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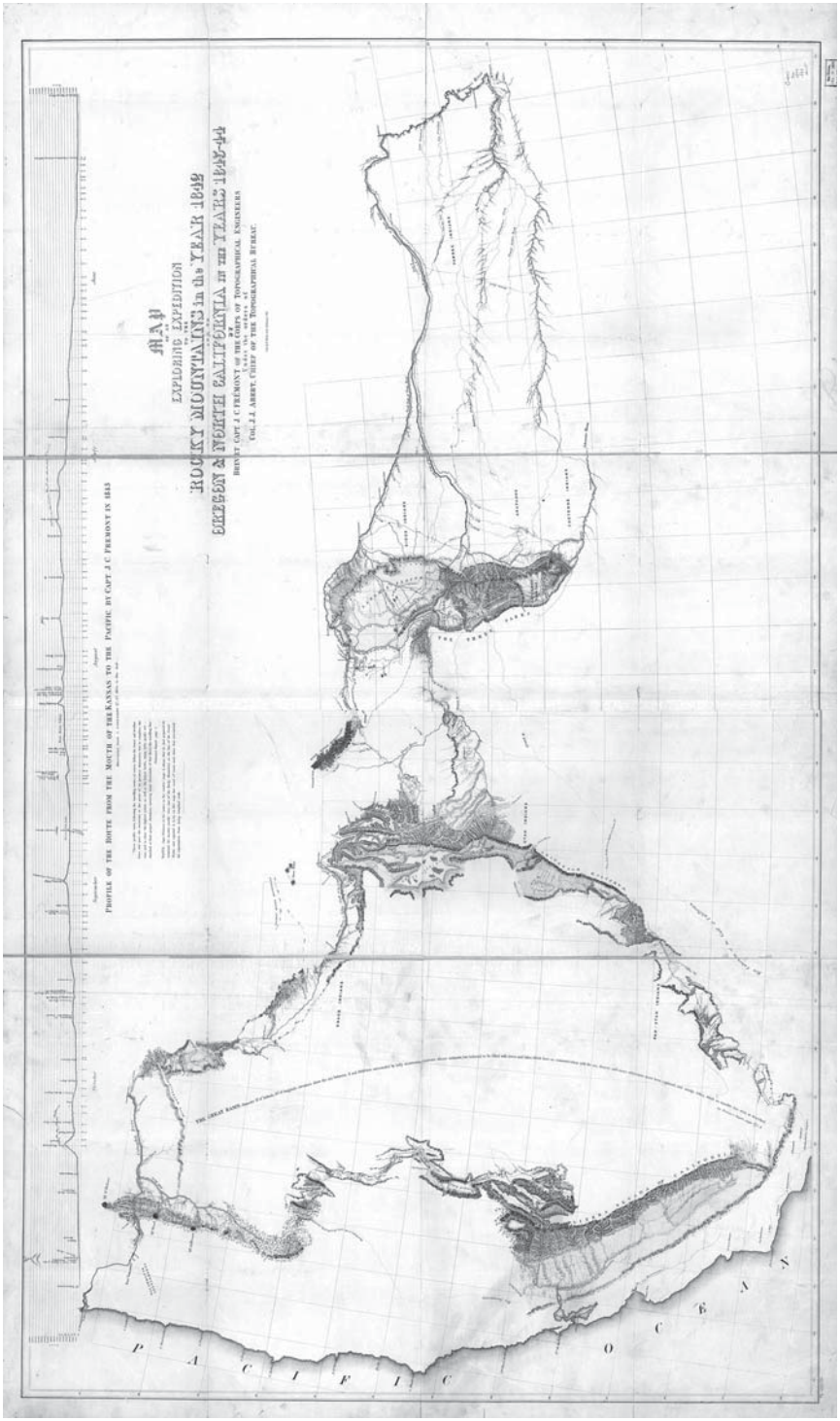
MAP
OF THE
EXPLORING EXPEDITION
TO THE
ROCKY MOUNTAINS in the YEAR 1842
OREGON & NORTH CALIFORNIA IN THE YEARS 1843-44
BRIVET CAPT. J. C. FREMONT OF THE CORPS OF TOPOGRAPHICAL ENGINEERS
Under the orders of
COL. J. J. ABERT, CHIEF OF THE TOPOGRAPHICAL BUREAU.
PROFILE OF THE ROUTE FROM THE MOUTH OF THE KANSAS TO THE PACIFIC BY CAPT. J. C. FREMONT IN 1843
P A C I F I C O C E A N

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FRÉMONT'S
FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The Original Report of
His Exploring Expeditions of 1842–1844

JOHN C. FRÉMONT

Introduction to the Bison Books edition
by Anne F. Hyde

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS · LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Introduction

Anne F. Hyde

In the cold winter months of 1849 young American men dreamed of escaping the family farm, the copyist's desk, or the store counter for the golden hopes of the California Gold Rush. In those moments of reverie, they picked up John Charles Frémont's *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842 and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843–44* (published four years earlier, in 1845). Worried wives and mothers also pored over Frémont's *Report* for clues about the dangers their gold-besotted men might face. This government report—with its uninviting title, but beguiling maps, information, illustrations, and adventure stories—became the bible of the Gold Rush and the Overland Trail.[1] The text was politically and geographically powerful as it recontoured a space that Native nations inhabited and European nations claimed into something belonging to the still new United States.

