

# The Myth of Progress

Harvey Leake

*ABOUT HARVEY LEAKE: More than thirty years ago, Harvey Leake began researching the history of his pioneering ancestors, the Wetherills of the Four Corners region. His investigations have taken him to libraries, archives, and the homes of family elders whose recollections, photographs, and memorabilia have brought the story to life. His field research has led him to remote trading post sites in the Navajo country and some of the routes used by his great-grandfather, John Wetherill, to access the intricate canyon country of the Colorado Plateau. Harvey was born and raised in Prescott, Arizona. He is a semi-retired electrical engineer.*

“Progress” is a word that gets bandied about with increasing regularity. Its usefulness in describing movement toward a desirable goal is often clouded by proponents of various causes who use it without describing exactly what their proposed goal is or explaining why they think it would be so desirable. This is often the case when the word is used to represent hoped-for societal change. The advocates of such change find the word particularly beneficial when they want to avoid full disclosure of their intended means and ends, skirt any discussions of the negative ramifications of their objective, and summarily dismiss contrary ideas as inferior and deserving of no further consideration.

It would seem that progress, used in this sense, would reflect a multitude of meanings as viewed through the eyes of each beholder. Surprisingly, though, just about everyone, regardless of social background or political persuasion, is passionately marching in lockstep toward the same fundamental vision of social change, like the pioneers in a famous nineteenth century painting entitled “Spirit of the Frontier”. It depicts the westward movement of a floating goddess and her followers who, aided by technology, are clearing the way of wild animals, Indians, and darkness. <Insert photo: American\_Progress; caption: “The Spirit of the Frontier by John Gast, 1872”> Cultural critic Neil Postman, in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, describes this concept of progress thusly: “all Americans... believe nothing if not that history is moving us toward some preordained paradise and that technology is the force behind that movement.” Henceforth, I will use the capitalized form—Progress—to represent this particular ideology.

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An inevitable corollary of the philosophy of Progress, it seems, is that there is something wrong with those who are disinterested in or critical of this quest for technological nirvana. Such people are dismissed as unenlightened, backward-looking, and inferior both intellectually and morally. They are disregarded, ridiculed, and sometimes dealt with using more violent means. I became interested in this subject years ago while researching the history of my ancestors, the Wetherill family of Mancos, Colorado. They experienced this repression first-hand when, informed by their Quaker heritage, they attempted to spread the word that modern society could learn important lessons of life by studying the ways of Native Americans.

The Wetherills moved to southwestern Colorado around 1880. It was a period when most of the settlers considered the local Ute Indians to be adversaries and impediments to civilization. The Ute presence limited development of the region and expansion of mining, farming, and ranching operations. The family patriarch, Benjamin Kite (B. K.) Wetherill viewed the situation from a different perspective. He had lived with the Osages during the previous decade and respected their ability to live happily in their natural environment. Rather than fighting with the Utes, the Wetherills treated them as neighbors.

In 1888, B. K. Wetherill’s eldest son, Richard, and son-in-law, Charlie Mason, discovered Cliff Palace and some of the other cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde. The family believed that they had found an amazing resource for educating the public, and they worked hard to gather artifacts for use in spreading the message. They were disappointed when they realized that the public was not so enthused. “The neighbors ridiculed and scoffed at the idea of preserving the

bones and pottery of a lot of old dead Indians,” one of B. K.’s granddaughters recalled. “Better leave them alone; they would do no one any good; why go to all the trouble?”

B. K. Wetherill decided to appeal their cause to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. “I think the Mancos, and tributary cañons should be reserved as a national park, in order to preserve the curious cliff houses,” he wrote. The Secretary of the Smithsonian, Samuel P. Langley, forwarded B. K.’s letter to the Director of the Bureau of Ethnology, noted Colorado River explorer, John Wesley Powell. Powell directed the letter to his staff archaeologist, William Henry Holmes. “Of course it is a pity that they could not be reserved and preserved,” Holmes replied, “but when their multitude is considered—they cover a good part of four States and Territories—it seems a Herculean task.”

B. K. Wetherill wrote several other letters, reiterating the need for government action. “We are particular to preserve the buildings, but fear, unless the Gov’t sees proper to make a national park of the Cañons, including Mesa Verde[,] that the tourists will destroy them,” he warned. He was unaware that Holmes had decided to terminate the dialog at the outset. “There seems to be no need of other communication with him,” Holmes had recorded privately upon replying to B. K.’s first letter. My ancestors must have wondered why a government bureau that was created for the purpose of studying Indian culture was so disinterested in helping protect invaluable archaeological resources such as the cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde.

