Chapter 16

[THE BIG IDEA] How did U.S. policymakers seek to stimulate the economy and integrate the trans-Mississippi west into the nation, and how did this effort affect people living there?

Government ambitions were big in the 1860s and 1870s—not only in the conflict between North and South, but also in the West. When the Confederate states withdrew from Congress, they gave the remaining representatives a unique chance to reshape the economy. Republicans promptly built the first transcontinental railroad, passed the Homestead Act, funded a network of universities in every state, and raised tariffs on imported goods to protect American manufacturing. These policies, which enabled the United States to exploit the vast resources of the West, played a decisive role in the nation’s rising industrial power.

Describing the conquest of the West, historian Frederick Jackson Turner saw a peaceful, orderly process of economic development. But it didn’t turn out that way. Mining and logging brought booms--and then busts. Farmers who filed homestead claims or purchased land from the railroads found that the Plains could be a hostile environment. Aridity and drought forced thousands to give up their quest.

Meanwhile, the United States removed native peoples from their remaining western lands—a process made easier by the encroachment of white ranchers and farmers, and the hunting of bison to near-extinction. A victory by Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho forces at the Little Big Horn was short lived; afterward, like most native peoples, they were forced onto reservations.

Many history textbooks end the story there, but I think that’s a mistake. As one author has said, Americans tend to remove Indians from our national history with a “sharp rhetorical tool known as an *alas*.” (That is, after their defeat*, alas*, they vanish from the national story.) That’s what most white Americans believed at the time. But they were wrong. Even in the difficult reservation era, native peoples found new ways to survive and resist. ([Aside]: So look for evidence of American Indians history in later chapters of this textbook—the Native American story continues in the 20th century, and today.) Amid the oppressive conditions of white-run boarding schools, younger generations of Indians built cross-tribal ties and networks to advocate on their peoples’ behalf. In this way, also, government policies in the West brought unexpected results.