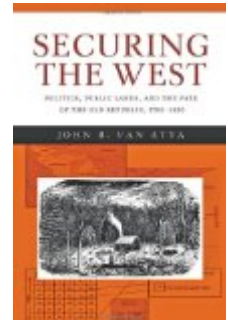


John R. Van Atta. *Securing the West: Politics, Public Lands, and the Fate of the Old Republic, 1785-1850.* Reconfiguring American Political History Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. xiii + 294 pp. \$54.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-1275-7.



Reviewed by Stephen J. Rockwell

Published on H-SHEAR (March, 2015)

Commissioned by Robert P. Murray (Mercy College)

In *Securing the West: Politics, Public Lands, and the Fate of the Old Republic, 1785-1850*, historian John R. Van Atta examines ideological and political debates surrounding land policy in the United States from the early Republic to the 1850s. The book is a fine discussion of the complexity and importance of policymaking at the federal level in these years. The book is well written and engagingly presented, but it overlooks some important pieces of the story.

Van Atta's study is a straightforward chronological discussion of the development of ideological and political disputes at the intersection of three critically important topics: land distribution, settlement, and the national economy. His attention throughout the book rests heavily on congressional policymaking, particularly the interplay of members of Congress with each other, with state officials, and with leading essayists and writers over the proper ways to manage western lands and settlement. Van Atta is terrific at describing the complexity of such important policymaking in clear terms, bringing the era's politics

to life in a way often missed by simpler studies of Jacksonian democracy. The author highlights intra-party and intra-regional disputes, effectively creating the sense of an ongoing political debate, shifting as political and geographic circumstances change.

In this complexity lie many of Van Atta's best passages. He covers the era's leading lights, including Alexander Hamilton, Rufus King, Albert Gallatin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Hart Benton. Importantly, though, Van Atta also offers nimble short studies of many important, but historically second-tier, leaders, like US senators Jeremiah Morrow of Ohio and Samuel Foot of Connecticut, US representative Joseph Duncan of Illinois, and Maryland state legislator Virgil Maxcy. Van Atta also pays careful attention to the work of influential writers like Matthew Carey, Hezekiah Niles, and Edward Everett. All of this is very good, presented clearly and crisply.

The book's narrative begins by tracing the development of early federal land policy, which was

seen by the Union's first generation of national leaders as intimately connected to growing the national economy, avoiding a population drain in the East, and settling the West through careful, organized planning. These leaders believed that land distributed wisely, at reasonable prices, could meet numerous interconnected goals: managed expansion; clearly titled lands, avoiding endless battles in court, by special land commissions or by personal conflict; careful coordination of eastern and western labor; and creation of a diversified western economy, closely linked to the East.

In addition to including these important goals, Van Atta identifies a crucial ideological objective. Pointedly, these leaders worried about the people who might be drawn west by too-cheap land and too-easy settlement terms. A looser, cheaper approach to land distribution might dot western areas with people lacking clear ties to the East, and lacking commitments to work, thrift, and growth. The threat of uncontrollable or even breakaway regions loomed, because the long-term loyalty of such people to the United States was uncertain. The nation's early leaders thus sought to settle the West with what they saw as the right kinds of people—hardworking, committed future members of a responsible middle class, who would link landholding to the development of towns, trade, and transportation and communication networks.

Subtle variations of this careful, nuanced, and managed approach held sway into the 1820s. Van Atta argues that the Federalists and Jeffersonians “agreed more than they disagreed” in the early years (p. 84), especially prior to the War of 1812 and the Panic of 1819, with the consensus largely holding through the John Quincy Adams administration. This managed approach fractured in the mid-1820s, though. Arguments from Thomas Hart Benton, Ninian Edwards, and others challenged the earlier consensus, as demands for preemption and defenses of squatters' rights became political-

ly viable—Van Atta pegs this development to what he calls the “rise of the radical West” (chap. 3). Even Henry Clay eventually capitulated to rhetoric that reimagined unlawful squatters as the vanguard of freedom and democracy. By the late 1830s and 1840s, it had become “no longer politically correct, especially in the West, to disparage such people” (p. 225). The Jacksonians “won both the cultural battle for preemption and much of the legendary claim to the frontier—a claim that sympathetic historians have reinforced to the detriment of Clay's reputation” (p. 228).

