

legacy of Reconstruction affected the 1930s revival of black militancy in other ways as well. Two leaders of the Alabama Share Croppers Union, Ralph and Thomas Gray, claimed to be descended from a Reconstruction legislator. (Like many nineteenth-century predecessors, Ralph Gray paid with his life for challenging the South's social order — he was killed in a shootout with a posse while guarding a union meeting.)

Twenty more years elapsed before another generation of black Southerners launched the final challenge to the racial system of the New South. A few participants in the civil rights movement thought of themselves as following a path blazed after the Civil War. Discussing the reasons for his involvement, one black Mississippian spoke of the time when “a few Negroes was admitted into the government of the State of Mississippi and to the United States.” Reconstruction's legacy was also evident in the actions of federal judge Frank Johnson, who fought a twelve-year battle for racial justice with Alabama Gov. George Wallace. Johnson hailed from Winston County, a center of Civil War Unionism, and his great-grandfather had served as a Republican sheriff during Reconstruction. By this time, however, the Reconstruction generation had passed from the scene and even within the black community, memories of the period had all but disappeared. Yet the institutions created or consolidated after the Civil War — the black family, school, and church — provided the base from which the modern civil rights revolution sprang. And for its legal strategy, the movement returned to the laws and amendments of Reconstruction.

“The river has its bend, and the longest road must terminate.” Rev. Peter Randolph, a former slave, wrote these words as the dark night of injustice settled over the South. Nearly a century elapsed before the nation again attempted to come to terms with the implications of emancipation and the political and social agenda of Reconstruction. In many ways, it has yet to do so.

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I would like to look again at race in America during the crucial middle years of the nineteenth century and wonder aloud what that story might look like if expanded to more of a continental perspective. Specifically, I

will bring the West more into the picture. If I have a general premise, it is that the acquisition of the Far West in the 1840s influenced, much more than we have credited, our racial history — how people have thought about race, how racial minorities have fared, and what policies our government adopted. In fact, since race is always a bellwether of larger forces, I think we need to consider that the great gulping of land in the 1840s had as much to do with shaping the course of our history as any event of that century, including the Civil War that dominates the story as we tell it today.

Taken together, the acquisitions of 1845–1848 comprised our greatest expansion. The annexations of Texas and Oregon and the Mexican Cession made the United States much larger and richer — and far more ethnically mixed. Languages are one crude measure. While the United States grew in area by about 66 percent, the number of languages spoken within it increased by more than 100 percent. That number would grow still more during the next few years as tens of thousands flooded into the California gold fields. In the 1850s, no nation on earth had a region with so rich an ethnic stew as the American West.

Expansion triggered an American racial crisis. We have always taught that to our students, of course, but we have missed at least half the point. The connection we make is between expansion and slavery. We say that new western lands, full of opportunity, made the question of black slavery dangerously concrete outside the South. That, in turn, set loose disputes that by 1861 would tip us over the edge of catastrophe. This sequence seems to give the West a prominent role in America's racial history, but the effect is ironic. Because race remains strictly a matter of black and white, and because its prime issue is African American slavery and its central event is the Civil War, western expansion is important only on eastern terms. Once the Mexican War does its mischief, the focus quickly swings back East and stays there. The West has its consequential moment, then remains at the edge of the action.

But that's nothing close to the whole story. Expansion was double trouble. It not only sped up the old conflict between North and South. By complicating so hugely America's ethnic character it raised new questions on the relation between race and nation. These questions centered on the West. . . .

The term for this era, Reconstruction, has always thrummed with racial implications, but when broadened to apply seriously from coast to coast, the term strengthens and its implications deepen. In the twenty years of tumult after 1846, attitudes and institutions of race were in fact being reconstructed, and more thoroughly than we have recognized. Listening to the clatter of opinions, not merely about black-white relations but also, in the color code of the day, about red, brown, and yellow, the range of possible outcomes seems to me a lot wider than we have allowed. When I shift my attention from the idealism of Reconstruction's radicals toward what was being said and done out West, and when I remember how rapidly that idealism would wither by the late 1870s, I wonder whether this nation

flirted more seriously than we have admitted with a racial order far more rigid than what we finally got. I wonder what kind of America we might have seen if the headhunters and racial purists had carried the day. Frankly (to use a boyhood phrase) it gives me the shivers.

