Developing the Great Plains: A Look Back at Lincoln

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Abraham Lincoln is still most remembered — and perhaps rightly so — for his role in the Civil War and in the end to slavery. From the perspective of the 1860s, those events and Lincoln's involvement in them can be seen as dealing with the past. To end the potential of secession and to end slavery marked some necessary housekeeping for the United States. At the same time, however, Lincoln was also involved in decisions that would define the future of the country. While the Civil War dealt with the problem of how to keep the existing country together, these decisions dealt with how to expand the United States. When Lincoln looked West, he made decisions that decisively defined how the United States would be formed in and through its relationship to the territory it claimed as its own but did not yet control.

This last fact — that the United States did not yet control the Great Plains and large parts of the intermountain West — is important in two ways. First, it shows that Lincoln's decisions, both in the East and in the West, dealt with the expansion of the liberal state. In the east, the question was how to expand the concept of equality as individual citizens before the state throughout the territory to all men (although not yet women). In the west, at issue was the orderly expansion of the state through a process that would create equal citizens and ensure the control of the state over them. Second, however, the fact that the United States still had to gain control over these territories shows that Lincoln was looking outside the United States. He was looking at territories controlled by indigenous peoples. It might be fair, then, to take a look back at Lincoln not only in a historical perspective, but to return the president's gaze to him from that West. How did the president's policies — the Homestead Act, the building of the transcontinental railroad, and the interactions with Native peoples on the Plains — shape the future of this region? I will argue that these three threads of federal policy under Lincoln are not distinct, but connected and aimed at the same goal: to expand the control of the state.

This is a critical look. It seems to be a trend that American presidents are rated differently from the perspective of Americans and from the perspective of non-Americans. In expanding the United States, Lincoln was expanding it onto territories of other nations, interfering with their sovereignty. While it might be true that Lincoln was pushing for Western expansion in part in order to establish Union control over the West to keep Confederate control — and slavery — out of the region, this had little bearing from the
perspective of indigenous peoples. In fact, where indigenous peoples had a choice between the Union and the Confederacy, the policies proposed by the Confederacy often sounded much more appealing, especially in the early years of Lincoln's presidency, when the Union withdrew most of its Indian agents and Indian policy resources.

Aside from directly political goals, Lincoln's policies were of course also geared toward creating a successful economic climate in the new territories that stood in contrast to the plantation economies of the South. Expanding the liberal state meant to create economic opportunities for citizens of the state to settle in this territory. Homesteading, the railroad, and even Indian policies were distinctively aimed at this economic goal, too. The economic development of the Plains, then, becomes a crucial undertaking linked to the political goals.

Homesteading was linked, of course, to the Jeffersonian ideal of the republic of yeoman farmers. Five days before the Homestead Act was passed, Lincoln created the Department of Agriculture, designed to provide technical support for the westward expansion of farming. The idea had always been that yeoman farming would ensure that European decadence, poverty, and disenfranchisement could be held at bay and instead the New Republic would be built on a democratic basis, both politically and economically. Jefferson's ideas had been implemented in the Land Ordinance of 1785, which created the model for future dispositions of federal lands in any further expansions. It is important to remember that in 1803, Louisiana Territory was not acquired in the sense that the land now belonged to the United States. Instead, the United States had bought the rights of discovery from France, which gave it, according to the 1823 Supreme Court decision in Johnson v. McIntosh, the overarching eventual title to the land, while, however, the indigenous peoples retained possession of their lands until they would sell them to the federal government. Only the federal government could buy lands from indigenous nations; thus, all lands would eventually convert into government ownership and be sold to individuals in the process laid out by Jefferson. The Homestead Act of 1862 did not invent the land survey method to be used, nor any other fundamental aspects of the process. Those were in place. Homesteading simply created a big land sale. Lincoln applied the method created by Jefferson for the fertile Ohio River Valley to the rest of the country, but especially to the arid regions of the Plains.

By 1862, the Plains were the last region in the United States that were still in the control of indigenous nations. The United States had fought a successful war of conquest against Mexico in the Southwest. California had experienced a huge influx of settlers after the 1849 goldrush, and both Mexican
and indigenous presences had been ignored and brushed aside. American settlements in Oregon and Washington were becoming large enough that the presence of the Hudson Bay Company and the existence of indigenous nations could be held at bay.

