Edward S. Curtis, *Navajo Riders in Canyon de Chelly*, c. 1904. Library of Congress.

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Conquering the West

I. Introduction

Native Americans long dominated the vastness of the American West. Linked culturally and geographically by trade, travel, and warfare, various indigenous groups controlled most of the continent west of the Mississippi River deep into the nineteenth century. Spanish, French, British, and later American traders had integrated themselves into many regional economies, and American emigrants pushed ever westward, but no imperial power had yet achieved anything approximating political or military control over the great bulk of the continent. But then the Civil War came and went and decoupled the West from the question of slavery just as the United States industrialized and laid down rails and pushed its ever-expanding population ever farther west.

Indigenous Americans had lived in North America for over ten millennia and, into the late nineteenth century, perhaps as many as 250,000 Natives still inhabited the American West.[1] But then unending waves of American settlers, the American military, and the unstoppable onrush

of American capital conquered all. The United States removed Native groups to ever-shrinking reservations, incorporated the West first as territories and then as states, and, for the first time in its history, controlled the enormity of land between the two oceans.

The history of the late-nineteenth-century West is many-sided. Tragedy for some, triumph for others, the many intertwined histories of the American West marked a pivotal transformation in the history of the United States.

II. Post–Civil War Westward Migration

In the decades after the Civil War, Americans poured across the Mississippi River in record numbers. No longer simply crossing over the continent for new imagined Edens in California or Oregon, they settled now in the vast heart of the continent.

Many of the first American migrants had come to the West in search of quick profits during the midcentury gold and silver rushes. As in the California rush of 1848–1849, droves of prospectors poured in after precious-metal strikes in Colorado in 1858, Nevada in 1859, Idaho in 1860, Montana in 1863, and the Black Hills in 1874. While women often performed housework that allowed mining families to subsist in often difficult conditions, a significant portion of the mining workforce were single men without families dependent on service industries in nearby towns and cities. There, working-class women worked in shops, saloons, boardinghouses, and brothels. Many of these ancillary operations profited from the mining boom: as failed prospectors found, the rush itself often generated more wealth than the mines. The gold that left Colorado in the first seven years after the Pikes Peak gold strike—estimated at $25.5 million—was, for instance, less than half of what outside parties had invested in the fever. The 100,000-plus migrants who settled in the Rocky Mountains were ultimately more valuable to the region's development than the gold they came to find.[2]

Others came to the Plains to extract the hides of the great bison herds. Millions of animals had roamed the Plains, but their tough leather supplied industrial belting in eastern factories and raw material for the booming clothing industry. Specialized teams took down and skinned the herds. The infamous American bison slaughter peaked in the early 1870s. The number of American bison plummeted from over ten million at midcentury to only a few hundred by the early 1880s. The expansion

While bison leather supplied America's booming clothing industry, the skulls of the animals provided a key ingredient in fertilizer. This 1870s photograph illustrates the massive number of bison killed in the second half of the nineteenth century. Wikimedia.

of the railroads allowed ranching to replace the bison with cattle on the American grasslands.[3]

The nearly seventy thousand members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (more commonly called Mormons) who migrated west between 1846 and 1868 were similar to other Americans traveling west on the overland trails. They faced many of the same problems, but unlike most other American migrants, Mormons were fleeing from religious persecution.

Many historians view Mormonism as a "uniquely American faith," not just because it was founded by Joseph Smith in New York in the 1830s, but because of its optimistic and future-oriented tenets. Mormons believed that Americans were exceptional—chosen by God to spread truth across the world and to build utopia, a New Jerusalem in North America. However, many Americans were suspicious of the Latter-Day

Saint movement and its unusual rituals, especially the practice of polygamy, and most Mormons found it difficult to practice their faith in the eastern United States. Thus began a series of migrations in the midnineteenth century, first to Illinois, then Missouri and Nebraska, and finally into Utah Territory.

