

Introduction to this book

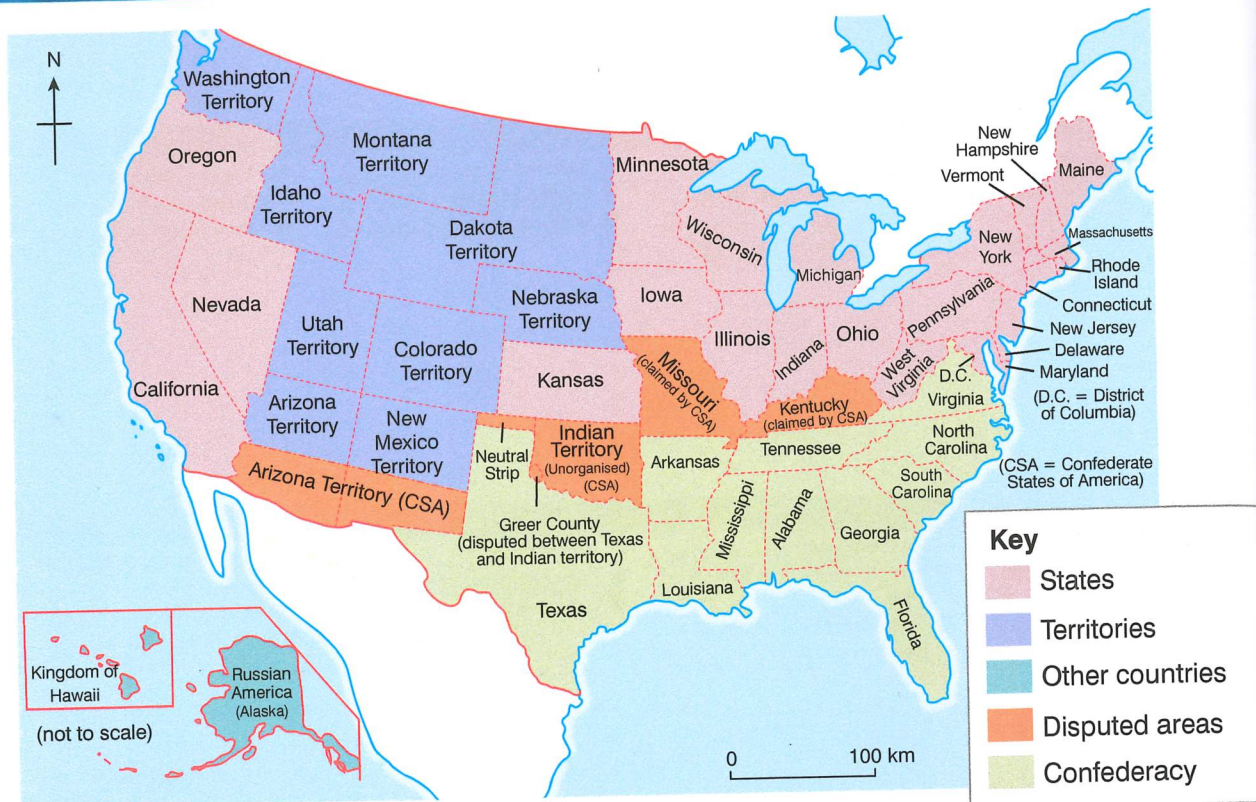


Fig. 1 The United States at the end of the Civil War, c1865

A CLOSER LOOK

The **American Civil War** was fought to save the Union: to prevent the Southern states from breaking away to form a new independent nation, the Confederacy. After years of tension between North and South, fighting broke out in 1861. The Southern armies finally surrendered in 1865 and the states of the Confederacy were brought back within the Union.

KEY TERM

isolationism: the American Revolution created a small nation in a vast land. The Founding Fathers of American independence were anxious to preserve the new nation from outside interference and 'foreign entanglements'. This desire to live in isolation from the 'Old World' was a deep-rooted theme in American politics.