Few books can claim to reshape cultures and nations: Frémont's *Report* did both. It made Frémont a household name as a dashing explorer, spy, and, eventually, a candidate for president. The text and its detailed maps also convinced thousands of people to move to Oregon and California. This great migration ignited a series of wars and diplomatic efforts that redrew the borders of the United States into what is familiar to us today. The years between 1800 and 1850 were Enlightenment science's glory days in the United States. The grand project of exploring and cataloging the North American continent moved from the purview of gentlemen scholars to the task of professionally trained and bureaucratically organized divisions of the U.S. government. John Charles Frémont,

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explorer, scientist, and romantically self-made man, perfectly matched this moment. His *Report* also perfectly reflected the attitudes and language of the moment: self-confident, heroic, and assuredly racist. The end of Frémont's career, in the years after the Civil War, also mirrored the West; failure, corruption, and selfishness marred a man and a place that started with so much promise.

BIOGRAPHY AND CONTEXT

Born in Savannah, Georgia, on January 21, 1813, to unmarried parents who had fled in disgrace because of an adulterous affair, young John began life with some disadvantages. His mother, Anne Whiting Pryor, came from an elite Virginia family fallen on hard times. His father, Charles Frémon (spelled without the "t"), was a French Canadian who had been kidnapped and forced to serve in the British Navy before escaping to Norfolk, Virginia, where he became Anne Pryor's French teacher and her lover. The young family moved around various southern cities, making ends meet teaching dancing and French, until Charles Frémon died. He left a widow and three children, John Charles being the eldest. To find some stability and educational possibilities for her children, Anne Pryor, now calling herself Mrs. Charles Frémont, settled in Charleston, South Carolina.[2]

At the age of thirteen, John began working as a clerk in a law firm to help his family. With his beautiful handwriting, skills in French and English, and manners and good looks, John impressed the lawyers in the firm. They agreed to sponsor his education at Charleston's finest classical preparatory school, where John instantly excelled, particularly in Greek and mathematics. With stellar reports from his teachers, he was admitted to the College of Charleston on a charity scholarship in 1829. He excelled there as well, but discovered he could get good grades without attending classes. So he spent much of his time carousing and drinking, but also working as a surveyor and a math teacher. John learned several life lessons from these experiences. First, he had real talents and could learn almost anything quickly. Second, he recognized that personal relationships and mentors mattered even more than money in getting ahead in life. And finally, and painfully, he knew that his illegitimate birth and his poor upbringing would always be held against him. This last realiza-

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tion made him extremely independent and dismissive of authority, traits that would make him impulsive and daring, but rarely a good leader.[3]

Frémont's skill at finding important and gifted mentors would prove essential to his entire career. The first of these was Joel Poinsett, a trustee of Charleston College, but also a diplomat and eventually the secretary of war. Poinsett arranged for Frémont to serve as a navy mathematics instructor in 1833 and then as an army engineer on a surveying expedition into South Carolina's Indian backcountry in 1837. This would be Frémont's first experience with mapping, with unknown lands, and with Native people, and he became addicted to the life of an army explorer. His next mentor would be Robert Nicollet, a French astronomer and cartographer, who had the task of charting North America's mineral resources and watersheds. As Nicollet's assistant and newly commissioned army lieutenant, Frémont would learn mapmaking as a science from the most advanced cartographer in the world at a moment when topographical engineers had become the heroes of American science and empire building.

Science, romantic exploration, and imperial ambition went hand in hand. The world in which Robert Nicollet, Louis Agassiz, and, above all, Alexander von Humboldt were household words is lost to us now. These scientists who wrote about their fieldwork discoveries as Frémont did, as accounts of swashbuckling adventure, personal discovery, and solutions to great cosmic puzzles about how the world operated, made their work accessible and important to a huge audience. As industrialization, urbanization, and great economic booms and busts confused many people about the meaning of progress and their own place in the world, these literary scientists clarified the notion that God had a plan, one that could be read on the landscape. This optimistic science was powerfully hooked to political notions of Manifest Destiny and the "White Man's Burden" in which Europeans and Anglo-Americans would naturally conquer the entire planet, leaving indigenous people and people of color out of the action entirely. These ideas, to our eyes racist and dangerously imperialistic, gave a unifying intellectual core to the desire to explore, link, and connect the entire world.[4]

We can see this linkage of science and politics in the career of another of John Charles Frémont's life-long mentors, Thomas Hart Benton, who spent a lifetime in politics as a U.S. senator from Missouri. Benton, a

