The Development of the West
By Ned Blackhawk

In the summer of 1876, two dramatically different places captured the American nation’s attention. As the summer began, fairgoers in Philadelphia teemed into the Centennial Exhibition held to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of independence. Millions marveled at the majestic torch and metal hand that had just come from France, an initial gift to commemorate the two nations’ shared revolutionary spirits. Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone and other technological wonders were unveiled at Machinery Hall, the centerpiece of the fair, while on opening night an orchestra and thousand-person choir performed the national anthems of the forty-nine nations invited to this first American world’s fair.

Across the continent in late June, allied American Indians from the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe nations camped along the Little Big Horn River on the Montana plains awaiting US military forces under the leadership of Colonel George Armstrong Custer. Lakota leaders such as Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull remembered well their nation’s capacity for inflicting damage on the US military. After all, Lakotas in 1866 under Red Cloud had fought US forces to a virtual standstill along Montana’s Bozeman Trail. Crazy Horse in particular had distinguished himself by leading the annihilation of Montana’s Fort Phil Kearny. The subsequent treaty at Fort Laramie in 1868 recognized such power and established a “Great Sioux Reservation” across what are now the western halves of North and South Dakota. Following a series of broken promises after the Fort Laramie treaty, Lakota leaders led their bands out of the Great Sioux Reservation of the Dakota Territory and back to their beloved equestrian and bison grasslands in Montana.

The “end of the Indian wars” has always held either a deeply nostalgic or triumphant sense of predetermination. Lakota history has particularly suited such narratives well. Custer’s “massacre,” “slaughter,” or “last stand” at Little Bighorn quickly became the most iconic battle of the post-Civil War Era. Endlessly reimagined in popular “wild west” shows, serial novels, and advertisements, it came to epitomize American expansion and US history more broadly. Custer’s defeat, and not the subsequent confinement of Lakota communities onto their fragmented reservation, has framed many narratives of the West.

Scholars have often viewed both the trajectory of the technological advances and the collapse of the fragile ecologies that sustained Native American autonomy through the lens of inevitability. These two signature events from the summer of 1876 highlight many of the interconnections that would increasingly bind the American West with the development of the American nation. Indeed, the twenty-five year period afterward was filled with the most dynamic processes of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration that the country had yet witnessed, making the United States by the end of the nineteenth century a modern and emergent power.

Although communication and transportation networks increasingly linked the West with the rest of the nation, no one could have foreseen the next quarter century’s phenomenal growth. In fact, the United States in 1876 was still recovering from a devastating civil war, and the country was nowhere near a modern and integrated nation-state. Union armies still occupied much of the former Confederacy, and the fate of Reconstruction remained unclear as millions of former slaves faced the daily challenge of enacting and defining their recently won “freedom.” As one author has recently noted, so “incomplete and uncertain was the United States” that “it did not yet have a national anthem.”

By 1900, of course, the nation’s future had dramatically changed, and, as scholars now increasingly recognize, the West helped to “reconstruct” America. With its expansive, extractive economies, its growing forms of federal authority, and the creation of single-party Republican territories and states, the West in many ways presaged the development of a modern American state and economy. Moreover, the mythology of the West solidified the ideological narrative of American history. With its presumptions of rugged individualism and freedom from concentrated political power, the West quickly became the most iconic and “imagined” region of
the United States. Un-coincidentally, the most celebrated US historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, crafted his famous “frontier thesis” in the late 1800s and delivered it at another world’s fair held in Chicago to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of the Columbian Encounter. In his 1893 address, Turner identified the process of US expansion as the most important variable in American history. He also worried about the “closing” of this frontier following the 1890 Census which had identified, for the first time, the absence of available and unincorporated western lands on which immigrant communities could settle. Such processes of frontier settlement, Turner believed, not only defined American history but also provided the self-democratizing impulses that fueled US democracy. In an era in which millions of non-Anglophones amassed upon American seaboards, Turner worried how such newly arrived immigrants might become Americans.

In both the historic and mythic West, the United States moved beyond the impasse of sectional conflict and emerged into the twentieth century positioned for global ascendency. The development of the West was of course both cultural and geographic, and few places signal such expansive transformations as clearly Hawaii, which would become America’s most western state. Located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, several weeks’ travel from California, Hawaii remained at the end of the Civil War largely outside the orbit of the United States. Its cultural, linguistic, and political practices confounded American travelers.

The Hawaiian Kingdom, an indigenous monarchy, governed the Hawaiian Islands, and like the West as a whole, Hawaii underwent a three-decade process following the Civil War that both led to its incorporation into the American nation and fueled American national development more broadly. As with the Lakota and other Indian communities who viewed the American Union as divided and weak during the Civil War, Hawaiian leaders could not foresee the transformation ushered in by the war’s aftermath. They did, however, try their best to forestall such changes, particularly as the Hawaiian Kingdom saw its economy and land-tenure systems. The monarchy and its supporters staged a lengthy international campaign to protect Hawaiian sovereignty.

