

Towards a Greater Reconstruction

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Historians traditionally claimed that Reconstruction occurred only in the South. More recently, some have argued that it also involved the western United States.

The West was not immune to the violence of the Civil War. Republicans, who were dedicated to the principles of free labor, wanted to implement their vision of economic and political development in the western territories when the Civil War ended. This brought the United States into direct conflict with a number of Native American tribes.

This tutorial examines this “Greater Reconstruction” in five parts:

1. The West and Reconstruction

Recall the major questions associated with Reconstruction in the South:

1. How could the South, which was largely agricultural and dependent on enslaved labor, become a modern economy based on the principles of free labor?
2. What role would African Americans play in a reconstructed South?

Similar questions apply to the ways in which the West was affected by the Civil War and Reconstruction:

1. How could the West, with ample land and other natural resources, be integrated into the United States and develop economically, based on the principles of free labor?
2. What role would Native Americans, who sought to maintain their cultural and political autonomy in the face of U.S. expansion, play in a reconstructed West?

During the Civil War, Republicans in Congress enacted a series of measures to implement their free labor vision and end the national debate over slavery. Shortly after Union armies finished waging total war on the Confederacy, they turned west to subjugate the Native Americans living there.

Both of these trends have contributed to a new understanding of Reconstruction, one that involves the unification of East and West, in addition to the reunification of North and South. This interpretation is referred to as **Greater Reconstruction** by Elliott West and other historians.



TERM TO KNOW

Greater Reconstruction

A historical interpretation suggesting that Reconstruction represented an attempt to unite East and West, in addition to North and South, during and following the Civil War.

2. Great Plains Tribes

Although the debate over slavery in the western territories (such as Kansas) was widespread in the eastern United States by the mid-19th century, most easterners knew little about the land and people of the West. Most thought that the West, especially the Great Plains, was a vast, empty land. This was an exaggerated and inaccurate notion.

At the time of the Civil War, as many as 250,000 Native Americans, representing a number of tribes, lived on the Great Plains. Most of these tribes were nomadic, with cultures based on horses and bison hunting. For a time, this approach was remarkably successful. Several Plains tribes were at the height of their power during the mid-19th century.



DID YOU KNOW

These tribes included the Comanche, Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho on the southern Plains, and the Lakota (Sioux) on the northern Plains.



George Catlin, Buffalo Hunt, Chase, c. 1844

Over a period of years, tribes including the Comanche and the Lakota reshaped their culture and identity

around horses and bison hunting. Bison flesh served as food. Bison hides provided clothing. Bison horns and bones provided tools.

Near-total reliance on the bison, combined with the volatile environment of the Great Plains, led to important challenges for the Plains tribes. The tribes moved constantly, not only in search of bison, but also to locate grass for their horses, and water and wood for themselves. When bison were hard to find and the meat supply ran low, prairie turnips and a variety of other plants and berries supplemented the diet.

Plains Native Americans' mobility and subsistence practices were remarkable examples of adaptation. However, a number of American observers envisioned different uses for the West: ones that centered upon economic development and homesteads occupied by sedentary, free laborers.

3. Free Soil, Free Men, Free Labor

At the outbreak of the Civil War, the majority of southern politicians—most of whom were Democrats who wanted to open the West to slavery—left Congress to serve the Confederacy. Their departure gave northern Republicans a majority in Congress, and the opportunity to implement their vision for the West while the Civil War raged in the South.

Three laws had profound consequences for the integration of the West into the U.S. The first was the Homestead Act (1862).

The **Homestead Act** entitled any head of household, or individual over the age of twenty-one—including unmarried women—to receive a parcel of 160 acres for a nominal filing fee. In exchange, all that recipients were required to do was to “improve the land” within five years of taking possession. The standards for improvement were minimal: Owners could clear a few acres, build small houses or barns, or maintain livestock.



TERM TO KNOW

Homestead Act

Promoted western settlement by granting free land to heads of households who promised to improve the land.

Republican leaders in Congress and advocates of western expansion on behalf of free labor recognized that prospective homesteaders and new western states would require educational institutions. Therefore, Justin Smith Morrill, a Republican Senator from Vermont, helped to pass the second important law, the Morrill Act (also known as the Land Grant College Act), in 1862.

