The Civil War and the American West are some of the most familiar subjects in U.S. history. The journey of Lewis and Clark and the discovery of gold in California; the firing on Fort Sumter and the battle at Gettysburg; the assassination of President Lincoln and the driving of the Golden Spike to complete the transcontinental railroad—each has inspired hundreds of studies and preoccupied scholars and enthusiasts since the events themselves unfolded.

But little attention has been paid to the intersections of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the wider history of the American West, and how these seemingly separate events compose a larger, unified history of conflict over land, labor, rights, citizenship, and the limits of governmental authority in the United States.

Traditionally, Civil War history has focused on the challenge of secession, the timing and reasoning behind the eradication of slavery, and the ways that large-scale military actions shaped the lives of soldiers and civilians on both sides. Histories of Reconstruction, meanwhile, have measured the promise of emancipation against the nation’s failure to achieve so many of those new possibilities. By contrast, histories of the American West have begun with the so-called frontier spaces of encounter, and have told the history of how these new territories and new peoples were integrated into European and then U.S. realms.

In geographical terms, Civil War history has generally been rooted in the battlefields and plantation landscapes of the “South” (which may or may not include Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, or other southern border states)—while the “West” of western history has most often meant the trans-Mississippi, and sometimes west of the 100th meridian. When Civil War historians talk about
the war’s “western theater,” they usually mean the military engagements in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi. But the Department of the Trans-Mississippi included armed conflict in Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas, reaching as far as the crucial Sibley Campaign and the founding of Confederate Arizona. The extensive Civil War fortifications along the Pacific coast and their role in the war generally merit only a footnote.¹

Historians have long fixed the endpoints of the Civil War and delineated the concerns of Reconstruction from vantage points along the eastern seaboard. On the battlefields between Washington and Richmond, there seems to be a clearly defined conflict between the United States and the Confederacy, with obvious geographical and temporal parameters. Much of the Civil War history concerning the West drifts toward the counterfactual: how much more significant it would have been if a Confederate raider attacked Seattle or San Francisco; if the Confederacy had held Arizona, conquered Southern California, captured St. Louis, or threatened Chicago; or if the Indian Territory representation in the Confederate Congress would have changed the course of the war. From the perspective of traditional Civil War scholarship, it can be hard to see these stories as much more than red herrings. Yet our contention that testing the limits of U.S. sovereignty is the central story of both the Civil War and the American West means that, even in failure, these pivot points provide a profound new understanding of the experience of the war years.

The importance of the West among the causes of the Civil War is well established, with the question of the extension of slavery into the lands conquered or annexed between 1845 and 1848 generally understood as the precipitating cause of the Civil War. Yet the West continued to matter to political and military leaders during the conflict itself, and the Civil War and Reconstruction transformed the region along with the North and South. The Mexican Cession and the Emancipation Proclamation both shaped the settling of the West and the meaning of the Civil War. Fighting in New Mexico affected fighting at Gettysburg, while the civil war in Mexico shaped the experience of the U.S. Civil War (and vice versa). The transcontinental railroad stitched the country closer together, but its regions were already deeply engaged in similar debates over citizenship, economic opportunity, and the legacy of conquest.

These facts were obvious and essential to nineteenth-century Americans. Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, Secretary of State William Henry Seward, and other U.S. and Confederate officials thought of the Civil War in continental and even global terms. Many of the men who led soldiers
in the Civil War had spent the years just prior to the conflict in the West, engaged in “total war” conflagrations with Native peoples that some scholars have called U.S. attempts at genocide. For instance, Nathaniel Lyon, who would die a Union hero at the Battle of Wilson’s Creek in Missouri, directed massacres against the Pomo Indians of California in 1850, at Clear Lake and in the Russian River Valley. Philip Sheridan led troops in the Yakima War that roiled Washington Territory in the late 1850s. Before George Pickett led the ill-fated Confederate charge at Gettysburg, he was posted at Fort Bellingham, Washington Territory to watch for British aggression; during this interlude he fathered a son with Morning Mist, his Haida wife. In 1860, future Confederate general J. E. B. Stuart participated in campaigns against the Kiowas and Comanches.