Once in the west, Mormon settlements served as important supply points for other emigrants heading on to California and Oregon. Brigham Young, the leader of the Church after the death of Joseph Smith, was appointed governor of the Utah Territory by the federal government in 1850. He encouraged Mormon residents of the territory to engage in agricultural pursuits and be cautious of the outsiders who arrived as the mining and railroad industries developed in the region.[4]

It was land, ultimately, that drew the most migrants to the West. Family farms were the backbone of the agricultural economy that expanded in the West after the Civil War. In 1862, northerners in Congress passed the Homestead Act, which allowed male citizens (or those who declared their intent to become citizens) to claim federally owned lands in the West. Settlers could head west, choose a 160-acre surveyed section of land, file a claim, and begin "improving" the land by plowing fields, building houses and barns, or digging wells, and, after five years of living on the land, could apply for the official title deed to the land. Hundreds of thousands of Americans used the Homestead Act to acquire land. The treeless plains that had been considered unfit for settlement became the new agricultural mecca for land-hungry Americans.[5]

The Homestead Act excluded married women from filing claims because they were considered the legal dependents of their husbands. Some unmarried women filed claims on their own, but single farmers (male or female) were hard-pressed to run a farm and they were a small minority. Most farm households adopted traditional divisions of labor: men worked in the fields and women managed the home and kept the family fed. Both were essential.[6]

Migrants sometimes found in homesteads a self-sufficiency denied at home. Second or third sons who did not inherit land in Scandinavia, for instance, founded farm communities in Minnesota, Dakota, and other Midwestern territories in the 1860s. Boosters encouraged emigration by advertising the semiarid Plains as, for instance, "a flowery meadow of great fertility clothed in nutritious grasses, and watered by numerous streams."[7] Western populations exploded. The Plains were transformed. In 1860, for example, Kansas had about 10,000 farms; in 1880 it had

239,000. Texas saw enormous population growth. The federal government counted 200,000 people in Texas in 1850, 1,600,000 in 1880, and 3,000,000 in 1900, making it the sixth most populous state in the nation.

III. The Indian Wars and Federal Peace Policies

The "Indian wars," so mythologized in western folklore, were a series of sporadic, localized, and often brief engagements between U.S. military forces and various Native American groups. The more sustained and more impactful conflict, meanwhile, was economic and cultural. The vast and cyclical movement across the Great Plains to hunt buffalo, raid enemies, and trade goods was incompatible with new patterns of American settlement and railroad construction. Thomas Jefferson's old dream that Indian groups might live isolated in the West was, in the face of American expansion, no longer a viable reality. Political, economic, and even humanitarian concerns intensified American efforts to isolate Indians on reservations. Although Indian removal had long been a part of federal Indian policy, following the Civil War the U.S. government redoubled its efforts. If treaties and other forms of persistent coercion would not work, more drastic measures were deemed necessary. Against the threat of confinement and the extinction of traditional ways of life, Native Americans battled the American army and the encroaching lines of American settlement.

In one of the earliest western engagements, in 1862, while the Civil War still consumed the nation, tensions erupted between Dakota Sioux and white settlers in Minnesota and the Dakota Territory. The 1850 U.S. census recorded a white population of about 6,000 in Minnesota; eight years later, when it became a state, it was more than 150,000.[8] The influx of American farmers pushed the Sioux to the breaking point. Hunting became unsustainable and those Sioux who had taken up farming found only poverty. Starvation wracked many. Then, on August 17, 1862, four young men of the Santees, a Sioux tribe, killed five white settlers near the Redwood Agency, an American administrative office. In the face of an inevitable American retaliation, and over the protests of many members, the tribe chose war. On the following day, Sioux warriors attacked settlements near the Agency. They killed thirty-one men, women, and children. They then ambushed a U.S. military detachment at Redwood Ferry, killing twenty-three. The governor of Minnesota called up militia and several thousand Americans waged war against the Sioux insurgents.

Buffalo Soldiers, the nickname given to African American cavalrymen by the native Americans they fought, were the first peacetime, all-black regiments in the regular U.S. Army. These soldiers regularly confronted racial prejudice from civilians and other soldiers but were an essential part of American victories during the Indian Wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 1890. Library of Congress.

