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Our Pioneer Blood:
American Frontier Myth, Identity and the Pacific War

The American experience in World War Two and more specifically the Pacific War was largely informed by the frontier myths of the American past. These myths were formed largely by the historical and cultural beliefs of “American exceptionalism” based on the idea that American moral and martial strength was forged through expansion into an unknown and hostile wilderness. Consequently, the heroic pioneer figure, at the center of these myths, has been viewed as a conqueror of the savage wilderness and peoples. Similarly, the Pacific theater of World War Two was also characterized as a savage frontier environment that in many ways replicated the familiar elements of these American myths.

This paper will explore American frontier myths and their application to the Pacific War; these were powerful conquest narratives that formed an ideological basis for the wartime experience. By invoking the mythic symbols of the frontier spirit, American society drew power from these claims to authentic and imagined historical truths. They would be appropriated and re-imagined in the creation of an American narrative of the Pacific War that pitted white civilization against Japanese savagery. Further, the frontier myths contributed to an image of the ideal (male) citizen in wartime. This identity was especially strong in communities in the western United States that perceived a close affiliation with the frontier wilderness. This in turn profoundly impacted the perception and treatment of Japanese through the course and conduct of the war at home and on the Pacific frontier.

Author Bio:

Lucas Erickson is a doctoral student in the Department of History at the University of Oregon. His research interests focus on US military history, American West, Pacific studies, historical anthropology, and corporeal trophy taking and display. He has presented his research at the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association Conference, a military oral history conference, an Anthropology Colloquium at the University of Oregon, and elsewhere.

AV requirements:

I will bring a laptop and I will need a projector.