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*Securing the West: Politics, Public Lands, and the Fate of
the Old Republic, 1785–1850* by John R. Van Atta (review)

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stories animate—the simultaneity of being in the heart of the heart of the country and at the same time in the middle of nowhere.

New Stories from the Midwest, then, is not, by design, a “best of” collection, though there was this winnowing process to get here. It is more a quilt, not crazy of course, but more a somber monotonic Amish quilt. With their subtle flatness and minute variations these stories are as indicative of the Midwest as the township grid is seen from the air as one flies over.

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John R. Van Atta, *Securing the West: Politics, Public Lands, and the Fate of the Old Republic, 1785–1850*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 312 pp. \$54.95.

In *Securing the West*, John R. Van Atta seeks to demonstrate just how crucial public land policy was in the first decades of the republic. Land had, of course, been the great project of British colonialism, and control of the Ohio Valley the key spark that started the French and Indian War. Settling this land was not simply an economic issue, but a political and social one as well. After 1763, and especially after 1783, the primary concern was how soon, and by whom, should that land be settled. If the West were settled too quickly, and by the *wrong* sort, it might well become a breakaway region of its own. Instead of providing desperately needed capital to a new Anglo American nation, it might prove a crippling albatross, populated by lazy, immoral freebooters with no respect for *proper authority*.

Many in Congress felt that hardworking, thrifty New Englanders would be the best model for settlers. Others, concerned about Indian resistance and the possibility of foreign invasion, felt that the Revolutionary War practice of states awarding bounties to military veterans should be expanded. Young Thomas Jefferson, in his more radical pre-presidential years, sought to distribute, rather than sell, the land to yeoman farmers. By 1785, Congress settled upon something of a hybrid—selling the land at public auction, but in sections of one-mile square (640 acres) at a minimum price of \$1 per acre—intentionally out of reach for many Americans. Of course, this and subsequent laws regarding the West tended to breeze over Indian land rights, or blissfully assume the lands would be cheerfully sold to the

federal government. Further, they set no upper limit on the amount of land one might purchase, which would certainly encourage speculators. Concern over the vast tracts of land left unpurchased and unimproved led Congress to repeatedly ease the terms of the Land Ordinance of 1785. In 1800, they cut the minimum purchase to 320 acres, with four years' credit to pay, though the price had risen to a minimum of \$2 per acre. By 1804, Jeffersonian Republicans further cut these amounts to 160 acres and \$1.64, but kept the credit provision.

The efforts to extend credit and ease the purchasing of public lands did increase land sales, though they also contributed to the wild speculation that helped bring on the Panic of 1819. The Panic, in turn, led some states to reconsider just how the money generated from those sales should be distributed. While the Land Ordinance had progressively promised one thirty-sixth of the sales—that is, one square mile—from each township to fund public education in the new lands, Maryland and other older states began to squawk for a piece of that revenue, arguing that it was benefitting the new states at the expense of the old. What if the tariffs collected in Atlantic ports were used only for projects in those states, they argued. “Unsurprisingly,” Van Atta notes, “no new state would ever favor the plan” (98).

As sectional tensions over slavery grew, old East vs. West tensions for a time were coupled with North vs. South frictions. Western senators, like Democrat Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, continued to champion quick and cheap sales of public lands, while many New Englanders, like New Hampshire senator Samuel Foot, tried to apply the brakes. Benton became a champion of squatters' rights to preemption, or claims to land that had been illegally occupied but “improved.” Henry Clay, in many ways a champion of westerners, felt granting such preemption rights was foolhardy and morally wrong, and it repeatedly cost him votes from men who should have stayed part of his political base.

A highlight of this confluence of sectional tensions came in the famous Webster-Hayne debate in January 1830. Though primarily remembered for the rhetorical genius of Massachusetts' Daniel Webster and the staunch antitariff position of South Carolina's Robert Hayne, the debate had really begun with Senator Foot's earlier resolution to stop surveying new public lands until those already surveyed had been sold off. Given how there were seventy-two million already surveyed acres unsold, the resolution would have effectively stopped surveying for the foreseeable future. Hayne thundered for states' rights and against what later generations would call big government.

Webster countered that he rose “to defend the East,” and orderly, rational settlement (163). Though Webster won more style points, Van Atta concludes that, at least temporarily, the preemptionists won the day.

As with states’ rights, the slavery controversy remained interwoven with the question of the public lands, and slavery as a political issue became especially prominent in the years after the war with Mexico and the Mexican Cession. In the 1850s, the doctrine of popular sovereignty, sometimes called “squatter sovereignty,” helped bring on vicious armed conflicts, especially in the territory of Kansas (239). Once the Civil War broke out, leaving Lincoln and Congress without significant southern opposition, they could pass the Homestead Act of 1862, granting 160 acres to heads of household, and the Morrill Land Grant College Act to promote higher education throughout the nation.

Securing the West features a number of helpful population maps, as well as tables illustrating the sectional distribution of key votes in Congress. It is solidly researched, well written, and cogently argued. In all likelihood it will not garner much of an audience outside of specialists, which is really a shame. The history of public land policy lacks the excitement of studies of the wars against Native Americans and cannot hope to match the inherent drama of works on American slavery. Yet what Van Atta has ably demonstrated is that one cannot really understand either of those topics without grasping just how inextricable land policy was from both of them.

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Dana Elizabeth Weiner, *Race and Rights: Fighting Slavery in the Old Northwest*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013. 327 pp. \$38.00.

In *Race and Rights* Dana Elizabeth Weiner examines how Americans in the Midwest responded to slavery and racial discrimination from 1830 to 1870. Her monograph focuses on four states: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan. Her central argument is that blacks and whites launched an organized movement to advance civil rights and do away with the remnants of slavery that lingered in defiance of the Ordinance of 1787. They also wanted slavery abolished in the country at large. While this book reminds readers of many well known topics from the Old Northwest Territory, Weiner makes