Fighting broke out at New Ulm, Fort Ridgely, and Birch Coulee, but the Americans broke the Indian resistance at the Battle of Wood Lake on September 23, ending the so-called Dakota War, also known as the Sioux Uprising.[9]

More than two thousand Sioux had been taken prisoner during the fighting. Many were tried at federal forts for murder, rape, and other atrocities. Military tribunals convicted 303 Sioux and sentenced them to hang. At the last minute, President Lincoln commuted all but thirty eight of the sentences. Terrified Minnesota settlers and government officials insisted not only that the Sioux lose much of their reservation lands and be removed farther west, but that those who had fled be hunted down and placed on reservations as well. The American military gave chase and, on September 3, 1863, after a year of attrition, American military units surrounded a large encampment of Dakota Sioux. American troops killed an estimated three hundred men, women, and children. Dozens more were taken prisoner. Troops spent the next two days burning winter food and supply stores to starve out the Sioux resistance, which would continue to smolder.

Farther south, tensions flared in Colorado. In 1851, the Treaty of Fort Laramie had secured right-of-way access for Americans passing through on their way to California and Oregon. But a gold rush in 1858 drew approximately 100,000 white gold seekers, and they demanded new treaties be made with local Indian groups to secure land rights in the newly created Colorado Territory. Cheyenne bands splintered over the possibility of signing a new treaty that would confine them to a reservation. Settlers, already wary of raids by powerful groups of Cheyennes, Arapahos, and Comanches, meanwhile read in their local newspapers sensationalist accounts of the Sioux uprising in Minnesota. Militia leader John M. Chivington warned settlers in the summer of 1864 that the Cheyenne were dangerous savages, urged war, and promised a swift military victory. Sporadic fighting broke out. Although Chivington warned of Cheyenne savagery, the aged Cheyenne chief Black Kettle, believing that a peace treaty would be best for his people, traveled to Denver to arrange for peace talks. He and his followers traveled toward Fort Lyon in accordance with government instructions, but on November 29, 1864, Chivington ordered his seven hundred militiamen to move on the Cheyenne camp near Fort Lyon at Sand Creek. The Cheyenne tried to declare their peaceful intentions but Chivington's militia cut them down. It was a slaughter. About two hundred men, women, and children were killed.[10]

The Sand Creek Massacre was a national scandal, alternately condemned and applauded. News of the massacre reached other Native groups and the American frontier erupted into conflict. Americans pushed for a new "peace policy." Congress, confronted with these tragedies and further violence, authorized in 1868 the creation of an Indian Peace Commission. The commission's study of American Indians decried prior American policy and galvanized support for reformers. After the inauguration of Ulysses S. Grant the following spring, Congress allied with prominent philanthropists to create the Board of Indian Commissioners, a permanent advisory body to oversee Indian affairs and prevent the further outbreak of violence. The board effectively Christianized American Indian policy. Much of the reservation system was handed over to Protestant churches, which were tasked with finding agents and missionaries to manage reservation life. Congress hoped that religiously minded men might fare better at creating just assimilation policies and persuading Indians to accept them. Historian Francis Paul Prucha believed that this attempt at a new "peace policy . . . might just have properly been labelled the 'religious policy.'"[11]

Tom Torlino, a member of the Navajo Nation, entered the Carlisle Indian School, a Native American boarding school founded by the U.S. government in 1879, on October 21, 1882, and departed on August 28, 1886. Torlino's student file contained photographs from 1882 and 1885. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

Many female Christian missionaries played a central role in cultural reeducation programs that attempted to not only instill Protestant religion but also impose traditional American gender roles and family structures. They endeavored to replace Indians' tribal social units with small, patriarchal households. Women's labor became a contentious issue because few tribes divided labor according to the gender norms of middle- and upper-class Americans. Fieldwork, the traditional domain of white males, was primarily performed by Native women, who also usually controlled the products of their labor, if not the land that was worked, giving them status in society as laborers and food providers. For missionaries, the goal was to get Native women to leave the fields and engage in more proper "women's" work—housework. Christian missionaries performed much as secular federal agents had. Few American agents could meet Native Americans on their own terms. Most viewed reservation Indians as lazy and thought of Native cultures as inferior to their own. The views of J. L. Broaddus, appointed to oversee several small Indian tribes on the Hoopa Valley reservation in California, are illustrative: in his annual report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1875, he wrote, "The great majority of them are idle, listless, careless, and improvident. They

seem to take no thought about provision for the future, and many of them would not work at all if they were not compelled to do so. They would rather live upon the roots and acorns gathered by their women than to work for flour and beef."[12]