The West, then, was not mysterious and unknown; it was, instead, a land of known or at least expected possibilities and opportunities, which, like a wedge, was keeping the United States apart. Cheap land would attract yeoman farmers, build an agricultural republic, and fill the gap. A transcontinental railroad would span the divide and, with railroad land grants, lead the way to settlements. And a day after the Pacific Railway Act, the Morrill Act was passed, creating the land grant college system. Thus, the Department of Agriculture would provide support for farmers attracted by cheap lands, with land grant agricultural colleges providing extension services, and railroads connecting them to markets for their products. All of this, of course, would only be possible if indigenous nations would give up the land and either become yeoman farmers themselves and integrate into this ideal agricultural republic, or disappear. While the federal government tried to push them to choose the first alternative, it did not really care enough to provide resources to make it work or to prevent the second.

Initially, and through the lens of romantic revision, the policies might be seen as a success. In historic analysis, however, most of the policies were a failure. Homesteading was a "magnificent failure", as John Martin Campbell (2002) puts it, but it was a failure, nonetheless. While it brought hundreds of thousands of people to the plains, of the around seven million people involved in western homesteading, five million failed. Granted, these figures include those who never really tried, but if the goal of the policy was to create a republic of small farmers, these were nevertheless failures. John Bennett (1996:261) found that less than twenty percent of the settlers on the northern Plains stayed put on their first land. The others were forced to look for better land, and water. Those descendants that still stay on the plains might see homesteading as proof for the strength of human will in the face of adversity. For many of their ancestors, finally staying on a piece of land was a consequence of sheer exhaustion, desperation and stubbornness. After an initial land and population rush, it soon became obvious that to simply transfer eastern and midwestern approaches to land and agriculture to the plains simply did and still does not work.

On the broader scale, transferring institutions from the east to the western landscape is a consequence of the expansion of the modern state. The liberal state, in treating all citizens as equal individuals, needs to homogenize landscapes, cultures, and institutions. As V. P. Gagnon (2004:9) says, "The ultimate goal [of nationalism] is not so much ethnic homogeneity as it is the construction of
homogeneous political space as a means to demobilize challengers…. Homogenization projects are always works in progress, always requiring some level of violence, overt or covert, explicit or implicit, to reinforce and reimpose an idealized sameness on the messy realities of society." Just like the United States could not bear to integrate both, a capitalist industrial society and a feudal plantation society, so could it not create a special approach to the western landscape. Thus, homesteading, which had worked in the fertile regions of the eastern woodlands, allocated woefully inadequate resources to families.

Homesteading also did not create new sustainable plains of yeoman farmers because it was a non-capitalist and non-industrial ideal implemented at the beginning of an intensification of capitalist industrialization. The Civil War, perhaps the first industrial war, swept away not simply slavery, but an alternative economic and political model. From now on, in accordance with the increased control and homogenization by liberal states everywhere at this time, there would be one model for everybody. Feudal plantation culture, as for example James Agee showed in *Let Us New Praise Famous Men*, stayed ingrained in the South, but it was clear that it would not compete, anymore, as an economic-political model on a national level. The Pacific Railroad Act, from an economic perspective, stands in direct contrast to the Homestead Act, as it makes clear that the future of the country will be invested in large corporations that are making investments for the government and are in return rewarded by the state. Homesteaders, then, fit into this model not as independent yeoman farmers, but as a means for the railroads to regain their investments and to make a profit. Railroads are not needed to carry agricultural products to markets. It is the inverse: agricultural products, and therefore farmers, are needed to create business for railroads. Very quickly, homesteaders gave way to larger farms, industrial agriculture, and the connection and dependence of farmers to speculative markets. This allowed for economic growth, but meant that homesteading and homesteaders would disappear.

"Implicit in all this," as Fredric Jameson (1991:366) points out, "is the thud of the predictable second shoe, namely, the effacement of Nature, and its precapitalist agricultures, from the postmodern, the essential homogenization of a social space and experience now uniformly modernized, and the triumphant achievement of…standardization and conformity…. [This] postmodern begins to make its appearance wherever the modernization process no longer has archaic features and obstacles to overcome and has triumphantly implanted its own autonomous logic." Just like homesteaders were used and abused in the development of the West, so too were American Indians. The homogenization of the land and the state would not allow for special cases, and "the relationship between peasant agriculture and traditional culture
has become only too clear; the latter follows the former into extinction" (Jameson 1998:67). The difference, of course, was that homesteaders were free to come and go — they could leave and go back to the developing cities to become wage laborers. With the beginning shift in economic reality from Jefferson's agricultural, egalitarian democracy to an industrialized, stratified society, workers were needed. The homesteading ideal, however, would continue to inform American popular expectations of rural life as well as official policy. The policies that Lincoln set in place would continue to constrict American Indian economic opportunities through allotment and consequential land loss. In fact, they still are a main reason for the disenfranchisement of rural, northern Plains Indian reservation communities.