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long-time friend of Thomas Jefferson and a fierce defender of the American West and expansionism, believed deeply in science and mapping as a way to open the West. Upon first meeting Frémont in Washington DC in 1840 and seeing his maps and descriptions of the Upper Mississippi watershed, Benton recognized his talents and how useful he would be to Benton's dream of a United States that stretched to the Pacific. Benton's initial hopes for the young man took a back seat to a family drama. After the dashing young Frémont ran away with Benton's sixteen-year-old daughter Jessie, and after the furious senator had time to accept the impetuous and defiant behavior of the young couple, Benton became his son-in-law's staunchest supporter.[5]

Intent on spreading the United States from sea to sea—which meant invading foreign territory clearly owned and settled by Spain, Mexico, England, and various Native nations—Benton recognized the power of information in achieving his goals. Careful scientific surveys, maps of roads and potential railroad routes across the West, and descriptions of the riches the region held for farmers, miners, and ambitious Americans of all kinds would lure people west and convince conservative politicians of the need for a continental nation. In the service of this political and personal vision, Thomas Benton, John Frémont, and Jessie Benton Frémont became a powerful team that made a lasting mark on the shape and culture of the United States. The significant role Jessie played on this team as writer, publicist, and political advisor was quite unusual for a woman in the mid-nineteenth century. Their first family project would be a mapping expedition that traced the well-worn path from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains, ostensibly to find the easiest route across the mountains and to figure out the mysteries of the Platte, Republican, and Arkansas Rivers.[6]

Benton, chair of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, arranged the funding for an 1842 expedition to ascertain the most likely points to build military forts that the increasing traffic along the Overland Trail, especially to Oregon, now required. The route to Oregon was by no means unexplored, but the parts of it west of South Pass in what is now Wyoming traversed difficult mountainous terrain. The political situation in Oregon, described as joint-occupancy by the United States and England, intimidated many potential settlers. An official government map would signal to eastern Americans and to British diplomats both the safety of the

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road and U.S. intentions to settle Oregon. Organized more as a scientific survey than a military expedition, by government standards the endeavor was important and politically sensitive, and some people wondered if Lt. John Charles Frémont was ready for the task.[7]

THE EXPEDITIONS: 1842 AND 1843–44

Less than six months after his marriage to Jessie, John left Washington and headed to St. Louis, where Senator Benton's connections made his preparations easy. Frémont hired Cyprian Chouteau, member of the powerful fur-trading Chouteau family, as his organizer. Chouteau arranged for supplies, horses, mules, and a team of twenty-one French-Canadian and Indian hunters and laborers. Frémont and his German mapmaker, Charles Preuss, had already purchased surveying equipment, several chronometers and barometers, an early photographic device called a daguerreotype, and a large rubber boat. On Chouteau's word, he hired the then unknown Kit Carson as his guide and scout. With this crew, and his twelve-year-old brother-in-law Randolph Benton, Frémont set off from Cyprian Chouteau's trading post near what is now Kansas City, Kansas, on June 10, 1842.[8]

As they traveled west, Frémont kept several kinds of records. He kept a regular and detailed journal, but also careful topographical records in which he measured latitude, longitude, and altitude daily. He and mapmaker Charles Preuss also made drawings of plants and animals and described the texture of the soil and the course size of rivers and streams. All of this would eventually be incorporated into the *Report*. Two weeks out, the party found their first bison, and several days later they ran into Pawnee and Cheyenne scouts and shared an elaborate meal. Frémont wrote with real delight about this moment of "barbaric luxury around our smoking supper in the grass" that initiated him into the romantic life of a western explorer.[9] Traveling slowly and with military precision, they reached South Pass, in theory the westernmost part of their reconnaissance, in August of 1842.

Once they ascertained with various measurements that this was indeed the Continental Divide, Frémont made one of his first seriously questionable decisions. He insisted that the expedition veer off its course and that most of the party climb a peak he claimed, incorrectly, to be the highest mountain in the Rockies. With great difficulty and carrying

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the awkward and heavy barometer, they ascended what Frémont would name with an evident lack of humility Fremont Peak in the Wind River Range (not even a 14,000-footer, but a less impressive 13,517 feet). The detour endangered Frémont's mission as it took several days, made many of the men ill with altitude sickness, wore out the mules, and destroyed some of the samples and equipment that Frémont carried with him. After they reached the summit on August 17, 1842, the group headed east toward home. They reached the Missouri settlements on October 1, and Lieutenant Frémont arrived in Washington DC less than a month later.