If the Indians could not be forced through kindness to change their ways, most agreed that it was acceptable to use force, which Native groups resisted. In Texas and the Southern Plains, the Comanche, the Kiowa, and their allies had wielded enormous influence. The Comanche in particular controlled huge swaths of territory and raided vast areas, inspiring terror from the Rocky Mountains to the interior of northern Mexico to the Texas Gulf Coast. But after the Civil War, the U.S. military refocused its attention on the Southern Plains.

The American military first sent messengers to the Plains to find the elusive Comanche bands and ask them to come to peace negotiations at Medicine Lodge Creek in the fall of 1867. But terms were muddled: American officials believed that Comanche bands had accepted reservation life, while Comanche leaders believed they were guaranteed vast lands for buffalo hunting. Comanche bands used designated reservation lands as a base from which to collect supplies and federal annuity goods while continuing to hunt, trade, and raid American settlements in Texas.

Confronted with renewed Comanche raiding, particularly by the famed war leader Quanah Parker, the U.S. military finally proclaimed that all Indians who were not settled on the reservation by the fall of 1874 would be considered "hostile." The Red River War began when many Comanche bands refused to resettle and the American military launched expeditions into the Plains to subdue them, culminating in the defeat of the remaining roaming bands in the canyonlands of the Texas Panhandle. Cold and hungry, with their way of life already decimated by soldiers, settlers, cattlemen, and railroads, the last free Comanche bands were moved to the reservation at Fort Sill, in what is now southwestern Oklahoma.[13]

On the northern Plains, the Sioux people had yet to fully surrender. Following the troubles of 1862, many bands had signed treaties with the United States and drifted into the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies to collect rations and annuities, but many continued to resist American encroachment, particularly during Red Cloud's War, a rare victory for the Plains people that resulted in the Treaty of 1868 and created the Great Sioux Reservation. Then, in 1874, an American expedition to the Black Hills of South Dakota discovered gold. White prospectors flooded

the territory. Caring very little about Indian rights and very much about getting rich, they brought the Sioux situation again to its breaking point. Aware that U.S. citizens were violating treaty provisions, but unwilling to prevent them from searching for gold, federal officials pressured the western Sioux to sign a new treaty that would transfer control of the Black Hills to the United States while General Philip Sheridan quietly moved U.S. troops into the region. Initial clashes between U.S. troops and Sioux warriors resulted in several Sioux victories that, combined with the visions of Sitting Bull, who had dreamed of an even more triumphant victory, attracted Sioux bands who had already signed treaties but now joined to fight.[14]

In late June 1876, a division of the 7th Cavalry Regiment led by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer was sent up a trail into the Black Hills as an advance guard for a larger force. Custer's men approached a camp along a river known to the Sioux as Greasy Grass but marked on Custer's map as Little Bighorn, and they found that the influx of "treaty" Sioux as well as aggrieved Cheyenne and other allies had swelled the population of the village far beyond Custer's estimation. Custer's 7th Cavalry was vastly outnumbered, and he and 268 of his men were killed.[15]

Custer's fall shocked the nation. Cries for a swift American response filled the public sphere, and military expeditions were sent out to crush Native resistance. The Sioux splintered off into the wilderness and began a campaign of intermittent resistance but, outnumbered and suffering after a long, hungry winter, Crazy Horse led a band of Oglala Sioux to surrender in May 1877. Other bands gradually followed until finally, in July 1881, Sitting Bull and his followers at last laid down their weapons and came to the reservation. Indigenous powers had been defeated. The Plains, it seemed, had been pacified.

IV. Beyond the Plains

Plains peoples were not the only ones who suffered as a result of American expansion. Groups like the Utes and Paiutes were pushed out of the Rocky Mountains by U.S. expansion into Colorado and away from the northern Great Basin by the expanding Mormon population in Utah Territory in the 1850s and 1860s. Faced with a shrinking territorial base, members of these two groups often joined the U.S. military in its campaigns in the southwest against other powerful Native groups like the

Hopi, the Zuni, the Jicarilla Apache, and especially the Navajo, whose population of at least ten thousand engaged in both farming and sheep herding on some of the most valuable lands acquired by the United States after the Mexican War.

