

Born Modern: An Overview of the West

by *Richard White*

The present American West is a creation of history rather than geography. There has never been a single West; American Wests come and go. At various times places now considered as thoroughly eastern as western Pennsylvania, western New York, or West Virginia have been the West, and over the course of the nineteenth century the term itself proceeded steadily westward. The arguments for defining the modern West as that section of the United States west of the Missouri River or, more narrowly, west of the ninety-eighth meridian, are historical, as are the arguments for pronouncing this region different from the Wests that preceded it. The modern American West is not the product of the arrival at the Pacific of a steadily moving frontier but is instead the result of transformative events and new processes.

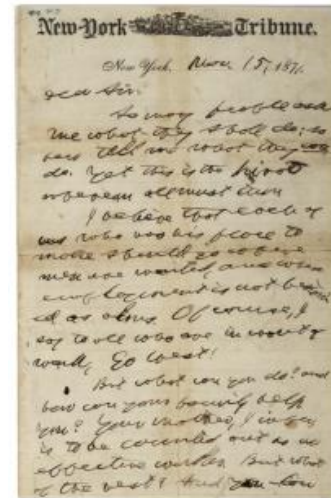
To a remarkable degree, the modern West is the product of two wars—the Civil War, which brought it into being, and World War II, which utterly transformed it. Any broad overview of the history of the American West, such as this one, must recognize the lasting consequences of these events for the West.

Before it became the American West, the region west of the Missouri had for centuries been Indian country and a contested and uncontrolled borderland between empires. Between 1865 and 1869, it underwent a gestation, and a large chunk of it was reborn as a child of the Civil War. By the time this West reached adulthood, it would be fully under American control. Its identity was more than the result of conquest. Americans had been conquering land and dispossessing its prior inhabitants long before they reached the West, but both the pace and processes of conquest—military, political, economic and technological—changed in important ways following the Civil War. As a result, the West evolved differently from lands east of the Missouri River.

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Before the Civil War there had been two parallel expansions—a northern expansion based on free labor and a southern expansion based on slave labor. Terms like Manifest Destiny disguise the deep tensions and divisions over westward expansion that surfaced again and again in the controversies over the admission of Missouri as a state, the annexation of Texas, and the organization of Kansas as a territory. The Civil War replaced this dual expansion with a unitary expansion. There would be no equivalent of the Mason-Dixon Line or the Ohio River in the West. The West is one of the many places that the South lost and lost badly.

There was a second political consequence of the Civil War in the West, and that was the expansion of



Letter from Horace Greeley to R. L. Sanderson, November 15, 1871, with the iconic advice to “go west.” (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

federal power. Before the Civil War, the federal government was quite weak. The Civil War created, in Richard Bense's nice phrase, a "Yankee Leviathan"—a powerful federal government. And although the power of this state diminished unevenly following the war, it remained strongest in the South during Reconstruction—and afterward was strongest in the West. During the late nineteenth century, the West was the kindergarten of the American state, a place where federal government nurtured its power and produced its bureaucracies. After Reconstruction, most of the American Army was stationed in the West. The federal government controlled most of the West's lands and an important, if not particularly efficient, bureaucracy disposed of them. With their lives touched by institutions like the agency that became the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the US Geological Survey, and—late in the century—the emerging Forest Service, westerners, more than inhabitants of any other section, depended on the presence of the federal government.

Federal power, in turn, was linked to a distinctive pattern of development. The backcountry or frontier of the early nineteenth century initially had weak and uneven connections with national or international markets. Market connections depended on rivers and eventually canals. Areas newly settled by non-Indians thus were unevenly integrated into regional or national economies, and politics often reflected these connections—or the lack of them.

In the West, settlement tended to follow, rather than precede, connections to national and international markets. This was true in California with the Gold Rush and mineral rushes elsewhere, but it was most true after the Civil War when the railroads, funded and subsidized by federal, state, and eventually local governments, penetrated the region. "Population," in Richard Overton's words, "followed the rails." Except for Mormons, Anglo-American settlement of the West really had no pre-market or even weak market phase. There was subsistence agriculture in the West, but it was largely American Indian and Mexican American. The great flood of migration brought commercial farmers who came in on railroads and depended upon them to get their crops to market. This was settlement by a mature commercial and increasingly industrial society, and from the beginning of the period, the West was a place of large and powerful corporations. There was no equivalent to these conditions in the settlement that took place further east.

The combination of a strong federal government and an industrial and commercial society had, in turn, further consequences. The first was that after the Civil War, American Indian peoples were badly outmatched. They faced a modern army, shaped by the Civil War, able to move quickly due to the new railroad network, and equipped with ever more powerful weapons. "Experience proves," Grenville Dodge, a leading figure in the Union Pacific and Texas Pacific railroads, wrote, "the Railroad line through Indian Territory a Fortress as well as a highway." Or as Charles Francis Adams, president of the Union Pacific, put it, "The Pacific railroads have settled the Indian question."