Immediately upon being reunited, John and Jessie Frémont began planning his second expedition and writing up the first one. Jessie recognized the importance of getting the news of the expedition to Congress and, she hoped, to a much wider audience as well. But John had trouble settling down and writing, so Jessie, having just given birth to their first daughter, Lily, hired a wet nurse to care for the baby during the day and went to work helping John write. By early spring, they had completed the *Report* of the 1842 trip, and John had received orders from the head of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, Col. John J. Abert—all orchestrated by Senator Benton—for another expedition. This expedition, much more ambitious and overtly political, had Lieutenant Frémont crossing the Rocky Mountains, investigating the headwaters of rivers that flowed to the Gulf of Mexico, then heading northwest to the Columbia River. No mention was made in his orders of a detour through what is now Nevada and California, but with Benton's knowledge and approval, he planned a tour of Mexican California all along.[10]

Frémont spent the spring of 1843 in St. Louis preparing for the trip. This time he hired thirty-nine men, including two Delaware Indians as hunters and Thomas "Brokenhand" Fitzpatrick as guide. The explorer also took along a personal valet, Jacob Dodson, whom he described as a "free colored man." Ever mindful of recording his groups' exploits, Frémont included mapmaker Charles Preuss again as well as William Gilpin, the editor of the *St. Louis Argus* and a future governor of Colorado. Their goal, according to the lieutenant in his *Report*, was "to connect the reconnaissance of 1842 with the surveys of Commander Wilkes on the coast of the Pacific ocean, so as to give a connected survey of the interior of our continent."[11] Note the use of "our continent" to describe

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the Pacific Northwest, the Intermountain West, and California, none of which belonged to the United States in 1843.

In late May the group left the Missouri frontier, carrying with them a set of Hall carbines and a twelve-pound howitzer that Frémont had convinced the commander of the St. Louis arsenal he needed for this peaceful scientific mission. When his superior in the Topographical Corps, Colonel Abert, got wind of this armament, he immediately sent a dispatch to St. Louis, ordering the lieutenant back to Washington to explain the cannon. When Jessie, home in St. Louis, looked at the dispatch, she feared it would delay or end the expedition, and she decided not to send it on to John. Instead she sent him a message: "Do not delay in Camp one minute longer. Trust me and move westward at once." He did, and though Jessie and John later received criticism for this clear flaunting of military authority, they both always believed they did the right thing.[12]

This second expedition covered much of the same ground until they approached the Rocky Mountains. Because they had travelled slowly, mostly because of the heavy howitzer, they had used up many of their stores, and their animals were worn out. Instead of continuing west, they veered south to the Arkansas River and the great emporium of Bent's Fort, where they could purchase enough supplies and animals to continue. Here they ran into Kit Carson, and Frémont immediately hired him on. They surveyed the Front Range of the Colorado Rockies and considered climbing Pikes Peak, which Frémont again mislabeled as the highest mountain in North America, but decided to return to their planned route. The expedition crossed South Pass in the Wind River Mountains to track and map the river systems that flowed west from the Continental Divide. They spent the fall of 1843 mapping the route to Oregon. Led by Shoshone and Bannock guides, they moved along the difficult river systems that flowed through deep chasms and tortured landscapes. A group of eleven disgruntled men, tired of the cold weather, spartan conditions, and Frémont's brutal pace, left the expedition at Fort Hall, in what is now southern Idaho. After following the Snake and Columbia Rivers through the icy mountains of Idaho and eastern Oregon, the party finally reached the Dalles of the Columbia, a point where the Columbia raged in a great waterfall before opening out into its broad coastal plain. Exhausted by the wintry travel and by the river gorges

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that required portages, Frémont declared the westward part of the trip complete. He accompanied two canoes to Fort Vancouver, the great fur-trading fort run by the British Hudson's Bay Company, for supplies and news, and to make a political statement about American presence in the region.[13]

At this point, the seemingly rational plan would be to winter in Oregon or at least to turn back toward the United States. Frémont did neither. He decided to move into northern California to seek the fabled Buenaventura River that supposedly rose in the Rockies and flowed west directly into the Pacific Ocean, a geographic impossibility given the reality of the Sierra Nevada. He also risked a winter crossing of the Sierra Nevada. Some biographers claim he was driven by his need to understand the geography of what he would call the Great Basin; others insist he had complex political motives planted by Senator Benton about entering California at a moment when its future was in question. Other writers see it as purely irrational glory-seeking—a desire to do something grand on this trip that had so far only covered familiar territory. Frémont himself claimed his sore-footed ponies drove the decision; they couldn't survive the hard trip east. Kit Carson later made a similar case, remembering that "we were nearly out of provisions, and cross the mountains we must, let the consequences be what they may."[14] In the *Report*, Frémont only records what he did, not why he did it.

So in January of 1844, when drifts in the Sierra reached forty feet, and disregarding the dire warnings of the local Paiute and Washoe Indians, the young and impetuous lieutenant led his men out of what is now Reno, Nevada, toward the south end of Lake Tahoe. Only a few years later, a similar decision would lead to the infamous cannibalism of the Donner Party. Frémont and his men did not meet such a fate, but it took them five terrible weeks to make the seventy-mile crossing to Sutter's Fort on the Sacramento River, just west of the mountains. The men ate their mules and their dog Tlamath, while the horses ate bark, saddles, and each other's tails. When the much-reduced party stumbled into Sutter's Fort (which would be the site of the California gold discovery only four years later) on March 6, 1844, they had suffered greatly from lack of food, cold weather, and the challenge of horses and gear in deep snow.[15]

The California landscape into which Frémont and his men wandered in 1844 appeared a wonderland to their eyes. After the mountain snows,