But of course something else happened. We turned away from the western tendency toward absolute racial divides, even as we compromised an eastern ideal of a fuller racial equality for former slaves. Among the theorists, the hard lines of scientific racism softened. Polygenesis, the teaching that races were born separate and could never merge, fell from favor. Racial distinctions were as strong as ever, and so was the trust in sorting them out by skull volume and the length of fingers, but now everyone once again was called part of one humanity. Races were unequal at the moment, but they were all moving along the same path of development. We seemed to be back around 1800, back to the Jeffersonian faith in turning Indians into whites. But there were two big differences. The new ideas about race were full of pretensions from the new science, especially evolutionary notions of social Darwinism. And now the government was expected to take charge of racial development as it never had before. The federal government, newly muscular after the Civil War, would act within its borders much as other imperial powers did in their distant colonies of Africa and Asia. Washington would claim the jurisdiction and the know-how to be a kind of racial master, part policeman, part doctor, part professor.

The key to understanding this . . . story is the powerful drive toward national consolidation. This theme — the integration of a divided America into a whole — is the one our textbooks tell us ruled the late nineteenth century. And so it did. Those texts, however, usually tell us that the sectional crisis and Civil War were the prime causes behind that drive, while, in fact, consolidation took its energy at least as much from the expansion of the 1840s. Acquiring the West stretched our distances, enriched our variety, and uncovered enormous wealth on our farthest edge. That, as much as secession, compelled us to think in terms of pulling it all together and keeping it that way. Making a firmer, tighter union meant resolving questions about differences within this nation, and close to the top of the list were questions about race. Here, too, westward expansion, as much as the conflict of North and South, had churned up matters and pushed us toward some resolution. It follows that if we want to understand what happened — in national consolidation, in American race, and in how the two wove together — we need to keep our eyes moving in both directions, toward both West and South.

Consolidation, racial or any other kind, means finding common ground. There must be standards to measure the parts of the nation and to decide what fits where. In bringing West and South and their peoples more tightly into the union, two standards were most important. The first was economic. From Virginia plantations to Nevada mines and Nebraska homesteads, the nation would be pulled together under the ideals of free labor and yeoman agriculture and through the realities of corporate capitalism. The

the rest of what we call, inadequately, "culture" — nurtured from Boston to Charleston to Tombstone. A national economy and a national culture — together they would provide the common ground of the new America. America's racial parts would have to find their place, if they had a place to find, on that ground and inside its boundaries. Watching the results, West and South, is a revelation, not just about our racial drama, but also about the entire process of expansion and the remaking of a nation.

The case of the Chinese was the most extreme. They were America's most anomalous people. In language, dress, foodways, religion, and customs they seemed beyond the pale, and with their vast predominance of men, they lacked what all other groups, however different, had in common: the family as their central social unit. Culturally, then, the Chinese were uniquely vulnerable. Economically, their potential was much more promising, but ironically that made them a special threat. From early in the 1850s, some had compared Chinese work gangs to black slavery and had suggested them as a solution to the Far West's chronic labor shortage. An editor predicted (and he meant it positively) that the Chinese will "be to California what the African has been to the South." After the Civil War, some raised the possibility of Chinese playing the African in the South itself. In 1869, businessmen met in Memphis to consider importing Asia's rural workers into their cotton fields and factories. They heard that the Chinese, "industrious, docile, and competent," could be shipped in five hundred at a time at \$44.70 per head. Bitter opposition, however, came from opponents of slavery and, more effectively, from champions of free white labor. Close to the heart of the Chinese image as hopelessly alien was the notion that they were sheeplike, easily controlled, and utterly without the individual gumption to stand up to their bosses. This made them free labor's ultimate nightmare: a race of automatons used by monopolists and labor-bashers to undercut wages or cast out honest workers altogether. The most vicious assaults on Asians came from spokesmen for white workingmen like Henry George and in political movements like California's Workingmen's Party. In the end, the Chinese found themselves without either a cultural or economic base in the new nation and with virtually no natural constituency. They suffered the most excessive answer to America's racial question. As of 1882, they were excluded.

