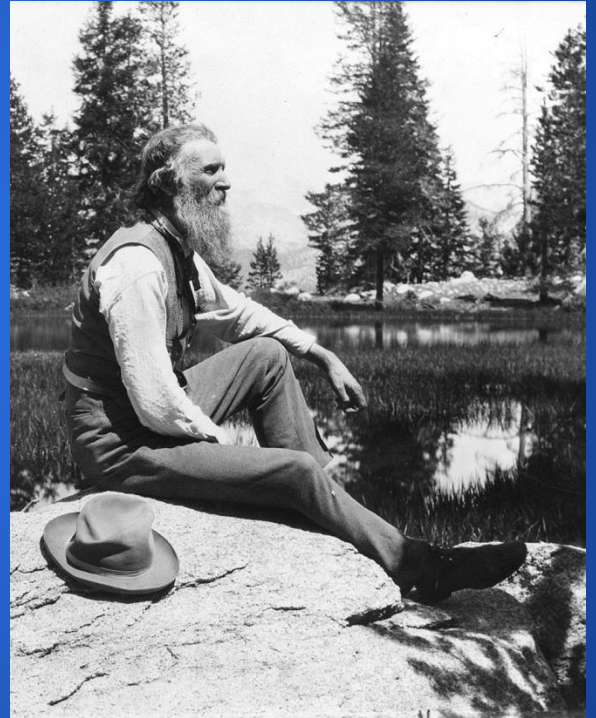


The Camping Trip That Changed America

Many others would speak for the preservation of nature, including Henry David Thoreau and Frederick Law Olmsted, but one of the most outspoken advocates for the preservation of nature and wild places was a man named **John Muir**.

Muir believed that there was a spiritual value in spending time in nature, and that people couldn't be healthy living in cities unless they spent at least some part of each year healing their minds and souls in nature.

John Muir wrote many books and magazine articles about the natural beauty of the American west and the importance of experiences in nature to human happiness. **He is considered today to be the father of American conservation.**



One person who strongly agreed with Muir was **President Theodore Roosevelt.**

Roosevelt had been a sickly child and his parents had sent him to the West to become stronger. Roosevelt lived in tents, hunting and fishing to get food, chopping wood to cook and stay warm, and learning to survive in the wild.

When he was 25, Roosevelt suffered a horrific tragedy. **His mother and his young wife, both of whom he loved dearly, died on the same day.** To help heal his broken heart, Roosevelt retreated again to nature.

During this time **Roosevelt developed a love for nature and wilderness,** something he didn't forget when he later became president.



Roosevelt didn't like being President very much (he hated the fake people in Washington DC), and he often disappeared for weeks or months at a time to go hunting or fishing and get away from the annoyances of his government offices.

In 1903 Roosevelt asked Muir if they could go camping together in what is now Yosemite National Park. During that trip Muir convinced Roosevelt to pass a federal law protecting huge chunks of the country for the future.

In 1906, congress passed the Antiquarian Act and **in 1916 the National Park Service was formally created by law.**

