

Vince McMahon and the Fall of the American Wrestling Association

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The day is July 14, 1984, and Georgia Championship Wrestling (GCW) is ready to air its weekly episodic flagship show, *World Championship Wrestling* (WCW). It is Saturday evening, and fans from across Georgia are tuning in to see local favorites Tommy Rich, Kevin Sullivan, and the Road Warriors. Instead, what they watch leaves them completely angered; it is Vincent Kennedy McMahon, owner of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), promoting his own wrestling show. This event became known as “Black Saturday” in the wrestling world.¹ What really happened behind the scenes was that Vince McMahon had just quietly purchased the GCW timeslot on Superstation WTBS without any warning. This meant that he could block the airing of the GCW programming and could air whatever he liked to the Georgia audiences. The moment officially marked McMahon’s open campaign to take control of professional wrestling and the start of the power struggle between the WWF and the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), signaling the beginning of the end for regional promotions that once controlled their own markets.

This paper examines how Vince McMahon took over a former member of the NWA, the American Wrestling Association (AWA), which was a Midwest promotion centered in Minneapolis, Minne-

¹ Leocardosobr, “Vince McMahon Opens World Championship Wrestling—July 14, 1984,” YouTube video, July 14, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX_b9JRGgME.

sota, ran by promoter Verne Gagne.² The research question guiding this microhistory asks, how Vince McMahon's tactics in dismantling the AWA reveal the broader strategies the WWF used to destroy the territorial system and establish a national monopoly in professional wrestling. Using televised matches, wrestler and promoter interviews, wrestling magazines, in addition to historical studies by sports scholars, this article demonstrates that through tactics such as the use of cable television and pay-per-view (PPV), poaching and reshaping of talent, and arena raids, he helped dismantle the territorial system and build a single national wrestling monopoly. The WWF story shows how media and business expansion transformed wrestling from a regional sport into a national entertainment business. The AWA's collapse reveals far more than a rivalry between two promoters. Its true significance lies in the fact that without Vince McMahon's expansion tactics, professional wrestling would not have evolved into the billion-dollar industry it is today. Regional promoters lacked the vision and reach necessary to sustain a national audience.

Historians who study the end of the territorial system explain the shift from regional wrestling to a national company through a few consistent themes. Shaun Assael describes the NWA as a network held together by private agreements, and that it survived because the promoters respected territorial boundaries. Each promoter stayed in their specific region and focused exclusively on that territory to avoid conflicts and maintain stable business operations. Assael demonstrates that Vincent James McMahon employed this approach, building the Northeast through cooperation and steady local television.³ He contrasts this with Vincent James McMahon's son, Vince McMahon, and his refusal to follow the gentlemen's agreement of fixed borders or slow growth. Assael's work demonstrates how the previous generation maintained stability in the system and how Vince McMahon broke that pattern.⁴ Scott Beekman explains that cable television changed the business. Cable created a single national audience instead of multiple regional ones. Most promoters stayed tied to local

² A promoter is the person in charge of organizing and promoting professional wrestling events for a respective organization.

³ Vincent James McMahon (1914–1984) was an American professional wrestling promoter and the owner of the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF).

⁴ Shaun Assael, *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks: The Real Story of Vince McMahon and the World Wrestling Entertainment* (Three Rivers Press, 2004).

stations, but Vince McMahon saw the scale of the new market. Beekman writes that Vince understood what national exposure meant and planned a product that looked the same in every city.⁵ Tim Hornbaker explains that talent movement played a major role in the fall of the territories. He shows that wrestlers left regional promotions because they wanted better pay and wider exposure, which the WWF was able to offer. Hornbaker writes that Vince McMahon poached top names from all of his competition, which weakened those promotions and cut into their ability to draw crowds.⁶ Gerald Morton and George O'Brien argue that wrestling underwent a significant transformation once new media reached national audiences. They explain that older promotions relied on simple studio shows and cheap local television. This kept costs down but also limited its growth. They demonstrate that cable made promoters increase production value in order to present a more polished product. Promoters needed stronger lighting, better sound, and a visual appeal that resonated with viewers across the country.⁷ Bill Hanstock explains that WrestleMania marked a significant shift in the business. He describes how Vince McMahon used large-scale events and closed-circuit broadcasts to reach national audiences before full pay-per-view access became available. He writes that WrestleMania blended celebrities, bright production, and strong marketing to pull wrestling into pop culture. He argues that these national events helped the WWF separate from the territories and build an audience that stretched far beyond any single region.⁸

Where this project differs is that it places the AWA at the center of the discussion. Most historians describe the fall of the territories as a whole, but they do not study the decline of one significant territory step by step.⁹ This study focuses on how the AWA operated and how its business habits created openings that Vince McMahon exploited. It explains how Vince used cable to reach AWA audiences,

5 Scott M. Beekman, *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America* (Praeger, 2006).

6 Tim Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories: Expansion, Betrayal, and the War That Changed Pro Wrestling Forever* (Tantor Audio, 2019).