Until the War of 1812, Indian peoples east of the Mississippi had been formidable opponents of American expansion. They were not only skilled fighters, but could call on European imperial allies. But Indians were warriors, not professional soldiers. They had to feed their families and could not remain in the field all year. The professional soldiers they faced suffered from neither of these liabilities. The soldiers might lose battles, but they did not lose wars. American advantages in numbers, equipment, and logistics were too formidable. Americans' tactics were too ruthless. The pressures they put on American Indians were relentless.

The results of the forces unleashed by the Civil War and the growth of a modern industrial society were, in hindsight, astonishing. New York is roughly 1,150 miles from Omaha, Nebraska, which is on the Missouri River and was the jumping-off place for the Union Pacific Railroad. Omaha, in turn, was roughly

1,421 miles from San Francisco, which was the terminus of the Central Pacific Railroad, the second half of the first transcontinental railroad. It had taken non-Indians roughly three-and-a-half centuries to take control of the land east of the Missouri; it took less than thirty years to secure control of the remaining 55 percent of the continent. The United States had, of course, claimed virtually this entire region since the Mexican American War, but most of it had remained Indian Country beyond practical control by the United States and only marginally connected with national or international markets. This was not true by the turn of the twentieth century. In hindsight, parts of this rapid expansion now seem a mistake. Large areas were repeatedly deserted during nineteenth-century droughts, and large sections of the Great Plains and the interior basins and plateaus saw their populations peak around 1920. For many farmers in the high arid regions, the twentieth century would be a long, slow retreat.

The West that had emerged from this rapid conquest and occupation by non-Indians was by the twentieth century a hardscrabble place. Its economy was based on extractive industries such as mining, fishing, and logging or on agriculture and ranching. San Francisco, gradually Los Angeles, and to a lesser extent Seattle developed some manufacturing, but by and large the West produced raw materials and semi-finished goods. Outside of the Great Plains, it was more urban than the country as a whole, and much of it was marked by other distinctive demographic patterns. In many parts of the West men heavily outnumbered women, and immigration from China, and later Japan and Mexico led to a racialization of work and demonization of the Chinese and Japanese.

By the time the Depression hit in the 1930s, large parts of the West were already staggering under low commodity prices. This only increased the region's sense of resentment. It saw itself as the hewer of wood and carrier of water for the East and as exploited by eastern capital and corporations. The New Deal gained immense popularity in the West not only because New Deal policies brought some immediate relief from the Depression but because so many New Deal projects—particularly the dams on western rivers—built up a western infrastructure that while of little use in the 1930s, would prove critical to western development during and after World War II.

The Depression shifted public resources westward, but World War II moved them in that direction on a far more massive and enduring scale. The excess hydroelectric power developed during the Depression now provided electricity for factories and aluminum mills, as well as the new atomic works at Hanford, Washington. The West gained a disproportionate share of military bases and government funding. Virtually overnight, the West acquired a shipbuilding industry, and its infant aircraft industry expanded enormously. The West had not produced a single commercial cargo vessel in the 1930s, but during World War II, it accounted for 52 percent of American shipbuilding production. Los Angeles set out to make itself the Detroit of the aircraft industry, and it succeeded. As was the case in the wake of the Civil War, during World War II the government subsidized large corporations such as Boeing, Kaiser, and Lockheed that became critical to the Western economy.

Workers, including those who had taken part in the first large-scale African American migration from the South to northern industrial cities, came west to work in relatively high-paying jobs in these factories. On the Pacific Coast, African American migrants often moved into neighborhoods vacated by Japanese Americans and older Japanese immigrants who had been interned after Pearl Harbor. A region that had supported the deportation and eviction of Mexican workers and their Mexican American children in the 1930s urged their return in the 1940s. The West's population increased roughly three times as quickly as the population of the country as a whole. Much of this growth was on the Pacific Coast and most of it was urban.

Westerners feared the boom and growth would end following the war, but with the onset of the Cold

War, continued federal support for the new aerospace industry as well as the maintenance of military bases spurred further growth. That expansion was not even, of course, but the old extractive economy was no longer at the core of the West. Politically, the West remained more liberal and more supportive of a strong federal role in the economy into the 1960s, but gradually this changed, and the region grew steadily more conservative as the century went on.

In popular culture, the West is seen as dichromatic—with whites and Indians. In reality, the West was more diverse than that, with large-scale immigration from Asia, Mexico, and later other places in Latin America, as well as Europe and Canada. What is perhaps most striking about such a broad overview of the West during the last century and a half is that a region defined in the popular mind by icons of individualism—cowboys, mountain men, gunfighters—can more accurately be seen as the child of government and large corporations. A place that we tend to define in terms of nature and a timeless past is actually probably the most modern section of the country. The West, as defined here, was born modern.

Richard White is the Margaret Byrne Professor of American History at Stanford University and a past president of the Organization of American Historians. His books include *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West (1991)*, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region 1650–1815 (1991)*, which won the *Parkman Prize*, and most recently *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America (2011)*.
