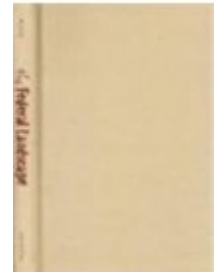




Gerald D. Nash. *The Federal Landscape: An Economic History of the Twentieth Century West.* Tucson, Ari: University of Arizona Press, 1999. xvi + 214 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8165-1863-0.



Reviewed by P. J. Hill

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Gerald D. Nash, Professor of History at the University of New Mexico, has written a survey of the influence of the federal government on the economic growth of the American West. Nash hypothesizes that the federal government was the dominant force that shaped the western economy throughout the twentieth century and his monograph details that role. The author also fits the region's economic history into a larger framework of Kondratieff cycles, arguing that these cycles explain the successive waves of growth in the western United States.

Nash provides a useful compendium of the different ways that the national government influenced the West. He discusses transportation, moving through railroads, West Coast harbors and rivers, and ending with automobiles. The national government also had a substantial impact on agriculture through the Reclamation Act of 1902 and the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. The fact that it retained ownership of much of the land also affected how agriculture was organized and the path that agricultural production took. During World War II, considerable industrial production moved

to the West Coast and after the war urbanization was sped up by housing subsidies and government investment in city infrastructure. Finally, the increased demand for recreation and other environmental amenities starting in the 1970s had a substantial impact upon the western economy.

If one wants a cataloguing of the federal government involvement in the West, Nash's book may be an appropriate place to start. However, it is not particularly useful beyond its descriptive details and even there it is not an especially strong source. Nash does not have a felicitous writing style and the overall tone is one of simplistic triumphalism. An appropriate subtitle might be "How the Federal Government Won the West." Also, the book is flawed in several important ways. The use of Kondratieff cycles as the major form of analysis is not particularly helpful. The author presents no evidence that such cycles really do exist or that they have any substantial influence upon the western economy. They are primarily used as a descriptive tool to explain whatever events Nash wants to describe. It is un-

fortunate that, in his attempts to provide a theoretical structure for his work, he drew upon a concept that plays an insignificant role in most American economic history accounts of the region.

Second, Nash does not understand comparative advantage and the fact that through much of its early history it was appropriate for the West to be a resource intensive economy. He makes repeated references to the colonial status of the West and finds the move to industrial production advantageous in that it removed the West's dependency upon the rest of the economy. Certainly the scope of the economy widened during the twentieth century, but it is not accurate to view this as the federal government rescuing the region from its colonial status.

Finally, Nash assumes that the west was a capital scarce area and that the investment by the national government was an appropriate response to capital shortages. He presents no theories as to why private capital was inadequate or why capital markets were not functioning well in the region. The federal government is seen primarily as an agent of positive change in capital markets and little attention is given to special interests or rent seeking.

The book, while presenting some interesting details about the role of the federal government in the region, is probably not of great interest to economic historians. At the most, it can serve as a marginally useful reference for someone looking for a catalog of federal government projects and influences in the region.

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