Service during the U.S. War with Mexico (1846–48) was the first battle experience for many eventual Civil War generals, and it influenced their expectations in combat. But these bloody encounters in the American West occupied and tested these men right up to the moment that U.S. troops were recalled from western postings to fight against the Confederacy. And, after Appomattox, Army officials continued to move between posts in the West and the South, applying the techniques of one theater in another.

Despite these lived connections, historians have long fixed the endpoints of the Civil War and delineated the concerns of Reconstruction while standing along the eastern seaboard. Traditional Civil War and Reconstruction scholars have resisted the redefinitions and expansions that a wider history of all of the nineteenth-century United States would create, thus refusing to put the American West and the Civil War in one frame.

Confederate secession created new and shifting borderlands, and stories of refugees and conflicts over allegiances have complicated our understanding of the path from slavery to freedom for white as well as non-white Americans. In the West, both Civil War battlefields and Civil War politics engaged a wider range of ethnic and racial distinctions, raising questions that would arise only later in places farther east.

This volume teases out the limits of this traditional perspective, this unnatural division between histories of the Civil War and the American West. By nearly any measure—lives lost, property destroyed, economic and emotional costs—the Civil War was the most momentous challenge to the existence of the United States ever mounted. But it was also only the largest conflict among many over the limits of U.S. authority. Since the Constitution was ratified, threats of disunion had emerged frequently in U.S. political
discourse, but the pressure had clearly increased in the 1850s, and attacks came from Californios, from Mormon settlers in southern Utah, from filibusterers and Free Staters and Jayhawkers, from raiders from Mexico and British troops in the Juan de Fuca Strait, and from American Indian nations pushed to the brink.4

To date, the histories of occupation, reincorporation, and expanded citizenship during Reconstruction in the South have ignored the connections to previous as well as subsequent efforts in the West.5 The ways in which questions of race, religion, citizenship, and federal oversight during Reconstruction were sorted out at least as much in the West as in the states of the former Confederacy is a process that western historian Elliott West has called “Greater Reconstruction,” an engagement with the nature and limits of federal power that can inform our study of U.S. expansionism from its origins.6 This volume erases the artificial divides scholars have created between western and Civil War America.

Slavery or union; empire or freedom; North or South—none of these binaries sufficiently captures the participants’ experience of the United States in these years, because the fundamental test of authority was wider and more profound. This becomes obvious in the West, through the category-expanding or category-defying histories presented in this volume: multiracial and multilateral conflicts of the Civil War, including battles among Native American nations; the multiple crises of sovereignty that roiled the entire continent, from Canada through the United States and into Mexico; the varied environmental realities that shaped the war and the nation; and the importance of a range of international and borderlands interactions in shaping the war. Indeed, the final national borders of the “lower forty-eight” states are a history of the Civil War as well as expansion into the West, just as the absence of change after 1853 is bound up in the relative strength of America’s continental neighbors in defending their territory during and immediately after the Civil War.7 It is only by considering events and tensions playing out in all three national regions that we can see new through-lines and turning points, and thus write a new, more inclusive narrative of nineteenth-century American history, attuned to the crises of authority and identity faced by the United States.

There are some precedents for bringing together these histories of the American West and the Civil War. Mabel Washbourne Anderson’s The Life
of General Stand Watie, the Only Indian Brigadier General of the Confederate Army and the Last General to Surrender (1915) and Annie Heloise Abel’s The American Indian as Participant in the Civil War (1919) were foundational works in the field, marking these connections through the lives of American Indians from the West in the U.S. and Confederate militaries. Aurora Hunt’s The Army of the Pacific, 1860–1866 (1951) and Ray Colton’s The Civil War in the Western Territories: Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah (1959) provided the first examination of the military and political history of the Civil War in those western places. In 1978, David Nichols’s Lincoln and the Indians provided a groundbreaking look at the failures of the “Indian System” during the Civil War, from the U.S. abandonment of forts and treaty obligations in order to fight the Confederacy, to the concentration of refugees on new reservations, to the escalation of threats and countermands that led to the mass execution of Dakota men in 1862 and the massacre of Arapahos and Cheyennes at Sand Creek in 1864, among other atrocities.