The **Morrill Act** provided for the creation of agricultural colleges (also known as “agricultural and mechanical schools”), funded through federal grants, to educate children from farming families in the latest agricultural techniques. Each state in the Union was granted thirty thousand acres of federal land to use for these institutions.



TERM TO KNOW

Morrill Act

Provided for the creation of “agricultural and mechanical schools” throughout the Union.



DID YOU KNOW

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was created in 1862.

Still, western homesteads and agricultural education would be useless unless there was a way for settlers to travel westward, and for farmers to ship their goods to market. To address these transportation needs, the Republican Congress enacted a series of measures known collectively as the Pacific Railway Acts between 1862 and 1864.

The **Pacific Railway Acts** commissioned the Union Pacific Railroad to build new track west from Omaha, Nebraska, while the Central Pacific Railroad built track eastward from Sacramento, California. To subsidize construction, the federal government issued bonds, and made generous land grants (on which to build) to both companies. The nation's first transcontinental railroad was completed when the companies connected their tracks at Promontory Point, Utah, in the spring of 1869.



TERM TO KNOW

Pacific Railway Acts

A series of measures that commissioned the construction of the first transcontinental railroad.

All three measures aimed to use western lands for settlement and economic development along lines that conformed to the northern vision of “free soil, free men, free labor.” They provided free land and encouraged the construction of schools and railroads to facilitate economic development and westward migration. Combined with the Union victory over the Confederacy in the Civil War, these measures ended the hope of southern slaveholders that slavery would be expanded in the West.

4. Wars for the West

While Republicans began to implement their vision for the West, Native Americans continued to live there. Western tribes were unwilling to relinquish their claim to the West without a fight.

Beginning in the Civil War and lasting until the late 19th century, tensions between American settlers, the U.S. government and military, and native peoples escalated into a series of conflicts known collectively as the **Indian Wars**.



TERM TO KNOW

Indian Wars

A series of armed conflicts between the United States and western Native American tribes during the mid- to late-19th century.

One of the more vicious episodes of the Indian Wars occurred during the Civil War in Colorado, where the Arapahoe and Cheyenne fought American settlers who encroached on their lands. In response, the settlers sent militias to round up Native Americans, including those who had cooperated with them, and with the U.S. Army.

Near Sand Creek, Colorado, on November 29, 1864, Colonel John Chivington led a militia raid on a camp in which Black Kettle, a Cheyenne chief, had negotiated a peaceful settlement with a nearby army garrison. The American flag and the white flag of surrender flew above the camp when Chivington's soldiers murdered nearly 100 people, the majority of them women and children. This incident became known as the **Sand Creek Massacre**.



TERM TO KNOW

Sand Creek Massacre

A militia raid led by Colonel Chivington on a Cheyenne camp in Colorado; over 100 native men, women, and children were killed.

To prevent similar atrocities from occurring, the federal government attempted to negotiate treaties with Great Plains tribes that would designate native lands and help the tribes transition from their nomadic way of life to a sedentary one, based on agriculture and individual property ownership. One of these agreements was the Treaty of Fort Laramie.

The **Treaty of Fort Laramie** granted the Lakota a reservation in Dakota Territory (which included the Black Hills) “for as long as the grass shall grow.” In exchange, the federal government promised to build a number of public buildings on the reservation (including a school), and to provide a doctor, farmer, blacksmith, carpenter, engineer, and teachers—all of whom would help the Lakota transition from their nomadic ways to farming, and maintain peaceful relations with the United States.

TERM TO KNOW

Treaty of Fort Laramie

Signed between the United States and members of the Lakota (Sioux) tribe in 1868.

The Treaty of Fort Laramie reduced violence on the Plains for a time, but did not eliminate it. Within a year after the signing, American railroad crews encroached on the Sioux reservation. War between the Lakota and the United States escalated during the mid-1870s, when gold was discovered in the Black Hills.

In response to the gold rush, the federal government offered to lease the Black Hills or to pay six million dollars if the Lakota were willing to sell the land. They refused, and several bands, including one led by **Sitting Bull** (image right), left the reservation and urged nearby tribes to join them in defense of their lands.

