

The Civil War and Reconstruction in the American West

by Elliott West

The histories of the Civil War and of the emerging West were tangled together from their beginnings. Although the war was fought mostly in the East, the events that set it off were born of the expansion of the 1840s, and in turn the war and its aftermath shaped profoundly western development between 1861 and 1877. Moved by the threat to the Union, then the demands of war, and finally the challenges of victory, the federal government drew the new country ever more tightly into the nation, creating new governments, reaching into the West with rails and telegraph wires, opening its farmlands to millions of families, and assaulting American Indians while trying to turn them into citizens.



Photograph of American Indians by William Hicks Jackson, 1871. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

The conflicts behind the Civil War, simmering since the nation's birth, were brought sharply into focus when expansion to the Pacific raised an explosive issue: Would slavery be allowed in the new country, including the rich gold diggings of California? Another crucial western issue, the desperate need for better links of transportation to the East, sharpened still more the division between the North and the South. The soaring population in California quickly brought a call for a transcontinental railroad. Whichever city was on the eastern end of it—the prime candidates were New Orleans, St. Louis, and Chicago—would profit enormously. US Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois, hoping to win the prize for Chicago, cut a deal with southern legislators to pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which re-opened the explosive issue supposedly settled by the Missouri Compromise in 1820—whether slaves would be permitted in the former Louisiana Purchase. The debates that followed gave rise to the Republican Party, whose triumph in 1860 would precipitate southern secession.

The law also led to “Bleeding Kansas,” the fight (1854–1858) over whether Kansas would be a slave state or “free soil.” Two questions faced the nation, one centered in the East and the other in the West. What would be the place of African American slavery in the Republic? And who would be allowed access to the West's grand possibilities, and on what terms? In Kansas those questions met, and Americans began killing Americans in the effort to resolve them. In a sense the first blood of the Civil War was shed not at Fort Sumter but here, on the western plains.

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Many Westerners supported the expansion of slavery into the West, and some would support Southern secession. Much of the Anglo population in Arizona and New Mexico had come from the South, and although California was admitted as a free state in 1850, on the eve of the conflict the state's highest officials included both Unionists and future Confederates. In a duel in September 1859, a month before John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in Virginia, David Terry, a secessionist and chief judge of the state's supreme court, shot and killed US Senator David Broderick, a free-soil advocate. Nonetheless there was never any serious threat of Confederate control of California, and the far West was secured for the Union in the spring of 1862 when federal troops at Glorieta Pass in northern New Mexico turned back a Southern bid to seize Colorado's gold fields and another column from California drove a small

Confederate force out of Arizona.

Paradoxically, the war's greatest impact on the West came after the fighting there was over. With Union forces firmly in control and with Southern opposition gone from the nation's capital, Congress passed and President Lincoln signed three measures of the greatest significance in the coming decades. On May 20, 1862, the Homestead Act became law. It granted 160 acres of unclaimed public land to any adult, including immigrants intending to become citizens, who worked the land for five years while making certain improvements, including building a dwelling. Roughly six weeks later, on July 1, Lincoln signed the Pacific Railway Act providing land and government loans to construct the first transcontinental rail line. The next day he signed the Morrill Act, which allotted public lands to states to finance colleges dedicated to agricultural education and research, an especially pressing need given the semi-arid West's great challenges to farmers of that day.

Although the Homestead Act proved ill suited to the more arid parts of the region, tens of millions of western acres (and many millions more in the East) would be settled under its terms before it was phased out in the lower forty-eight states in the 1930s. The Pacific Railway Act began a vigorous expansion of the federal effort, begun in the 1850s, to build an infrastructure of roads, wires, and rails. By 1883 several more transcontinentals had been built, among them the Southern Pacific, Northern Pacific, and Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe, all with federal support. The "aggie" colleges born of the Morrill Act, besides graduating hundreds of thousands of students, continued to promote the development (and, many would come to argue, the overdevelopment) of western agriculture and other rural industries.

Meanwhile the West was being integrated politically into the nation. Between 1859 and 1876, Oregon, Kansas, Nevada, and Nebraska became states and the rest of the West was organized into territories. National laws and institutions were in place from one side of the continent to the other.

As with western gold and silver rushes, the Civil War and Reconstruction's effect on American Indians was catastrophic. The war divided the "five civilized tribes," removed to Indian Territory only a generation earlier. The Cherokee Stand Watie became a Confederate general and was the last of that rank to surrender in 1865. Many among the Unionist minority were driven into exile in Kansas, where they suffered terribly from hunger and exposure. Elsewhere an uprising of Minnesota Sioux (Dakota) in 1862 left hundreds of white settlers dead before it was crushed. Thirty-eight of its leaders were hanged and nearly two thousand Sioux were removed to South Dakota. The next year in Arizona a campaign led by the famed scout Christopher "Kit" Carson shattered the power of the Navajo, and conflict in Colorado, 1864–1868, broke that of the Cheyenne and Arapahoe. The latter fighting included the infamous Sand Creek massacre, an attack on a peaceful camp in November 1864 that left between 150 and 200 people dead. Massacres of Shoshone in Idaho (1863) and Blackfeet in Montana (1870) took more than four hundred more lives. Despite the crisis in the East, Union forces thus dealt Native independence terrible blows during the Civil War, and after 1865 the remnant of the US Army snuffed out the remaining Native military resistance in the far West. The last true Indian wars were against the western Sioux (Lakota) in 1876 and the Nez Perce of the Pacific Northwest in 1877. The Indian wars ended, that is, in the waning months of Reconstruction, a reminder that the Civil War's aftermath also played out in both West and East, with especially ironic results.

The West proved a boon for newly freed slaves. Thousands took advantage of emancipation to flee the South as "exodusters" and settle on the Great Plains in towns like Nicodemus, Kansas. The Territorial Suffrage Act (1867), which extended the franchise to blacks in all federal territories a full three years before the Fifteenth Amendment, helped build momentum toward granting black suffrage generally.

Reconstruction's impact on American Indians was at least as profound but far less positive. In the 1850s yet another federal political structure, the reservation system, had appeared, and after the war it spread across the West. Expansion to the Pacific left the government no place farther west to send them. Reservations provided a kind of internal removal, setting Native peoples apart in enclaves within country opened to white development. Through reservations, Washington also pledged to bring western tribes into the national community by methods strikingly similar to its programs for former slaves in the South—work by Christian missionaries and turning Indian hunters into independent farmers and training them in citizenship through common school education. But while freedpersons responded warmly to such efforts, many American Indians, fully content with traditional spiritual and economic lives, resisted. For them, the expansion of citizenship was not the opportunity welcomed by African Americans. It was conquest and coercion.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the United States faced a crisis of union, but that crisis was far wider than usually described. It was genuinely continental, a challenge both to hold North and South together and to bind West and East into a single nation. By 1877 the challenge had been largely met, and meeting it had been a matter of both liberation and conquest, both done by a federal government flexing an expanded power and authority from coast to coast.

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