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the green and fertile hills with their spreading oak trees and spring-melt rivers looked appealing indeed. They rested for two weeks, during which Charles Preuss reported in his secret journal that Captain Sutter feted them admirably (including a dance by local Miwok people in which the men painted their penises with the colors of the Prussian flag, a detail Preuss clearly appreciated). The party moved on with fresh horses and supplies, for which they paid Sutter dearly.[16] With an eye toward the goal of acquiring Mexican California for the United States, the expedition travelled south through what is now the Central Valley along the San Joaquin River. Spanish and then Mexican citizens and soldiers had taken California from its Native inhabitants in the late eighteenth century, set up missions, farms, and ranches in the early nineteenth century, and were now justifiably worried about the intent of the United States and the sorts of reconnaissance missions that Lieutenant Frémont led. With Mexican officials well aware of their presence, and with troops dispatched to detain them if the group appeared to be moving too far toward the settlements in coastal California, Frémont's expedition kept moving. They considered another crossing of the Sierra, but Native guides talked them out of that foolish idea, and they traveled several hundred miles south to meet up with the Old Spanish Trail that connected Los Angeles and Santa Fe, both old Spanish settlements.[17]

Instead of mountain snows, they faced the Mojave Desert and the forbidding landscape of the Great Basin in what is now Nevada and Utah. Fortunately it was April, and the desert had as much bloom and moisture as it ever would. The desert proved to be a challenge, and so did the powerful Native groups in the region who saw little reason to trade with or to guide apparently poor and starving Euro-American invaders. Mojave, Paiute, and Ute, they stole Frémont's horses and supplies until Kit Carson and Alexander Godey got tired of the constant pilfering. Without consulting anyone, they decided to "punish the robbers of the desert," as Frémont put it. Or as Charles Preuss labeled it with less approval, they "sneaked in like cats and shot an Indian in the back." However it happened, Carson and Godey returned shouting and dangling bloody scalps from their rifles, an outcome Frémont could justify and Preuss could not.[18]

After two months of difficult travel through the mountains and deserts, where they felt constantly in danger from the Indians, they had

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ascertained the shape of the Great Basin and fully appreciated its lack of rivers. This part of the trip allowed Frémont to introduce the phrase "Great Basin" as a feature peculiar to western North America. After this series of explorations, the group finally crossed the Rockies and reached Bent's Fort and the Arkansas River in July of 1844, and on August 6, 1844, Frémont arrived in St. Louis, where he surprised and frightened Jessie with his unannounced arrival and emaciated appearance.[19]

WRITING THE REPORT: AUTHORSHIP AND IMPACT

When Lt. John Charles Frémont arrived in St. Louis, he possessed genuinely new geographic information for which people clamored. He understood much more about the interior mountain ranges of the Far West, the challenges of western rivers, and the routes to Oregon and to California, a place that Frémont described as a veritable Eden. His experience made him an expert on western flora and fauna as well as the variety of Native nations that populated the West. After resting briefly, reporting to Washington, and being promoted to captain by Gen. Winfield Scott, he and Jessie once again settled down to produce a report. Just how much of the *Report* was John and how much Jessie is still controversial, but they clearly acted as collaborators. John dictated and Jessie wrote, but they discussed wording and narrative structure. Much of the drama and literary qualities belong to Jessie. The 1842 *Report* was both a geographical and political document, and the much longer 1843–44 *Report* combined adventure story, science, and politics with even more skill. John and Jessie wrote it in less than six months and delivered it to the printer in March of 1845. The combined text proved that the Great Plains were not an arid wasteland, and Frémont's meteorological readings and discussions of soil conditions, water resources, and river courses would prove vital to travelers, settlers, and developers. It recommended new forts and new governmental structures to support westward settlement beyond the Rockies, suggesting that Oregon and California would inevitably be part of the United States. And it became an instant cultural phenomenon and best seller.[20]

First issued as a congressional *Report* in an unheard-of printing of ten thousand copies, and then immediately reprinted over and over again and translated into several languages, the combined *Report* instantly reached a vast audience. Frémont, largely because of the romantic picture that

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Jessie created of him in the text, became a genuine hero. The *Report*'s fame, according to the *Southern Literary Messenger*, would "survive as long as the Sierra Nevada," and according to the equally effusive *Democratic Review*, the *Report* far surpassed Lewis and Clark's for its "breadth and variety." Preuss's map, published in 1846 as a separate document, was designed as a trail map about ten feet long, to be mounted on a roller and carried by overland travelers and consulted easily. Its ten-miles-to-the-inch scale offered explicit detail about routes, and it provided hints about camping sites, vegetation, salt licks, and Native people. We have no clear sense of how many people used it this way, but given the fact that hundreds of thousands of people travelled on that trail in the next ten years, it surely provided helpful and comforting direction.[21]