More recently, Alvin Josephy’s The Civil War in the American West (1991) narrated both the struggles between uniformed Union and Confederate forces and the concurrent engagements with American Indians in the region. Laurence Hauptman’s Between Two Fires: American Indians in the Civil War (1995) provided an overview that opened in the West before emphasizing Indian service in both the North and South. Josephy’s and Hauptman’s analyses suggested that the Civil War years marked a turning point for many Indian nations, as some lost autonomy, some lost their lands, and some faced brutal massacres—and even renewed genocide—at the hands of Union soldiers or other Indians. As in so many areas of U.S. history, greater attention to the history and historiography of American Indian nations reveals the defining threads of the U.S. national project, uniting western history, Civil War history, and the study of the United States as empire.

Scholars of the American West have long emphasized the importance of borderlands and borders, the extent of federal power, and the incorporation of new peoples into the United States. Howard Lamar’s pair of territorial histories, Dakota Territory, 1861–1889: A Study of Frontier Politics (1956) and The Far Southwest, 1846–1912: A Territorial History (1966) are by rights the first works of western history to engage these questions through the experience of the Civil War, although not many historians have taken up these subjects in the years since. Eugene Berwanger’s The West and Reconstruction (1983) was an early call to focus on the region’s role in the postwar nation, but it also has gone mostly unheeded.
In 1991, Richard Maxwell Brown argued for conceptualizing U.S. history from 1850 to at least 1910 as a grand nationalizing struggle, turning to a great degree—along with the eastern conflict—upon a “Western Civil War for Incorporation.” That same year, Richard White emphasized how the American West “served as the kindergarten of the American state,” the region where the military, the Corps of Engineers, land and water managers, and Indian agents learned their skills. Emphasizing the processes of empire west of the Mississippi River, White wrote that “in the West federal power took on modern forms,” connecting U.S. military and bureaucratic action in the West before and after the Civil War, but again ignoring integral connections to the conflict in the East. These formulations have influenced the most recent work expanding the subject, including Heather Cox Richardson’s West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War (2007), and Elliott West’s The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story (2009), which demonstrated how “the forces transforming America were at work in Idaho and Oregon as much as in South Carolina and Massachusetts,” with results and consequences for all regions of the country.

My own work on St. Louis, alongside Richard Etulain’s recent book on Lincoln and the Oregon Country and Susan Schulten’s research on Colorado as a nexus of Civil War and western conflicts, has emphasized how these national and even continental conflicts were experienced in some of the key locations of the U.S. West. This volume continues the work that these scholars began, making connections between rebellions against U.S. authority at different moments and in multiple places. The volume is divided into three parts:

In part 1, “Borderlands in Conflict,” four historians focus on the West as a theater of political maneuvering and military conflict. James Robbins Jewell begins the volume in unfamiliar Civil War geography: the Union forts of Washington Territory, where the United States tracked spies and thwarted Confederate plots hatched on Vancouver Island and in British Columbia. Megan Kate Nelson considers the high hopes for a Confederate march to the Pacific and how the harsh realities of the New Mexico desert proved as formidable an enemy as any army. Lance R. Blyth ponders the complex and combustible interplay among a borderland political economy, U.S. Indian policy, and the increase in manpower created by the Civil War as he narrates the experience of three American Indian nations targeted by local forces under General Kit Carson. Diane Mutti Burke then describes how four western counties of Missouri—one claimed by waves of Indian nations, Mormon emigrants, free soilers and proslavery bushwhackers, and then Confederate...
sympathizers—were emptied out as a way to secure that borderland home-front for the Union.