The case of Hispanics was the oddest. Their numbers were greatest in relation to whites in the Southwest, our least populous region with resources that were, for the moment, the least exploitable. This corner of the nation consequently was the last to be brought close and consolidated, which in turn lessened somewhat the pressure to resolve its racial issues. Mexican-Americans still carried the burden of the old rhetoric, the images of listless, unenlightened people, but they were not as alien as the Chinese. After all they were Christian, albeit Catholic, and were family-oriented farmers. And they fit the emerging economy. They did the grunt labor in mines, and they worked the land in a system of debt peonage strikingly similar to southern sharecropping. Hispanics, that is, posed little cultural threat and played useful economic roles. The upshot was partly to ignore

Mexican-Americans were either rendered invisible, segregated in cities and countryside, or they were reimagined as a bit of American exotica in a region we could afford to fantasize as an escape from fast-paced modern life. In the land of *poco tiempo*, these people of color became what was much tamer: people of local color.

That left African and Native Americans. Their case was most revealing of all. Since the 1840s, southern blacks and western Indians had been counterpoised in our racial thinking: insiders and outsiders, enslaved and free-roaming, the essences of South and West. Now they converged. They were brought together as events of the 1860s shattered older arrangements and assumptions. Emancipated blacks still were insiders — they were, in the fine phrase of Frederick Douglass, close under the arm of white America — but they were no longer controlled through slavery. While not as free-roaming as Indians, they were definitely on the loose. Indians, meanwhile, contrary to the claims of the 1840s and 1850s, were obviously not vanishing. In fact, their lands were being pulled into the national embrace far more quickly than anyone had guessed possible. Indians were not as enmeshed in white society as the freedmen, but they *were* being brought inside the house. Blacks and Indians found themselves suddenly moving from opposite directions into the national mainstream. Paradoxically, liberation and conquest were carrying them to the same place.

Where exactly they would end up, and how they would get there, would be the self-appointed job of the newly centralized government, and nothing in the history of Reconstruction is more illuminating as the programs that resulted. As usual, we have treated events in the West and South as if they rolled along utterly independent of each other, while in fact Washington's treatment of blacks and Indians ran as a stunning parallel. Official strategies were virtually the same. Economic integration for freedmen was to come through forty acres and a mule, or at least some measure of agrarian self-sufficiency; for Indians, the answer was to be allotment in severalty. For cultural integration, ex-slaves would be educated under the Freedmen's Bureau; for Indians, it would be agency and boarding schools. (And sometimes, most famously in the Hampton Institute, the two were schooled in the same places.) For both, Christian service and evangelism directed and suffused the entire enterprise, mixing religious verities with the virtues of free enterprise, patriotism, and Anglo American civilization.

The differences were not in the government's goals and methods but in the responses to them. Freedmen, as insiders, had worked within private agriculture for generations and had been sustained by their own Christian worship. They found the government's stated goals perfectly fine. The Sioux and Apaches and Nez Percés and others, as outsiders, had their own traditions and cosmologies and relations with the land. They replied differently. Some accepted the new order, but for others the government finally had to turn to its strong arm to impose what former slaves wanted all along.

It takes a little effort, I will admit, to see Freedmen's schools and the Little Big Horn as two sides of the same process, but blink a few times

and it makes perfect sense, once you look at Reconstruction's racial policies, not on strictly southern terms, narrowly, as an outgrowth of Civil War, but rather as a culmination of a development that began in the 1840s. Its first stage began with the expansion of the nation, and with that physical growth we were unsettled profoundly in our sense of who we were and might be. This stage raised a series of new racial questions and aggravated older ones. The second stage, the Civil War, brought those questions to the sticking place. By ending slavery and bringing the West closer into the union, the war left the nation as mixed and uncertain in its racial identity as it ever had been or would be. By revolutionizing relations of power, the war also opened the way for a settlement of a sort. In the third stage, from 1865 to the early 1880s, the government used its confirmed authority to flesh out the particulars of a new racial arrangement. Some peoples it excluded, some it left on the edges, some it integrated on the terms and by the means of its choosing, including in some cases by conquest and coercion.