Frémont's text and Preuss's maps also asserted American ownership of the West with the powerful act of naming. Even before they were actually part of the United States, places became familiar and even domesticated when they had names. Monikers like Fremont Peak, the Carson River, and Carson Pass labeled these places as Anglo-American space, not Native American space. Frémont (probably Jessie in this case) used descriptive strategies to make the landscape appealing and familiar. Architectural terms and analogies described features so that mountain ranges looked like "ancient fortified towns" or sandstone shapes resembled "parapets, domes, and slender minarets." Such analogies helped to make the landscape seem already settled to American readers. Not every bit of the West could be so easily domesticated and owned with words. The Frémonts struggled to describe places that, like the Great Basin, were "dreary" and "barren" because they awaited the touch of Anglo-American enterprise to make them fertile.[22]

FRÉMONT'S LATER CAREER: SPY, POLITICIAN, AND FAILED ENTREPRENEUR

The publication of the *Report* and the accolades Frémont received in its wake were the pinnacle of his career. He and Jessie certainly predicted a continued meteoric rise. He would undertake three more expeditions, and he would hold territorial and national political offices, but his career would be tainted with doubt and scandal after his adventures in California in the late 1840s. Given the national mood around territorial expansion and the need for heroic figures to distract people from the problems of

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slavery and sectional conflict, Frémont indeed seemed the man of the moment. In the spring of 1845, as John and Jessie celebrated the success of the book among scientists, politicians, and eager readers of all types, the nation had a new president, James K. Polk. Polk, who had been elected in 1844 on a ticket based on expansionism, intended to make the landscape that John had explored and that he and Jessie had described so compellingly part of the United States in fact. Polk would annex Texas, initiating a war with Mexico. At the same time, he began negotiating with Great Britain for the Oregon Territory and sent out secret missives about obtaining California, with Senator Thomas Benton as his advisor. John Charles Frémont, now famous as the Pathfinder, was inevitably drawn into these plans. Benton, along with Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft and Vice President James Buchanan, began planning an ambitious third expedition to California and Oregon. His orders from his superior Colonel Abert, vague and general, masked the real reason for his trip: to have an American presence in California in case war broke out and England tried to grab California.[23]

Whatever his official purpose or instructions, Capt. John Charles Frémont managed to be on the spot as the Mexican War unsettled conditions in that other province of Northern Mexico, Alta California. Whether Frémont's task in California was as official observer, diplomat, or military spy, he appeared at the moment of the Bear Flag Revolt in the summer of 1846, California's pale imitation of the Alamo, and instigated a three-week-long California independence movement. This activity was controversial enough, but then Frémont refused to give up his temporary military authority to Col. Stephen Watts Kearney and the U.S. Army when Kearney's troops arrived several months later. After being arrested by Colonel Kearney, marched to the Kansas border as a prisoner, and subjected to a long, drawn-out investigation, Frémont was court-martialed in Washington DC in November of 1847. The court-martial of an American hero became a feeding frenzy for the press. Senator Benton had insisted on a full court-martial so that his son-in-law would be "justified and exalted." Unfortunately for John and Jessie, the publicity and the investigation did not prove to be the utter vindication Benton had promised. Frémont claimed he had been but "a pawn" in the service of other people's machinations and that West Point– and Annapolis-trained regular military officers conspired against him. In much of the testimony,

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however, John appeared greedy, self-centered, rash, and entirely insubordinate. And in the end he was found guilty of both treason and mutiny, and stripped of his army office.[24]

Obviously, the trial entirely overshadowed the geographic aspects of Frémont's expedition and placed his entire career in jeopardy, but it had made John Charles Frémont very famous. His fourth and fifth expeditions would be massive efforts to regain his reputation. First he and Jessie decided to move to California, where they believed, like so many people, they could make a fresh start. In 1848 John undertook a fourth expedition, this time as a citizen scientist and railroad promoter, to survey a route for a railroad from St. Louis to California through the central part of the Rocky Mountains. The trip began under a deep cloud as John and Jessie's new baby boy Benton died on the river trip between St. Louis and Kansas City. Crushed by this tragedy, Jessie could only watch mutely as John and his men headed out on the ill-fated winter expedition to the mountains, and she returned to the East to take a ship to California.

Frémont's task was to find out if a year-round railroad route along the thirty-eighth parallel through the mountains was possible, hence the winter expedition. They followed the route of the Santa Fe Trail to Bent's Fort and then headed east and north into what is now southern Colorado. Traveling in spite of the warnings of Native people, mountain men, and his own men, Frémont found heavy snow and immediately got lost in the rugged San Juan Mountains. Frémont, of course, had made a similar gamble in 1844 in the Sierra Nevada and had been celebrated for it. This time, however, the dice rolled in an unlucky direction. The expedition wandered in the cold with only enough supplies for a month, with men deserting, dying, suffering from frostbite, and discussing cannibalism. They subsisted on their frozen mules, and one member of the party remembered a Christmas "feast" that consisted of "mule on toast (without the toast) and short ribs of mule with Apple Sauce (without the applesauce)."[25] At the time, however, the situation had little humor, and in late December they turned back in a disorganized retreat that cost ten men and hundreds of mules their lives. Frémont himself denied any blame for these decisions, calling the disaster a result of "fate" and "sudden ruin" in a letter to Jessie.[26] After they reached the safety of Taos in February of 1849, Frémont's men excoriated their leader for poor decisions that had endangered many and killed some. Infuriated by these charges, Frémont

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blamed their guide, "Old Bill" Williams, for the entire disaster, which was convenient, since Williams was now dead.[27] After only two days of rest in Taos, John turned his back on the entire ugly situation and, feeling like a much-misunderstood hero, set out for California to meet Jessie.