The title of part 2, “The Civil War Is Not Over,” announces the main insight of its chapters, as together they demonstrate how the military, political, and economic exigencies of the conflict continued beyond Appomattox. Nicholas Guyatt examines why Republican leaders sought to convince ex-slaves to settle in Mexico, Texas, or Latin America throughout the 1860s, while Gregory P. Downs discusses how Union commanders in Texas sustained a war footing in facing down challenges from ex-Confederate, Mexican, and Indian adversaries in 1866. William Deverell describes the psychic and physical repercussions of the battles at Gettysburg and elsewhere for veterans living in California but reliving their war experience continuously. And then Martha Sandweiss considers the paths into and out of the Civil War evident in a photograph taken to commemorate the signing in Wyoming Territory of the Fort Laramie Treaty in 1868.

The chapters of part 3, “Borders of Citizenship,” consider how geography as well as race, ethnicity, religion, and gender shaped the possibilities of citizenship after the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments. Joshua Paddison describes the political contortions of Republican senators from western states as they sought to embrace the voting rights for African Americans while preventing Chinese or American Indian men from gaining suffrage. Virginia Scharff considers what racial factors informed the decision to grant woman suffrage (the first instance in U.S. history) in Wyoming Territory in 1869. Fay A. Yarbrough considers how the struggle between Choctaw leaders and their former slaves reflected the national debate over the expansion of citizenship. And Stephen Kantrowitz considers how and when members of the Ho-Chunk nation could use “citizen’s clothing” to accentuate their claims to U.S. citizenship through land holdings, even in states from which they had been removed.

Steven Hahn’s epilogue brings the volume to a close by considering how our narratives of nineteenth-century U.S. history could change dramatically if we take these connections between the American West and the Civil War to heart.

The geographic sweep from Missouri and Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) to the desert Southwest—where, one might say, West meets South—receives the greatest attention here. The combination of empires in
the history of this demanding environment—Comanches, Spanish, Mexican, Texan, U.S., and Confederate—and the multiple and also incomplete attempts at incorporating this area into the United States highlight many of the volume’s central concerns. As many locals know, if one considers the Southwest and tells the history of the Civil War or the American West, it looks very different than it does from Boston or Charleston, Los Angeles or San Francisco, even different from Dallas or St. Louis. That southwestern sensibility is essential to the story told here. But more stories, from antebellum California and Texas, from Montana and Utah, from Matamoros and Hawai’i, belong here, and we encourage students and scholars to bring these connections to their work.

In the American West and in the Civil War and Reconstruction, the United States was redefined. Scholars have much to gain by seeing these events as a sustained test of the limits of U.S. governmental authority and that government’s ability to shape land, labor, and rights. What emerges from such a reconceptualization is a richer, truer, and more provocative vision of mid-nineteenth-century U.S. history, one that reaches beyond North and South.

NOTES

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1. In James M. McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), coverage is even less: the states and territories of Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oregon, and Utah are referenced only in the prewar years; Colorado and Nevada each receive one passing mention (both on p. 818); Washington Territory receives no mention at all.


3. Gary Gallagher, one of this generation’s leading experts on the Civil War, has strenuously objected to the idea that government action in the West and the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction should be studied together. “When you don’t think there’s anything to say about what Reconstruction actually was, why don’t you pretend it was really about the West! Some historians of the West do that,” Gallagher told an interviewer from Civil War Trust in 2013. “That way you can bring Native Americans in, you can pretend that some of the things going on with
Native Americans and African Americans are sort of the same, but it's a real strain. Reconstruction is about reconstructing the former Confederate states. That's what the term means. It's really not about the West, it's not about California," Gallagher declared, though he concluded his answer by noting that "thousands of Union veterans ended up in California." Clayton Butler, “Understanding our Past: An Interview with Historian Gary Gallagher,” Civil War Trust, 2013. www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-history-and-scholarship/gary-gallagher-interview.html. Thanks to Steve Kantrowitz and Kevin Levin for the reference.


7. See the chapters of Nicholas Guyatt and James Jewell in this volume for more on this point.


13. For an emphasis on the terror of the Civil War years experienced by Indian nations far from the traditional battlefields, see Madley, “American Genocide”; Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), especially chap. 6; and the ongoing work of