The United States in 1865: the unfinished nation

In 1865 the United States was already a growing power in the world. Independence had been achieved. There was a strong sense of national identity. A strong political system had been founded, with a written constitution that was a model of its kind. Americans believed they were a fortunate, exceptional people, living in the Land of the Free. And yet this was an unfinished nation. It had taken a destructive **Civil War** to save the nation from splitting apart. Continuing social, regional and ethnic divisions threatened to undermine the American future: divisions between North and South; divisions between rural and urban America; between white people and African-Americans; between the states and the federal government.

There were questions over how well the industrial North could be reconciled with the defeated and resentful South. There were questions about the opening of the vast spaces of the American West. There were questions about the place of the United States in the wider world: how would its growing industrial power affect the traditional **isolationism** of an American nation, founded on the belief that foreign entanglements should be avoided?

The price of unity

Victory in the Civil War ensured that the United States of America had maintained the Union, but this was achieved at a terrible price. 700,000 Americans had been killed. Families and friendships had been divided. Vast areas of the country had been devastated, especially the South. Within days of General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse,

Abraham Lincoln, president since 1860 and architect of the victory of the North, was assassinated. With Lincoln gone, the problems of Reconstruction, of rebuilding the South and reconciling the warring factions who had fought the Civil War, became even more difficult.

The South

The South was deeply scarred by defeat in the Civil War. The states of the Old South, with its plantation society and its belief in **segregation**, were now forcibly reintegrated into a nation that was dominated by the fast-developing industrial economy of the North.

The divergence between the economic models of North and South, and Southern fears of the consequences of economic modernisation, had helped to cause the Civil War. The strength of the North's economy was a major factor in deciding its outcome. Now the South faced 'Reconstruction': an economic revolution imposed upon the South by the victors. The society of the Old South was about more than slavery, but 'King Cotton' and its dependence on the institution of slavery had been the foundation of the Southern economy. To replace it with another viable economic model was very difficult.

Slavery had also moulded the social and racial attitudes of the South. These attitudes were reflected in religion, politics and business. The South was not 'backward' but it was indeed different. White society was diverse and democratic, balancing the interests of large plantation owners, small slaveholders, and independent farmers. In 1865 all of these groups had reason to be resentful and fearful of the future.

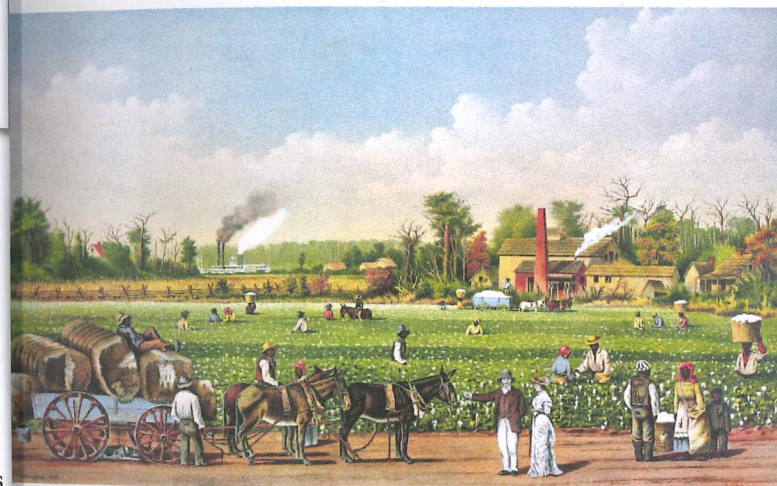


Fig. 2 Plantation in the antebellum South by the African-American artist William Aitken Walker (1838–1908)

The North

In the years before 1865, there was rapid economic modernisation in the North: booming East Coast seaports such as Boston and New York, and the growth of railroads and canals enabling rapid industrial development in the Great Lakes region, especially after the Erie Canal was completed in 1825. This rapid growth drew in large numbers of immigrants from northern Europe. Ten times as many of these migrants settled in the North as in the South. The rapid economic expansion of the North meant widening social and cultural divergence from the South. This social and cultural divide was reflected in the **abolitionist** movement.