Conflicts between the U.S. military, American settlers, and Native populations increased throughout the 1850s. By 1862, General James Carleton began searching for a reservation where he could remove the Navajo and end their threat to U.S. expansion in the Southwest. Carleton selected a dry, almost treeless site in the Bosque Redondo Valley, three hundred miles from the Navajo homeland.

In April 1863, Carleton gave orders to Colonel Kit Carson to round up the entire Navajo population and escort them to Bosque Redondo. Those who resisted would be shot. Thus began a period of Navajo history called the Long Walk, which remains deeply important to Navajo people today. The Long Walk was not a single event but a series of forced marches to the reservation at Bosque Redondo between August 1863 and December 1866. Conditions at Bosque Redondo were horrible. Provisions provided by the U.S. Army were not only inadequate but often spoiled; disease was rampant, and thousands of Navajos died.

By 1868, it had become clear that life at the reservation was unsustainable. General William Tecumseh Sherman visited the reservation and wrote of the inhumane situation in which the Navajo were essentially kept as prisoners, but lack of cost-effectiveness was the main reason Sherman recommended that the Navajo be returned to their homeland in the West. On June 1, 1868, the Navajo signed the Treaty of Bosque Redondo, an unprecedented treaty in the history of U.S.-Indian relations in which the Navajo were able to return from the reservation to their homeland.

The destruction of Indian nations in California and the Pacific Northwest received significantly less attention than the dramatic conquest of the Plains, but Native peoples in these regions also experienced violence, population decline, and territorial loss. For example, in 1872, the California/Oregon border erupted in violence when the Modoc people left the reservation of their historic enemies, the Klamath Indians, and returned to an area known as Lost River. Americans had settled the region after Modoc removal several years before, and they complained bitterly of the Natives' return. The U.S. military arrived when fifty-two remaining Modoc warriors, led by a man called Captain Jack, refused to return to the reservation and holed up in defensive positions along the state border. They fought a guerrilla war for eleven months in which

at least two hundred U.S. troops were killed before they were finally forced to surrender.[16] Four years later, in the Pacific Northwest, a branch of the Nez Percé (who, generations earlier, had aided Lewis and Clark in their famous journey to the Pacific Ocean) refused to be moved to a reservation and, under the leadership of Chief Joseph, attempted to flee to Canada but were pursued by the U.S. Cavalry. The outnumbered Nez Percé battled across a thousand miles and were attacked nearly two dozen times before they succumbed to hunger and exhaustion, surrendered, and were forced to return. The flight of the Nez Percé captured the attention of the nation, and a transcript of Chief Joseph's surrender, as recorded by a U.S. Army officer, became a landmark of American rhetoric. "Hear me, my chiefs," Joseph was supposed to have said, "I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."[17]

The history of Indian-American relations in California typified the decline of the western Indians. The treaties that had been signed with numerous Native nations in California in the 1850s were never ratified by the Senate. Over one hundred distinct Native groups had lived in California before the Spanish and American conquests, but by 1880, the Native population of California had collapsed from about 150,000 on the eve of the gold rush to a little less than 20,000. A few reservation areas were eventually set up by the U.S. government to collect what remained of the Native population, but most were dispersed throughout California. This was partly the result of state laws from the 1850s that allowed white Californians to obtain both Native children and adults as "apprentice" laborers by merely bringing the desired laborer before a judge and promising to feed, clothe, and eventually release them after a period of "service" that ranged from ten to twenty years. Thousands of California's Natives were thus pressed into a form of slave labor that supported the growing mining, agricultural, railroad, and cattle industries.

V. Western Economic Expansion: Railroads and Cattle

As Native peoples were pushed out, American settlers poured in. Aside from agriculture and the extraction of natural resources—such as timber and precious metals—two major industries fueled the new western economy: ranching and railroads. Both developed in connection with each other and both shaped the collective American memory of the post–Civil War "Wild West."