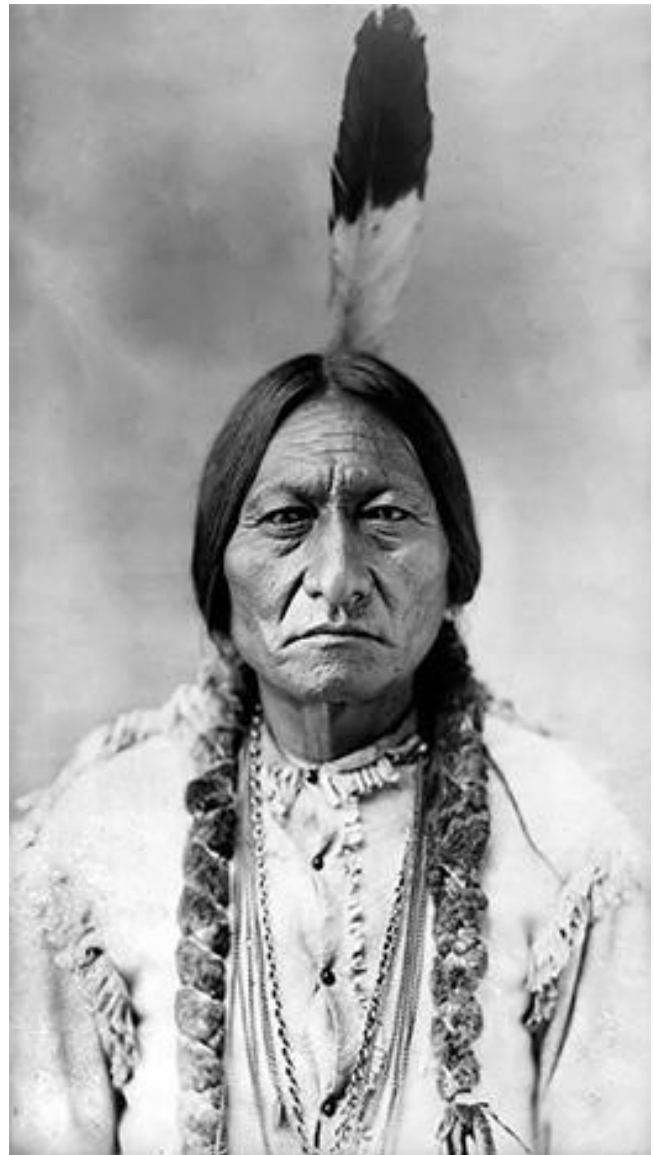
➔ **EXAMPLE** By the middle of 1875, thousands of white prospectors had illegally entered the Sioux reservation in search of gold. The Black Hills produced approximately \$2 million in gold by 1876.

PEOPLE TO KNOW

Sitting Bull

Sioux chieftain who united Native American tribes in defense of their lands and whose coalition of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors defeated a U.S. cavalry force led by George Armstrong Custer in 1876.

On June 25, 1876, Col. George Armstrong Custer and approximately 600 U.S. cavalrymen came upon Sitting Bull's camp along the Little Bighorn River in eastern Montana. Hoping to catch the camp by surprise, Custer divided his troops and attacked. He did not know that between 1,500 and 2,000 Lakota and Cheyenne



warriors awaited him.

The subsequent **Battle of the Little Bighorn** lasted a less than an hour. Custer and all of the men in his immediate detachment—approximately 250 men—were killed.



TERM TO KNOW

Battle of the Little Bighorn

A coalition of Lakota and Cheyenne warriors led by Sitting Bull defeated a U.S. cavalry force led by George Armstrong Custer on June 25, 1876.



DID YOU KNOW

Cheyenne chief Two Moons later said that the battle “took about as long as a hungry man to eat his dinner.”

The Battle of the Little Bighorn revealed that native groups were capable of inflicting a significant defeat on the U.S. Army. But the aftermath of the battle showed that they were unable to win prolonged conflicts, as U.S. military officers applied many of the tactics associated with **total war** that had been used during the Civil War.