7 Gerald Morton and George O'Brien, "Sinew and Sequins: Wrestling in the Age of Electronics," in *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle* (Popular Press, 2005), 46–76.

8 Bill Hanstock, *We Promised You a Great Main Event: An Unauthorized WWE History* (Harper, 2020).

9 A territory is a specific geographic area controlled by a wrestling promotion.

how closed-circuit shows and early pay-per-view helped him launch WrestleMania I, and how the loss of Hulk Hogan weakened the AWA. By studying these points, this project shows the exact tools Vince McMahon used against Verne Gagne and explains why the AWA could not survive once the market became national. The reason for choosing the AWA is that it was not your ordinary run-of-the-mill promotion that could be pushed around. At its height, the AWA was one of the most successful territorial promotions in the United States. Like Vince and the WWF, it split from the NWA for creative reasons and learned to thrive without the support of the other territories, making them the three biggest professional wrestling entities during the second half of the twentieth century. Their fall to Vince was not just a fluke, but a plan executed to perfection. Demonstrating that even the strongest territorial business models were no match for the evolving methods of the wrestling world.¹⁰

In the United States, wrestling became a huge part of popular culture, and toward the end of the nineteenth century professional wrestling was more accessible as urbanization created larger audiences willing to pay for entertainment. Promoters transformed wrestling matches into commercial attractions, while sports journalists helped spread wrestlers' reputations beyond their local communities. This was possible due to the popularity of catch-as-catch-can wrestling, a style characterized by pinning and submitting your rival through the grappling and manipulation of the joints and neck. As the style spread across the country, wrestling became increasingly tied to traveling carnivals, which created a distinct subculture around the sport. In the carnival, wrestling matches consisted of having two wrestlers, one up on the stage called the "inside man" and another blended within the crowd, known as the "outside man". The inside man would be taunting the crowd, shouting that he is the strongest man present and that if there was anyone brave enough to challenge him, to stand up. That's when the outside man accepts the invite, and they proceed to have a match.¹¹ These performances demonstrated early forms of worked matches, in which outcomes were predetermined, and kayfabe, the tradition of maintaining the illusion that wrestling contests were real.

¹⁰ Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories*.

¹¹ Beekman, *Ringside*, 35.

The NWA was formed on July 14, 1948, when six wrestling promoters of the time, including Al Haft, Orville Brown, and P.L. George, met at the President Hotel in Waterloo, Iowa, due to financial concerns.¹² Their goal was to bring stability to the chaotic business of wrestling. Prior to this meeting, professional wrestling in the United States consisted of several independent territories, each with its own champions and local stars, all competing against one another. The NWA sought to unify these promotions under a single governing body which recognized one “World Heavyweight Champion” who would travel between territories to defend the title.¹³ This would become known as the territory system, and it helped maintain order between promoters, as the NWA established rules for talent exchanges, match bookings, and promotional boundaries. By the 1950s, the NWA had become the dominant institution in North American wrestling, creating a powerful network of regional promoters that allowed wrestling to thrive in both urban and small-town arenas. In the years that followed, major regional promotions joined the NWA to benefit from its recognition and nationwide prestige.

Unfortunately for the NWA, as time passed, so did their power. One of their biggest members, the AWA, a powerhouse in the Upper Midwest ran by Verne Gagne, felt that they had outgrown the territory system. Gagne became frustrated with the alliance’s lack of recognition and felt that he had no say in who became the World Champion.¹⁴ He expanded his promotion by making himself the World Champion and filming his own matches, sending them out to local TV stations for free until he had wrestled enough bouts that he was comfortably selling out an eight-thousand-square-foot arena.¹⁵ Coincidentally, the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF), founded by Vincent James McMahon and based in the northeastern United States, also left the NWA due to a power struggle over control. The Nature Boy Buddy Rogers, the World Champion of the time, loved being in New York, and refused to fight anywhere else, or even drop the title to another wrestler. This greatly benefited Vincent