While Lincoln himself did not set these specific Indian policies in place, the fact that they could be imposed on sovereign nations — that the liberal state would no longer tolerate alternatives within its boundaries — became established under Lincoln's Indian policies.

Under pressure by the immediate needs of the Civil War, the Union withdrew from its treaty obligations. This meant on one hand that annuity rations, upon which many reservation communities had become dependent, were no longer delivered. On the other hand, the withdrawal of army forces to the battlefields in the east meant that the federal government left the field to local actors. Although American Indian affairs had been affirmed to be the responsibility of the federal government, Lincoln gave states free reign in practice. While the army had never been able or willing to truly protect Indian lands and sovereignty, the withdrawal of the units sent a clear signal of government disinterest in any pretense to do so. This was a message that was not lost on local and state governments and on American Indian nations. In their decision to join the Confederacy, the Chickasaw, for example, cited the withdrawal of federal troops as a treaty violation that dissolved their own obligations toward the Union and free "to take such steps as to secure their own safety, happiness and future welfare as may to them seem best." Just as Lincoln could not tolerate secession of the South, however, he could also not tolerate the secession of Indian nations. After the war, this was made very clear in a series of punitive treaties with those southeastern nations who, in the face of disinterest by the federal government, had taken steps to take their political future into their own hands.

Where possible, punishment for such actions followed more immediately, such as in Minnesota. Lincoln purportedly wrote to his generals there that "necessity knows no law," and the army as well as the state militia were only too happy to follow that advice. I think it is important to understand that this was not simply the expression of special contempt against Native people, but the extension of a general policy
during the Civil War. After all, Lincoln had already suspended *habeas corpus* without the consent of Congress. Necessity knew no laws, and if there were laws — moral or legal — they could be suspended or ignored. Punishment for secession, whether by the Confederacy or by Indians, was not going to be limited by adherence to what undoubtedly seemed to be sentimentalities. Right made might, but Lincoln was too pragmatic to ignore that might also makes right. The Civil War saw the development of the mass destruction of civilian infrastructure as a tool and weapon of war. It would be the same generals using the same methods against Indians in the West that would end military resistance against conquest on the Plains. In the meantime, however, in the absence of the army and the state, local governments and their militias had free reign to forge ahead with action that might not have been endorsed by the federal government, but that was, in the end, tolerated by it, and might as well have been modeled on it. It was under Lincoln's watch that the Colorado militia massacred the Cheyenne camp at Sand Creek. The national media and the government might have been outraged by this act, but military actions against peaceful Indian villages before and after Sand Creek suggest that this might have been more due to the fact that it had not been controlled by the government than due to the tactics used.

Lincoln's policies toward the West point to his presidency as a turning point in American history. While old ideas, such as the yeoman farmer as the economic, moral, and political backbone of the country, were still influencing policies, they began to be used as a legitimization for new developments, as evidenced by the transcontinental railroad. The expansion of the United States into the West would be characterized and carried by private resource extraction companies, yet built upon old myths of tough individualism and rugged self-sufficiency. At the same time that the state celebrated these values, they had already been left in the dust of accelerating capitalism and industrialization. Yet they also provided a model for the expanding liberal state; the illusion that everybody started from the same base, that dreams were still achievable, and that opportunities were endless on the one hand, the model of organized and controlled equal citizenship on the other. It was only a matter of time and methods to close the frontier with gridlined, orderly rows of farms.

Looking back from the West, the combination proved a double strike against American Indian nations. As the state would no longer tolerate cultural, political or economic exceptions within its territory, assimilation would become the rallying cry for Indian policy. This assimilation, however, was still based on the illusions of turning the country into an agricultural paradise based on self-sufficiency. While private companies, with the help of government subsidies as established by the transcontinental railroad, would
develop the West primarily based on increasingly industrial resource extraction, Indians would be forced to develop into yeoman farmers, an idea that had already been outdated by the time it had been conceived. Thus, while Lincoln's policies would develop the West for the interest of the state and major industrial interests, left behind under the wheels of the railroads would be those that were expendable to the project: homesteaders, buffalo, and Indians. By the 1930s, all three had come to be appropriated as quaint symbols of past times. As outlined by Lincoln's policies, as subjects of the state, they were meant to either adapt to the new realities or disappear. Lincoln follows a trend common for nationalist politicians, and one that perhaps mirrors the Spanish policies of 1492. Then, the *reconquista* stormed Grenada at the same time that Columbus secured new possibilities for the *conquista*. Lincoln consolidated the Union while he was grabbing for new Western resources. While he built the future of the country, his policies negated the existence and future of those who did not quite fit in.

References


