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Spring 2004

## Review of *Pathfinder: John Charles Fremont and the Course of American Empire* By Tom Chaffin

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Chandler, Robert J., "Review of *Pathfinder: John Charles Fremont and the Course of American Empire* By Tom Chaffin" (2004). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2437.

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*Pathfinder: John Charles Frémont and the Course of American Empire.* By Tom Chaffin. New York: Hill and Wang, 2002. xxx + 559 pp. Photographs, maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.

Who was John Charles Frémont (1813-1890)? Tom Chaffin attempts to map his mind's terrain, but Frémont reveals little. More crucial than lack of personal papers is Frémont's character: Chaffin declares his writings to be "duplicitous apologia."

Chaffin, therefore, travels well-worn paths. Ferol Egan's *Frémont: Explorer for a Restless Nation* (1977, 1985) comes to mind. While lacking Egan's richness of detail, Chaffin presents a fuller life. Where Egan dotes on "the great love affair" between Frémont and wife Jessie, Chaffin details Frémont's self-destructive womanizing. By 1856, he reports, a "growing distance" between the couple quickly became "a chill."

Some events defy explanation. Why did Frémont drag along a heavy, useless twelve-pounder mountain howitzer on his Second Expedition, needlessly angering Army brass? Others do not engage Chaffin. Whereas Egan denounces Frémont's California Indian hunts and slaying of three unarmed Californios, Chaffin shows little concern.

Chaffin's introduction makes the best case for Frémont; his text graphically tears him down. By 1844, loner Frémont held a "well-advanced sense of his own importance and talents," an arrogance leading to clashes with superiors up to the president. He played a "nervous prevaricator" during California's 1846 Bear Flag Revolt; displayed "limited knowledge" of politics in 1856; exhibited "bizarre" behavior in command of St. Louis; and "neglect[ed]" duties as Arizona Territorial governor. Finally, Frémont's financial finessing "bordered on outright fraud."

Why, then, even bother? Chaffin answers well. Frémont and Jessie were America's beautiful couple, similar to Jack and Jacqueline Kennedy during the 1960s. Name another presidential candidate's wife so honored with campaign songs. Frémont exemplified America's manifest destiny when he waved Old Glory from 13,500-foot Frémont Peak.

Frémont was the right man in the right place. He had “a jeweler’s eye for sorting out complexities of landscape,” delineating natural boundaries and drainage systems. His sense of the extent and diversity of plants debunked the notion of the infertile “Great American Desert.” Chaffin, who traveled Frémont’s trails with the same love of land, shines in the retelling.

Frémont’s First Expedition in 1842 marked the route to South Pass; his Second, 1843-1844, took him to Oregon and then through California’s Great Central Valley. Reports, published in 1843 and 1845, sparked “Oregon Fever.” Written from the heart, they were a paean to new land. People read them, while finely detailed maps supplied notes for emigrants. Frémont forced Americans “to conceive of their nation, for the first time, as a sea-to-sea empire.” For this, the United States is indebted to him.

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