Van Atta's great contribution here is to complement the familiar focus on the Jacksonians with the land policy articulated by Clay and others, and to highlight that policy as an integral component of the American System. Here, the Jacksonians come off almost as slick schemers, chasing short-term political gain by supporting cheap land, rapid settlement, and lawbreaking squatters—key reasons why they were seen as such threats to the Republic by longtime public servants like Clay and John Quincy Adams. What historians sometimes celebrate as democracy and the rise of the West were seen by Clay, Adams, and many others as encouragement of a risky scramble that endangered the careful settlement of the continent and the long-term goal of a secure, hardworking, interconnected union. For Clay, Van Atta writes, the victory of the Jacksonians was a victory of “‘a lawless rabble,’ whose apparent lack of moral restraint—and their possible unfamiliarity with native cultural values—threatened to undercut the middle-class concept of republican community embedded in the American System” (p. 229). Van Atta's steady focus on Clay's alternative to the Jacksonians is compelling.

Securing the West has two notable weaknesses. The first relates to institutional players. Van Atta offers an excellent analysis of congressional policymaking, but the study leans out of balance by barely addressing the role of presidents or courts in land issues. In his extended discussion of

the Webster-Hayne debate, for example, one starts to wonder where President Andrew Jackson is. Further, Van Atta almost completely ignores the important role of bureaucratic players like the War Department, the army, the Office of Indian Affairs, Indian treaty commissions, and so on. Intermittent attention to the General Land Office and to government removal of squatters does little to clarify the situation on the ground in the West, and the role of territorial governors and statehood politics is almost completely ignored. The result is a book that underplays the scope and influence of the federal government in western contexts, and the ways in which stiff fights in the field may have impacted congressional and ideological debate.

The other notable weakness is the book's lack of attention to the process of land acquisition. Like many authors before him, Van Atta starts with the land already safely in the hands of the United States, as if the land were unoccupied and ready for easy distribution and settlement. Van Atta occasionally acknowledges native populations, but he usually does so with an old-school sense of the inevitable demise of these communities and the implication that they raised little more than low hurdles on the way to white settlement. This approach ignores the difficult, complicated, and expensive process of land acquisition—the treaty system, diplomatic negotiations, economic policy and regulation, the development of communications and transportation networks, territorial politics, military action, and so on. From the Washington administration forward, such concerns were intimately tied up with debates about geographic expansion, settlement, stability, union, and national economy.

Leaving the ongoing process of land acquisition out of a discussion of this era's debates over settlement and land distribution excludes major elements of this policy environment. For example, Van Atta's review of the era's arguments over who would control public land—and the extent to

which western states owed a moral or other debt to eastern states or the federal government—would be far better contextualized if Van Atta addressed more thoroughly the ongoing role of the federal government in acquiring western lands from Indians through treaty and military action, and the conflicts such actions generated with states and citizens. Van Atta's discussions of the dynamics in play among (and within) southern, eastern, and western regional interests would be more complete if the author addressed more carefully southern states' threats to nullify federal treaties—the cornerstone of land acquisition policy—and the related issues of unceded Indian lands, southern survey efforts, Indian removal, and the role of western lands and western populations (Indian and non-Indian alike) in receiving and resettling removed eastern Indians. These were all important components of the issue areas Van Atta examines, but they are all largely absent from the book.

As a study of the complexity of congressional policymaking and ideological difference from the early Republic to the 1850s, *Securing the West* offers an effective corrective for anyone who still thinks that governance in those years was simple and noncontroversial, or that federal activity was somehow "out of sight." The nation's founders, Clay, Benton, and many others worked to manage land, settlement, and the West through the auspices of big government, with policy designed and directed by national leaders in pursuit of national ends. As Van Atta writes, "no 'free' land existed in the West before the Civil War" (pp. 171-172). Great and diverse demands were made upon government by proponents of settlement and development, by speculators, by squatters, and by the writers and public officials who promoted their interests. Van Atta's study of the multifaceted discussions taking place in Congress and throughout the nation provides a welcome level of sophistication, with implications for our understanding of

nineteenth-century American governance far beyond the context of land policy.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: Stephen J. Rockwell. Review of Van Atta, John R. *Securing the West: Politics, Public Lands, and the Fate of the Old Republic, 1785-1850*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. March, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42406>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.