When Reconstruction officially ended in 1877 following the contested election of Rutherford Hayes, the resulting economic, political, and cultural transformations were felt throughout both the South. The Pacific region underwent a parallel upheaval. By 1876, plantations had become Hawaii’s signature economy, and they were increasingly controlled by naturalized American immigrants and their children, including Sanford Dole, who was born in 1844 in Honolulu. As in the South, Hawaiian planters implemented systems of voter intimidation, disenfranchisement, and property taxes designed to exclude non-whites from the political process. By 1887, Hawaii was ruled by a white planter oligarchy with Asian laborers and Native Hawaiians excluded from participation in a newly formed constitutional government. Moreover, Hawaii possessed increased geopolitical importance. As American economic interests in Asia expanded, control over the largest port in the middle of the Pacific became more important to the American Navy.

With the outbreak of the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States took possession of the former Spanish colonies of the Philippines and annexed Hawaii through a series of Congressional measures that many viewed as illegal. Since Hawaii was never conquered by US military forces, ceded by treaty, nor purchased, its admission to the Union violated the US Constitution’s procedures for accessioning new territories. The last monarch of Hawaii, Queen Lili’uokalani, who was imprisoned in the early 1890s by planter elites, articulated such concerns to the US Congress, delivering thousands of signed petitions protesting the usurpation of Hawaiian sovereignty. American military strategists and plantation leaders across the Hawaiian Islands, however, mobilized against the queen and her supporters. They successfully lobbied the US administration of William McKinley, who had distanced himself from President Grover Cleveland’s previous support for Lili’uokalani. As with the contested election of 1876, the election of 1896 fundamentally remade American interests in the Pacific.

The development of the American West then is best viewed through a multiplicity of lenses. With millions of recent Anglophone migrants, the West of the 1870s quickly became a radically different place for those
indigenous non-Anglophone communities whose roots in the region stretched back for generations. As the largest and oldest Spanish-speaking community in the West, for example, New Mexico witnessed dramatically different economic and political fortunes than its recently established northern neighbor, Colorado, which had virtually no non-indigenous communities before the Mexican-American War in the 1840s. By contrast, New Mexico was home to tens of thousands of Hispãnos, many of whom prided themselves on their deep connections with the Spanish empire in the region and traced their ancestry to the Spanish conquistadors of New Mexico from the 1500s.

Unlike New Mexico, which did not become a state until 1912, Colorado became a state in 1876 and is known as “the Centennial State.” With many of Lincoln and Grant’s administrative appointments filling the state’s leadership ranks, Colorado, like many western states, enjoyed nearly uniform Republican Party affiliation from the 1870s until 1930. It voted for Democratic candidates for president only five out of fourteen times before 1932. Western states added after 1876 became even more uniform in their party affiliation, including, for example, North and South Dakota, which were admitted to the Union in 1892. Together these two states participated in twenty presidential elections before 1932, voting for Democratic candidates only three times. Such relatively uniform Republic affiliation guaranteed congressional and Electoral College support for Republican candidates and created administrative and institutional support for Republican economic, political, and social interests. In matters as mundane as political appointments to massive federal grazing or railroad contracts, for nearly half a century, political accommodation characterized the administrative politics of many western states.

The rapid political incorporation of diverse territories, geographies, and cultures into the American Republic after 1876 should not belie the tremendous social and cultural tumult experienced during this quarter-century of development. Mining and labor conflicts gripped newly emergent Anglophone communities from Montana to San Francisco and from Puget Sound to Bisbee, Arizona. Extractive economies particularly fueled social and civil unrest, as tens of thousands of migrants poured into remote locations, competing for employment as well as consuming scarce natural resources. The industrialization of the West remained as arduous and complicated a process as those fueling urban industries, and western industrial development became characterized by more immediately identifiable ecological transformations and increased competition between multi-racial communities. Chinese laborers, in particular, were targeted by civil and state-level exclusionary campaigns. Such extralegal and codified campaigns quickly resulted in the exile of one of the West’s first global migratory labor communities. As several scholars have suggested, such western tensions produced far-reaching federal legacies, as the Congressional 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act became the United States’ first immigration law to target the race and class of any national immigrant community.

In terms of race relations, expansion of federal authority, and economic and territorial growth, the West from 1876 to 1900 helped to both develop and reconstruct the United States. The millions of tons of western timber, cattle, minerals, metals, and fish were essential to the development of particularly the Midwest’s manufacturing capabilities. From furniture in Minneapolis to beer in St. Louis to meatpacking throughout the Great Lakes, western resources fueled American growth. After 1898, with the addition of the Philippines, Hawaii, and other Pacific possessions, an empire of US protectorates stretched from Puerto Rico to Southeast Asia, establishing the United States as not only the continental power of North America but increasingly of the globe.

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