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# **THE *NOT* SO WILD, WILD WEST** **Property Rights on the Frontier**

**Terry L. Anderson & Peter J. Hill**

"Hollywood will never be able to top this portrayal of the history of the West in the U.S. The history that Anderson and Hill depict is the current situation of the majority of entrepreneurs in developing and former Soviet countries. It is not only an extraordinary insight into the genesis of America, but also the key to understanding better the Middle East, Central Asia, and all the Third World today."

—Hernando de Soto,  
President of the Institute for Liberty and Democracy

"Emergent, self ordering institutional arrangements and property right norms are commonplace. But they are invisible to all those who rely upon them to create wealth, and who may believe falsely that all such rules come from legislated law. Anderson and Hill have made visible an impressive array of examples from US frontier history."

—Vernon L. Smith,  
George Mason University,  
2002 Nobel Laureate in Economics

Tales of the American West have typically painted it as a lawless, wild frontier, home to gun-slinging cowboys, greedy gold miners, land-hungry ranchers, and common criminals. The legendary status of old west outlaws, such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid, and lawmen, like Wyatt Earp and Wild Bill Hickok, indicates that most view the settlement of the western frontier as an epic struggle

between good and evil, law enforcers and lawbreakers. This struggle, many contend, was only resolved through the intervention of the federal government in establishing and enforcing the law and allocating the oftentimes-scarce resources available on the frontier.

However, in *The Not So Wild, Wild West*, authors Terry L. Anderson and Peter J. Hill argue that, for the most part, the American West was a harmonious environment where cattle ranchers, miners, fur traders, buffalo hunters, homesteaders, and American Indians alike were able to carve out their own legal institutions and work cooperatively to “tame” the West. Further, Anderson and Hill assert, it was government interference that actually disrupted this harmony by prompting the establishment of regressive policies and ineffective institutions.

*The Not So Wild, Wild West* makes a strong case for a “from-the-ground-up” approach to law making. Anderson and Hill illustrate how, time and time again in the American West, rules and institutions established at the local level trumped those made at the federal level in both efficiency and effectiveness. Because the everyday citizen living on the frontier had a greater stake in the establishment of property rights, for example, than a distant governing body, he/she was far more likely to work towards the establishment of realistic, sustainable, and equitable policies than a governmental official sitting in the capitol. This argument can easily be applied to modern government and the debate surrounding the benefits versus drawbacks of big government.

#### STANFORD ECONOMICS AND FINANCE

*Terry L. Anderson is the Executive Director of PERC, the Center for Free Market Environmentalism; Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University; and Professor Emeritus at Montana State University. He has published 28 books. P. J. Hill is Professor of Economics at Wheaton College, Illinois, and a PERC Senior Associate. This is his eleventh book.*

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