12 Assael, *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks*, 7.

13 Assael, *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks*, 9.

14 Kevin Dunn, *The Spectacular Legacy of the AWA* (Peacock, 2006), 6:48, <https://www.peacocktv.com>.

15 Assael, *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks*, 16.

James McMahon, as he was hosting the World Champion at all times, which went against the NWA's principle. This infuriated the other owners, who eventually forced the title away from Nature Boy Buddy Rogers by blackmailing him. At the time when a new champion was crowned, he had to pay a \$25,000 deposit in order to guarantee he would listen to the NWA's instructions.¹⁶ On January 24, 1963, Rogers lost the title to Lou Thesz. This created an avalanche of consequences as Vincent James McMahon, furious with the outcome, left the alliance and made Rogers the World Champion of his company.¹⁷ These departures reflected growing tensions within the alliance as television exposure and regional identities created opportunities for independent branding. The exits of the AWA and WWWF signaled the gradual erosion of the NWA's authority and foreshadowed the eventual rise of national promotions that would dominate the wrestling industry by the 1980s.¹⁸

Vince McMahon met his father at the age of twelve, as they didn't have a particularly close father-son relationship. After they reconnected, he followed his father into the wrestling business, where he watched shows from backstage and learned how the company worked. His father, Vincent James McMahon, had already built a major Northeast promotion through the Capitol Wrestling Corporation (CWC) and later the WWF. He grew the business with television on the DuMont Network, regular shows in New York and Washington, D.C., and a steady roster. By 1982, his father, now sixty-eight years old grew tired of the wrestling business and was looking for a way out. Vince took control of the World Wide Wrestling Federation in 1982 after buying the company from his father.¹⁹ Vince capitalized and worked on an agreement with his father to get a hold of the company. They settled on a one million dollar buyout to be paid in four installments, with the stipulation that if a payment was missed, the contract would be void and any money given would not be refunded.²⁰ This transfer gave Vince McMahon full control of the family's

16 Beekman, *Ringside*, 104.

17 Chicago Film Archives, "Lou Thesz vs. Buddy Rogers," YouTube video, September 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqIHV0m29FU>.

18 Assael, *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks*, 14-15.

19 Abraham Riesman, "Play-By-Play," in *Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America* (Atria Books, 2023), 53.

20 Hanstock, *We Promised You a Great Main Event*.

promotion and set the stage for the transition from a regional business to a national one.

One reason the AWA declined was its failure to build new stars. Hulk Hogan is the clearest example of this problem. The AWA style of wrestling was more technical and focused on the wrestling matches themselves rather than the storylines that garnered more viewers.²¹ In the AWA, Hogan remained in a mid-card role even as his popularity grew.²² Fans supported him at live events, and various magazine polls consistently ranked him among the top ten most popular wrestlers for several consecutive months.²³ Due to this, he proceeded to ask the AWA for a push that would eventually result with a title win that he believed he had earned.²⁴ However, the company disagreed as they believed that Nick Bockwinkel was more over with the crowd and should be the rightful champion and face of the company.²⁵ This decision limited Hogan's growth and frustrated him, as well as audiences who wanted him to be promoted to a leading spot. The AWA relied on older champions and a slow, outdated fighting style. This prevented rising talent from advancing. The handling of Hogan shows how the AWA failed to adjust to shifts in fan demand. The company missed an opportunity to elevate a wrestler who already showed national potential.

Vince McMahon saw Hulk Hogan's potential and moved fast to take him from the AWA without warning. Signing wrestlers to contracts in that era was not the norm and deals were typically done through handshake agreements. Vince knew this and told Hulk Hogan that he would sign him under the condition that he did not show up for Gagne's upcoming dates without warning.²⁶ To persuade him, the WWF offered Hogan the top babyface spot, with wide ex-

21 Title Match Wrestling, "Greg Gagne Full Shoot Interview (AWA Wrestling, Vince McMahon, Hulk Hogan, End of WCW)," YouTube video, May 30, 2024, 21:49, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NU1ssyrf_A. Storylines are a planned series of events or conflicts between wrestlers that unfold over time.

22 A wrestler who mainly appears in the middle portion of a wrestling event card.

23 Stanley Weston, "Hulk Hogan's Return to the WWF: What It Means to Wrestling," *The Wrestler*, April 1984.

24 A push is a deliberate effort made by a promoter to elevate a wrestler's popularity within the organization.

25 Dunn, *Spectacular Legacy of the AWA*, 42:45. Being over refers to when a wrestler is popular with the audience, which can stem from winning feuds.

26 Title Match Wrestling, "Greg Gagne Full Shoot Interview," 1:00:13.

posure and a direct path to the top spot.²⁷ They told him he would be the lead figure and receive the world title. This offer matched what Hogan wanted during his time in the AWA but never received. Then on January 23, 1984, in front of a sold-out crowd at Madison Square Garden, Hogan defeated the Iron Sheik for the World Championship.²⁸ The match placed him at the center of the WWF product. The crowd reaction in the broadcast shows how quickly the WWF audience accepted him. Hogan's rise reflected the WWF's shift toward highly charismatic personalities and spectacle. Rather than focusing on technical wrestling, the WWF emphasized entertainment. Their formula was simple, a babyface vs a heel, each with their unique roles, made to drag out as much emotion from the crowd as possible and make them crave more.²⁹ Ultimately, very few performers were able to play the role of the babyface as well as Hulk Hogan, whose charisma made him the ideal babyface and a centerpiece of the WWF's national appeal.