TERM TO KNOW

Total War

A state of war in which one or both of the opponents make no distinction between military and civilian targets, and mobilizes all resources, extending its reach into all areas of opponents’ lives.

During their conflicts with the Lakota and other tribes, the U.S. Army invaded native homelands, and pursued warring bands relentlessly.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Despite his victory at the Little Bighorn, the army chased Sitting Bull and other Lakota bands throughout the winter of 1876-77. By early 1877, many of the bands, starving and sick from the lack of food and shelter, surrendered. Sitting Bull and his surviving supporters fled to Canada.

In this manner, the U.S. military conquered much of the West and opened the region to American settlement, according to the principles of free labor.

5. Towards a Greater Reconstruction

Western conquest and settlement, processes that some historians associate with Greater Reconstruction, appeared to be ongoing by 1877, when Reconstruction formally ended in the South. By the late 1870s, thousands of settlers, along with those who were affiliated with railroads, mining, and other industries, migrated to the West, hoping to profit from the region’s resources.

Between 1860 and 1870, Nebraska’s non-Native American population increased from 28,000 to almost 123,000. During the same period, the non-Native American population of Nevada jumped from 6,800 to 42,000.

Lured by free homesteads and the opportunities associated with railroad construction, mining, and other forms of economic development, settlers continued to migrate westward. The populations of western states and territories grew throughout the late 19th century.

In addition to settlement and economic policies associated with free labor, the United States secured the West by means of the armed forces that conquered the Confederacy. Tribes like the Lakota resisted the Army,

but the federal government concluded (for a time, at least) that native people were obstacles to western expansion and progress. The question of whether Native Americans would be able to participate in a reconstructed West after the Indian Wars remained unanswered.



SUMMARY

The concept of a Greater Reconstruction argues that the United States made a concerted effort to unite East and West, as well as to reunite North and South, during the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. Republican legislators used the Civil War as an opportunity to enact their vision of the West, which was based on the principles of free labor. Conflict between Native Americans and the United States occurred during the Civil War, and violence escalated after it ended. Although Native Americans won significant battles (e.g., the Battle of the Little Bighorn), they did not sustain these victories in prolonged wars with the U.S. Army. By 1877, with Reconstruction ending in the South, the United States began to consolidate its control over the western territories.

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ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Buffalo Hunt](#) | Author: George Catlin | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Battle of the Little Bighorn

Where a coalition of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors led by Sitting Bull defeated a U.S. cavalry force led by George Armstrong Custer on June 25, 1876.

Greater Reconstruction

A historical interpretation that suggests that Reconstruction represented an attempt to unite East and West in addition to North and South during and following the Civil War.

Homestead Act

Promoted western settlement by granting free land to heads of households who promised to improve the land

Indian Wars

A series of armed conflicts between the United States and various western Native American tribes during the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

Morrill Act

Provided for the creation of “agricultural and mechanical schools” throughout the Union.

Pacific Railway Acts

A series of measures that commissioned the construction of the first transcontinental railroad

Sand Creek Massacre

A militia raid led by Colonel Chivington on a Cheyenne camp in Colorado; over one hundred native men, women, and children were killed.

Total War

A state of war in which the government makes no distinction between military and civilian targets, and mobilizes all resources, extending its reach into all areas of citizens’ lives.

Treaty of Fort Laramie

Signed between the United States and members of the Sioux tribe in 1868.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Sitting Bull

Sioux chieftain who united Native American tribes in defense of their lands and whose coalition of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors defeated a U.S. cavalry force led by George Armstrong Custer in 1876.



DATES TO KNOW

1861

The Civil War begins.

1862

The Homestead Act and Morrill Act (Land Grant College Act) are enacted.

1862–1864

The Pacific Railway Acts are enacted.

1864

Over 100 native men, women, and children are killed in the Sand Creek Massacre.

1865

The Civil War ends.

1868

The Treaty of Fort Laramie between the U.S. and Lakota Sioux is signed.

1869

The first transcontinental railroad is completed.

1874

The Black Hills gold rush begins.

1876

The Battle of Little Bighorn lasts less than an hour.

1877

The Southern Reconstruction ends.