The West

In 1865 westward expansion beyond the Mississippi river was more future dream than present reality. For the most part, the Great Plains, the Mountain West and the Pacific West still belonged to the Indian nations and the

CROSS-REFERENCE

Abraham Lincoln and his legacy are discussed further in Chapter 1, pages 1–2.

KEY TERM

segregation: the separation of white society from African-Americans. The institution of slavery was ended in 1865 but segregationist attitudes persisted for generations.

A CLOSER LOOK

The view from Hollywood

Gone With The Wind, the epic 1939 film of the novel by Margaret Mitchell, presents an idealised image of the Old South and the devastating impact of the Civil War. *Twelve Years A Slave*, directed by Steven Spielberg in 2013, presents a very different and more brutal image of plantation society. For an objective history of the conflict between South and North, see *The Civil War*, a great television documentary by Ken Burns.

KEY TERM

abolitionist: the fight for the abolition of slavery began long before the Civil War and was led by Northern activists who denounced the Old South as 'backward' and immoral. Leading figures included John Brown and Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

KEY TERM

California Gold Rush: the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California, 1848 led to a full-scale gold rush in 1849; this intensified interest in the West, and led to new routes across the lands west of the Mississippi, and San Francisco, California, rapidly developed into a major seaport city

A CLOSER LOOK

The Mexican War

The war between the United States and Mexico was fought between April 1846 and February 1848. A US victory led to vast new territories in the South and West: California, Nevada, New Mexico, and parts of Texas were incorporated into the United States. The war strengthened ideas of America's 'Manifest Destiny' to become a continental nation.

A CLOSER LOOK

The US Constitution and the separation of powers

The US Constitution arose from great debates in the 1780s. It was founded on the principle of the separation of powers – a system of checks and balances to ensure no one part of the government could ever dominate. The presidency (the **executive** power) was balanced against Congress (the legislature or lawmakers). The Constitution itself was protected by the Supreme Court (the **judiciary**) which could not be controlled by either President or Congress.

CROSS-REFERENCE

The Constitution and system of government is described in more detail in Chapter 1, page 3.

vast herds of buffalo that roamed the plains. Yet it was clear that westward expansion would indeed happen. A wagon route across the continent, the Oregon Trail, had been established in the 1840s. American settlers and prospectors had been pulled westwards by the 1849 **California Gold Rush**. Huge territories in the South and West had been acquired after victory in the **Mexican War**. Already, there were pioneer settlements in Kansas and Nebraska; and the Homestead Act of 1862 showed the determination of the federal government to accelerate westward expansion.

The idea of the West was at the core of American history and myth. From the first colonial settlements, there was always a moving frontier pushing westwards. Disputes between Britain and the American colonists over the opening of the West were a cause of the American Revolution. Disputes between the Northern states and the slave states had been a cause of the Civil War. Temporarily, these disputes slowed down westward expansion, but the end of the Civil War in 1865 was rather like a starting gun for the race to open the West. Huge social forces pushed into the West: land-hungry immigrants, ranchers, mining companies, and railroad builders. Binding them together was Manifest Destiny, the idea of America's mission to be a continental nation.



Fig. 3 Mapping the empty West: Clarence King's federal survey team mapping the 40th Parallel at Oreana, Nevada in 1867

The political system

American democracy rested on strong foundations. The federal constitution hammered out in the great debates of the 1770s and 1780s established the **separation of powers** between the **Presidency**, **Congress** and the **Supreme Court**; it also provided checks and balances to ensure no single arm of government could gain undue dominance.