The AWA struggled once the WWF used cable television and large events to reach national audiences. Cable allowed the WWF to appear in homes across the country, including cities inside AWA territory. This difference created a large gap in visibility. The AWA relied on local stations with limited range. The little national coverage they had was a deal with KSTP-TV in which they would produce one PPV card a month. This single deal accounted for a significant percentage of the AWA revenue, but unfortunately, it only lasted around three years. Vince McMahon learned about this and went straight to KSTP-TV with a stronger offer.³⁰ Another factor that made the decision easy for KSTP-TV was that, by that point, Vince McMahon had become synonymous with producing larger-than-life shows whenever it came to PPV. This was largely a contributing factor to the immense success of *WrestleMania I*. This event utilized closed-circuit screens nationwide and reached viewers who had never seen AWA programming. The event featured celebrities like Muhammad Ali and Cyndi Lauper, as well as the best the wrestling world had to offer at the

²⁷ A babyface is the wrestler portrayed as the good guy.

²⁸ WWE, "Full Match: Iron Sheik vs. Hulk Hogan | WWE Title Match: WWE at MSG, Jan. 23, 1984," YouTube video, July 24, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAmzvTbqFDM>.

²⁹ The heel is the wrestler portrayed as the bad guy.

³⁰ Title Match Wrestling, "Greg Gagne Full Shoot Interview," 1:49:31.

time, including Hulk Hogan and Mr. T.³¹ The AWA however, could not produce shows on this scale, as the company typically stayed with studio settings and smaller venues. WrestleMania changed how fans viewed wrestling and raised expectations for future events. The AWA was unable to adjust to this new standard. The growth of cable and closed-circuit events drew viewers away from the AWA and toward the WWF product, weakening the AWA's connection to its own market.

Vince McMahon further weakened the AWA by running WWF live shows in major AWA cities. The WWF booked arenas in Minneapolis, Chicago, Denver, and Milwaukee, all known for hosting AWA events. Vince entered these rival markets with disregard for existing agreements, and, like his TV deals, he just had better offers. The deals promised a larger cut and included a better show. They also included terms that pushed out rival promoters. One rule was the 30-30 rule, which prohibited any wrestling event from taking place in the building within thirty days before or after a WWF show. This rule was highly detrimental because Vince made sure to book a show at least every ninety days, which would essentially always shut out the AWA. Another stipulation common in these deals was that he would book last-minute shows on days AWA would book theirs.³² To add insult to injury, what Vince would do to guarantee the success of his shows was to book the likes of Bobby Heenan, Jesse Ventura, and Adrian Adonis, all wrestlers he had poached from the AWA, whom he knew were popular in the area.³³ Gagne didn't go down without a fight as he tried to replicate what Vince was doing by booking shows in WWF cities like New York and Boston, but the AWA was unable to draw strong numbers. Fans in those cities watched the WWF on local television and did not view AWA wrestlers as major figures.³⁴ The AWA roster lacked the promotional support that the WWF used for touring shows. It was clear that Vince built a brand that looked the same in every city, while the AWA offered a product tied to its home region.

The collapse of the AWA demonstrates how Vince McMahon used talent poaching, cable TV, large-scale events, and pressure

31 WWF, *WrestleMania I* (Peacock, 1985), <https://www.peacocktv.com/>.

32 Hanstock, *We Promised You a Great Main Event*, 49.

33 Beekman, *Ringside*, 120.

34 Dunn, *The Spectacular Legacy of the AWA*, 56:49.

on rival cities to destroy the territorial system that once characterized the wrestling world. Hulk Hogan's rise in the WWF exposed the AWA's inability to create stars. Cable and closed-circuit shows enabled WWF content to reach national audiences, something the AWA could never do. In-person WWF events in cities, where AWA was known to dominate, decreased attendance and shed light on the limitations of the AWA model. These actions worked together and pushed the AWA out of business.

This study sheds light on the significance of the AWA story in understanding the entire history of American wrestling. The fall of the AWA highlights how Vince McMahon was able to turn what was seen as a regional business into a product seen all over the world today. His new methods exposed the old generation and their aging methods. This project contributes to the scholarship by focusing on a single promotion and tracing its decline through primary and secondary sources. Many works describe the end of the territories as a general trend, but none are as specific as this. This study outlines the specific steps that weakened the AWA and reveals how internal decisions and external pressure contributed to its collapse.