I wondered the same, so I undertook a study to better understand what the leaders of the Bureau of Ethnology were thinking. I learned that they were staunch believers in Progress, which they viewed as incompatible with the concept that valuable insights could be gained from exposure to Native American culture.



“Richard and B. K. Wetherill on left at a Ute wedding, ca. 1892”

John Wesley Powell was a disciple of social theorist Lewis Henry Morgan whose book, *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilization*, was published in 1877. Morgan wrote that human culture evolves and progresses through these three stages. He purported to document the “Growth of intelligence through inventions and discoveries,” thus asserting that non-technological cultures are intellectually inferior.

Powell elaborated on Morgan’s theory in two articles: “From Savagery to Barbarism” and “From Barbarism to Civilization”. He maintained that civilized society is not only technologically and intellectually superior, but morally superior as well. “In savagery, the beasts are gods; in barbarism, the gods are men; in civilization, men are as gods, knowing good from evil,” he wrote.

The position of these men and many others in the Federal Government was that Native Americans were stuck in the barbaric stage and needed to be civilized. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, since their inception in 1849, implemented a number of unsuccessful strategies to bring the Indians “up” to modern intellectual and moral standards, while failing to acknowledge that the divide was

fundamentally a philosophic one. William Henry Holmes, who had responded to B. K. Wetherill's first letter, later expressed the violent aspect of the government approach. He believed that the dominant culture was destined predominate and that "the complete absorption or blotting out of the red race will be quickly accomplished. If peaceful amalgamation fails, extinction of the weaker by less gentle means will do the work."

My ancestors suffered many indignities down through the years as a result of their unorthodox interest in traditional Native American culture. During their later years, all five of B. K. Wetherill's sons spent time on the Navajo Reservation where they continued their archaeological investigations and operated trading posts. The eldest son, Richard, settled at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico where he engendered the hatred of Bureau of Indian Affairs agents William T. Shelton and Samuel F. Stacher. He was murdered by a Navajo man in 1910 under suspicious circumstances. My great grandfather, John Wetherill, lived with his wife Louisa among the Navajos from 1900 until 1944. Twice they were threatened with eviction by Indian agents who resented their acceptance of the Native Americans' way of life.

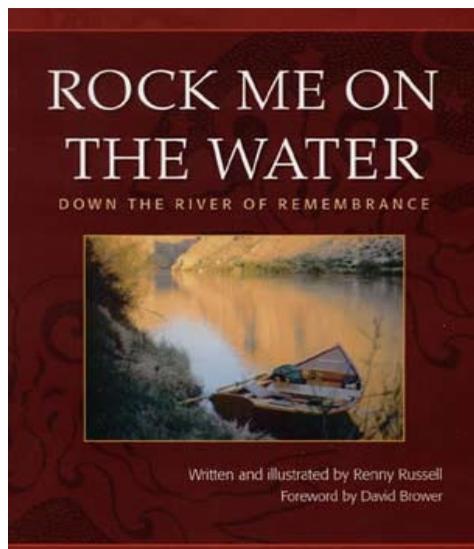
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In the course of my research, I found an assertion by John Wesley Powell regarding Progress that was particularly insightful: "It is not by adaptation to environment, but by the creation of an artificial environment." In this short statement, Powell precisely defined the objective of Progress—the creation of artificial environments, which are a means of escape from the natural environment. The opposing view, as advocated by the Wetherills and their Native American friends, was the one that Powell rejected: we should adapt to nature, rather than avoid it.

In 1893, some of the artifacts that the Wetherills had collected from Mesa Verde were exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The fair was not intended just for entertainment, but it was also a "propaganda of

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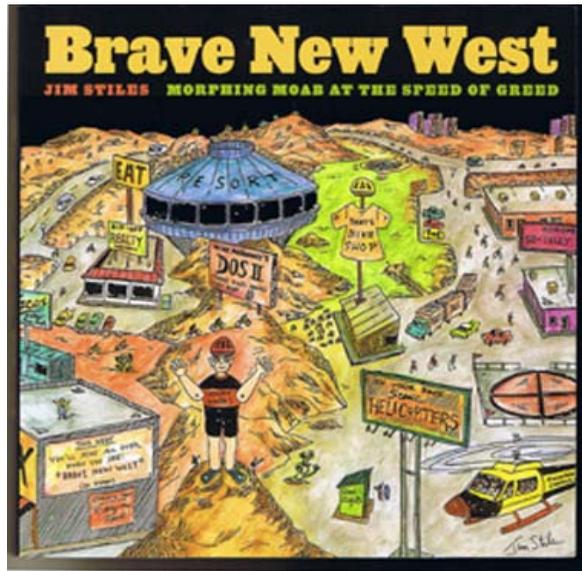
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