The Frémonts' timing was perfect to arrive in the earliest stages of the 1849 Gold Rush to California. The fact of a gold strike had been announced to the nation in December of 1848 as Frémont and his men froze in the Colorado Mountains. John immediately invested in a ranch/mine near Mariposa in the southern part of what would be known as "the diggings" while Jessie and seven-year-old Lily stayed in cooler Monterey. Frémont and his twenty-eight Sonoran miners brought in $25,000 a month, a stunning sum in 1849, until the news about the find spread north and his claim was invaded by eager Anglo miners. Rather than fight the claim jumpers, almost impossible in early California before any government could take hold, he went into politics. His fame and his wealth made him the first U.S. senator from California, a position from which Jessie could impose her fierce anti-slavery views. John may have been against slavery in some theoretical way, but keeping California from becoming a slave state was clearly Jessie's fight. The Pathfinder, now a senator, believed he had found a new path.[28]

Washington DC in 1850 seemed hostile to the couple expecting a returning hero's welcome. The bitter and dangerous arguments over slavery made the Senate a battleground, and John's early outspoken views made him unpopular, even in such an outspoken place. His lack of seniority and his unwillingness to enter the world of Washington politics made it nearly impossible to get California matters on the senatorial docket. He failed miserably and was roundly criticized in the California and national newspapers. After a year, he and Jessie returned to California, where he lost his bid to be re-elected in 1852. He "retired" to the ranch at Mariposa and speculated in land all over the state, vowing never to get involved in politics again.

Meanwhile, in the world of elite European science, John became famous. The books that he and Jessie had written, the vast collections of plant, fossil, and soil samples that he had collected, and the western maps that he and Charles Preuss had made gave John Charles Frémont the acclaim he craved. His books were read all over the world, and his specimens were displayed in European museums. The great explorer

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Alexander von Humboldt praised Frémont in 1849 and had the king of Prussia bestow upon him a gold medal for "Progress in the Sciences." In 1852 the Frémonts began a sort of European victory tour where they entertained royalty, met famous explorers, and gave lectures to cheering audiences. They attended royal weddings and celebrated the birth of a second daughter, named Anne for John's mother. They were also dogged by charges about financial shenanigans with railroads, lawsuits in California, and creditors who wanted to be paid for the lavish lifestyle the Frémonts enjoyed so much in Europe.

Some biographers describe Frémont as suffering from psychological flaws that prevented him from having the lifetime of success that he craved. They cite this phase of his life as evidence of his self-destructive tendencies, as he simultaneously invested in land schemes, railroads, and an 1856 run for president. As the national political parties tried to deal with the national elephant in the living room, slavery, Frémont emerged as a compromise candidate. As a heroic explorer he had name recognition and not much political baggage. As a Southerner with vaguely anti-slavery views, Frémont, with his youth and lack of experience, appealed to the new Republican Party that hoped to attract a range of voters who believed in curbing slavery, though not necessarily abolishing it. With Jessie pushing hard, using her skills and connections, but with his father-in-law, Thomas Hart Benton, advising him to turn down the nomination because he feared the new Republican Party would split the nation, Frémont took the job with some ambivalence. His abysmal performance as a public speaker and his unwillingness even to feign interest in politics made him a terrible candidate. Unprepared for the public and private vitriol that came from his lackluster performance, he and Jessie pulled away from public life after he lost the election.

DENOUEMENT: MILITARY, ECONOMIC, AND PERSONAL FAILURE

The West, that glittering jewel of untapped promise that Frémont had described in his first and second *Report*s, proved far more difficult for the nation to conquer and then to incorporate than anyone reading the text might have imagined. Two decades of Indian war, guerilla war in the Missouri border country over slavery, and then a civil war tarnished the West of people's dreams and John C. Frémont's legacy. He did much of

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the damage himself with shockingly poor decisions and obviously self-serving choices, but circumstances also conspired against him.