This Greater Reconstruction was even more morally ambiguous than the lesser one. It included not one war but three — the Mexican War, Civil War, and War against Indian America — and while it saw the emancipation of one non-white people, it was equally concerned with dominating others. It included the Civil Rights Acts and the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, but it began with U.S. soldiers clashing with a Mexican patrol on disputed terrain along the Rio Grande in 1846. And it closed, practically, with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and symbolically, in 1877, with Oliver Howard — former head of the Freedman's Bureau who had risked his life and given his arm for emancipation — running to ground Chief Joseph and the Nez Perces along our northern border, forty miles shy of freedom. Always the Greater Reconstruction was as much about control as liberation, as much about unity and power as about equality. Indians were given roles they mostly didn't want, and freedmen were offered roles they mostly did, but both were being told that these were the roles they *would* play, like it or not. There has always been a darker side to *e pluribus unum*, and when we look at the parallel policies toward Indians and blacks, we can see it in its full breathtaking arrogance. When the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indians turned from its usual concerns to devote two annual meetings to answering the so-called "Negro Question," one of its members, Lyman Abbott, was asked why no African Americans would be attending. He answered: "A patient is not invited to the consultation of the doctors in his case."

I hope no one takes from what I have written any intent to lessen the enormity of southern slavery in our history or to devalue in the slightest its human costs. My southern friends, especially, might argue that the way I am telling the story neglects the sheer weight of black-white relations in our national consciousness and the scale of the calamities spun off by slavery. They might tell me also that my version misses the genuine idealism generated from abolition and the Civil War. They might say all that and more, and if they do I will admit that they might be right.

But there are a few things I know. I know we should put our foot down and not allow the Civil War to continue behaving as it does now in our texts and histories, sitting there like a gravity field, drawing to itself everything around it and bending all meanings to fit its own shape. I am certain that, while we call the mid-nineteenth century the Civil War Era, acquiring the West had at least as much to do with remaking America as the conflict between North and South. I know that race is essential to understanding what happened during those years, and I know that the conquest and integration of the West is essential to understanding race. I am sure that we will never grasp the racial ideas of that time without recognizing that they took their twisting shapes partly from exchanges between West and South — a vigorous, strange dialogue that included not only slavery apologists and the familiar tropes about black inferiority but also rhetorical flights on opium smoking, color-coded *Zeitgeists*, and head-hunters and bodysnatchers in caps and gowns. And I am confident that when we bring the West more into the story, when we end the isolation of episodes like the California gold rush and the Indian wars and make them part of a genuinely coast-to-coast history of race in America, we will have learned a lot.

The lessons will teach us again how western history has plenty to say about America today. In the 1960s, movements for the rights of black Americans encouraged us to look back with new care at slavery, emancipation, and reconstruction. The situation today — when Hispanic Americans are our largest minority and Asian Americans are arriving in unprecedented numbers, when Pat Buchanan is fanning fears about brown and yellow hordes, when the fastest growing minority in southern cities is American Indians, and when I read in my local newspaper about rallies by an Arkansas anti-Hispanic group with the unintentionally ironic acronym of AIM (Americans for Immigration Moratorium) — this situation should encourage us to look yet again at those middle years of the nineteenth century, this time in search of the roots of racial thinking that goes beyond the simpler divisions of black and white.

The larger point, of course, is a broader awareness of the most troubling theme of our past. For many of us that awareness will mean a more intimate implication, especially if we live outside the South, or like me along its edges. Race is not the burden of southern history. Race is the burden of American history. Its questions speak to all of us, whichever region we call home, and press us all to ask where and how far we have fallen short in keeping promises we have made to ourselves. In 1869, near the end of the Great Reconstruction, the reformer and spiritualist Cora Tappan took this continental perspective when she offered her audience an observation that, in its essence, is still worth making today:

A government that has for nearly a century enslaved one race (African), that proscribes another (Chinese), proposes to exterminate another (Indians), and persistently refuses to recognize the rights of one-half of its citizens (women), cannot justly be called perfect.