In 1865 the main political parties were still taking shape. The Democratic Party, founded around 1828, was based on factions within the Jeffersonian party that had competed against the Federalists. The Republican Party was only formed in 1856, to address the issues of slavery and states' rights. Before 1861 there was a string of smaller parties and shifting alliances, such as the Anti-Masons, the Whigs, and the American, or Know-Nothing, Party. It was only after the Civil War that America settled into the stable rhythms of two-party politics.

Legacies of the past

Though the United States was an 'unfinished nation' in 1865, many key themes of American history and identity were already established. These legacies of the past had moulded the nation since 1776, and continued to shape the American future long after 1865.

Land of the free

The history and ideology of the United States was built on the idea of freedom. Americans saw themselves as free: from political or religious persecution; from the constraints of Old Europe; from the British rule they had thrown off in the American Revolution. Freedom was built into the **Declaration of Independence** and the **US Constitution**. Americans were free to own land, free to bear arms, and free to speak their minds. This idea of the 'land of the free' was a major reason why so many immigrants were pulled towards a new life in the New World.

SOURCE 1

Extract from a letter home, written in 1846 by Johann Adam Schaefer, a German farmer's son who settled in the Mid-West:

Dear Parents, only now do I really see to what kind of place I have come. At first I did not like this place and actually cursed it, but I see now how people are treated here – people who behave like good human beings are not judged by their riches but instead by their character. In three months here you can earn more in your work than in Germany in a whole year.

The legacy of slavery

The American ideal of freedom had a blind spot regarding African-Americans. The institution of slavery not only made slaves into legal chattels (private property) with inferior legal and human rights: it also fostered deeply-held racist attitudes. To abolish slavery was a matter of political decisions and constitutional amendments carried through in the 1860s, but to eliminate racial inequality would be a never-ending struggle over many generations.

The moving frontier

From the beginnings of colonial North America until 1890, there was a moving frontier. This involved successive conflicts against Native Americans; the first Indian war was in 1637. It set a pattern for future conflicts against the **indigenous** inhabitants. This came to a brutal climax in the years between 1865 and 1890. The moving frontier moulded the attitudes and patterns of white society: self-help and rugged individualism, being 'neighbourly', feeling superior to 'soft' Easterners, and denouncing the federal government far away in Washington.

American exceptionalism

Americans 'knew' they were a special people living in a special nation. This idea went back to the **Pilgrim Fathers** and the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s, who believed their new society was a 'City upon a Hill' – a beacon of freedom for the world. These beliefs ran through the Declaration of Independence and the ideals of the Founding Fathers, shaping American perceptions of the nation and its future.

At first these ideas were fundamentally defensive, to protect independence and to avoid foreign entanglements, as with the proclamation of the **Monroe Doctrine** in 1823. But the Monroe Doctrine implicitly reserved the future of the New World, both North and South, to be an American sphere of influence. Similarly, Manifest Destiny was expressed in high moral terms but meant territorial expansion and wars against Mexico and Native Americans.

Into the future: the United States from 1865

Between the end of the Civil War and 1890, the United States was transformed. The West was opened up at breathtaking speed. By 1890, the United States

KEY TERM

Declaration of Independence: the Declaration of Independence was issued on 4 July 1776, during the Revolutionary War; it was a manifesto to justify revolution against British rule and to define the democratic ideals on which the new nation was to be founded

KEY TERM

US Constitution: the supreme law of the United States; a written framework of government and laws, protected by the Supreme Court, which came into effect in 1789

KEY TERM

indigenous: native to a particular place

A CLOSER LOOK

In 1865 many Americans regarded the West as an 'empty land' waiting to be settled. Of course, it was not an empty land at all but populated by 1.2 million indigenous people in 500 Indian Nations, with their own established ways of life.

KEY TERM

Pilgrim Fathers: refugees from persecution who landed at Plymouth in Massachusetts in 1620 and seen by many Americans as the true forerunners of American freedom