When the Civil War began in 1861, President Lincoln gave Frémont, a popular hero and a high-ranking army officer, large responsibilities as one of four generals selected to lead the Union effort. As the general in command of the Army of the West, he faced the enormous challenge of fighting angry Confederates supported by experienced guerilla fighters with an underprepared, poorly supplied Union Army. In what he hoped would be a grand military gesture, he issued an emancipation proclamation and declared martial law in Missouri, hoping that ex-slaves would pour into his ragged army and that Confederates would leave Missouri. Few did, and his action infuriated both Lincoln and Missouri's governor, who were struggling to keep the peace in a delicate border state.[29] After nearly losing Missouri to the Confederates in 1861, Frémont went on to be the commander who let Confederate general Stonewall Jackson escape with his troops in the failed Virginia campaigns in the spring of 1862. Frémont continually misread military politics and ignored direct communications from Lincoln. Finally Lincoln fired him in 1862, and he faced a court-martial once again. Jessie, seeing how much damage this would do to her family's reputation, demanded and obtained a personal meeting with the president and begged for Lincoln to restore John's command, but he refused. Perhaps it was spite, perhaps it was genuine fear for the nation, but Jessie convinced John he should run for president against Lincoln in 1864 as a Radical Democrat who wanted more vindication against the slaveholding South. This, too, failed as cooler heads considered the dangers of changing leaders in the midst of a war.[30]

Such episodes certainly made Frémont well known, but not in the way he craved. He never found a real place in post–Civil War America, and he never managed to pay off his creditors or satisfy his own ambitions. He attempted to reclaim his fame with speaking tours, his California mining and land projects, and railroad investment schemes. Still focused on the "path to the Pacific" that had entranced investors for decades, he sold his expertise as an explorer in return for stock certificates in western railroads. Frémont's fame drew shady investors to install him on their boards of directors, and his own greed drew him into clearly illegal activities. The French government convicted him for defrauding French investors in 1871, and several western and Mexican railroads failed entirely with

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Frémont's poor management skills, ruining thousands of investors with each failure.[31] Even in a period when graft seemed like normal business behavior, a San Francisco newspaper commented nastily, "It is rare that a national fame . . . was ever acquired by the exercise of so little ability."[32] His final political appointment was as territorial governor of Arizona, an office he chose partly to find a place where his son Frank might recover from tuberculosis, but he got snarled in railroad investments once again and was forced to resign from office in 1881.[33]

Only by writing for national magazines was "Gallant Jessie" able to keep the family fed in those years. She wrote furiously and her work sold well, bringing in as much as $200 an article. However, the family had to sell all of its real estate in New York and California and found themselves renting small houses and living in fear of the tax collector. Jessie's passion for supporting John's career became an obsession as his star power faded. She found a publisher who would pay an advance for the great five-volume memoir that the Frémonts planned to write in hopes of resuscitating John's reputation. With the assistance of California railroad magnates and generous local women, Jessie found a home in Los Angeles. Though they published volume one of the *Memoirs*, almost entirely written by Jessie, in 1887, the Frémonts rarely lived together. Now in his late seventies, John still tried to raise money for various schemes among his old military and political friends, and he died in July of 1890 in New York. Jessie couldn't afford to travel to the funeral. Instead she mailed, to be buried with him, a miniature of herself that she had sent west with Kit Carson in 1845 for Frémont to carry on the second expedition.[34]

Jessie would spend the rest of her life fiercely protecting a particular heroic image of the general. The first and second expeditions, as reprinted here in *Frémont's First Impressions*, are surely John Charles Frémont's most glorious moment. They show us the Frémont whom Jessie hoped would be remembered. Her vision of the irreverent, brave, and debonair explorer would survive, though we should not simply accept the version of John that Jessie wanted us to see. He is a fuller and more interesting human with failures tempering successes, and he better represents the complicated West of the nineteenth century. As the difficulties of conquest and the moral quandaries of warfare made the West seem less golden, so too did the image of the Pathfinder seem to tarnish. We can see Frémont with patina rather than simply youthful glow

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as we read about his encounters with the many places named for him—Fremont Passes in the Sierras, Rockies, and Cascades, and Fremont Peak, Fremont Glacier, and Fremont Needle—all places he saw and made part of the United States on those first expeditions.

NOTES

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3. Rolle, *John Charles Frémont*, 1–11; Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 1–25.
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9. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 23; Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 103–6.
10. Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 79–81; Pamela Herr, *Jessie Benton Frémont: A Biography* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1987), 78–79.
11. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 105; Rolle, *John Charles Frémont*, 48–49.

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12. Nevins, *Pathmarker*, 133; Herr, *Jessie Benton Frémont*, 88–90; Frémont, *Memoirs*, 167–68.
13. Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 179–87; Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 180–96.
14. Frémont, *Memoirs*, 317–29; Sachs, *The Humboldt Current*, 8–9; Harvey Carter, *Dear Old Kit: The Historical Christopher Carson* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 89; Charles Preuss, *Exploring with Frémont: The Private Diaries of Charles Preuss, Cartographer* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 107–11.
15. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 221–45; Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 218–21.
16. Preuss, *Exploring with Frémont*, 120.
17. Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 223–29.
18. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 263; Preuss, *Exploring with Frémont*, 127–28; Tom Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 100–103.
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25. Thomas E. Breckenridge, reprinted in LeRoy Hafen and Ann Hafen, eds., *Frémont's Fourth Expedition: A Documentary Account of the Disaster of 1848–1849* (Glendale CA: Arthur H. Clark, 1960), 184.
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34. Herr, *Jessie Benton Frémont*, 392–400, 427–35; Rolle, *John Charles Frémont*, 264–72.

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