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PART

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Creating and Preserving a Continental Nation

1844–1877

Between 1844 and 1877, the United States became a continental nation by winning three wars and creating a stronger central government. This energetic process of national expansion and purposeful state building spanned three decades and three periods often treated as distinct: antebellum America, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. In fact, these decades constitute a single, distinct period of American political and constitutional development that produced a consolidated national republic.

This era of state building began in the 1840s as the United States expanded to the Pacific through a diplomatic deal with Great Britain and a war of conquest against Mexico. However, geographic expansion sharpened the conflict between free and slave states and led eventually to the secession of the South in 1861. The Union government defeated the secessionists in a bloody Civil War and reconstructed the Union under the ideals of the Republican Party. Freed from slavery, millions of African Americans fought for better pay and equal citizenship rights. Under pressure to assimilate, most Native Americans adapted selectively while maintaining tribal ties and traditional lifeways. Subsequently, the national government promoted Euro-American settlement of the West by conquering Indian peoples and confining them to reservations.

The story of these transforming events focuses on three sets of historical issues:



Continental Empire and Cultural Conflict

A romantic spirit of geographic expansion grew during the 1840s, prompting southerners to demand the annexation of Texas and midwesterners to favor the acquisition of Oregon. Northeastern railroad entrepreneurs championed western settlement, as did merchants eager to trade across the Pacific. The quest for western lands sparked seizure of the Mexican provinces of New Mexico and California and purchase of Russian claims to Alaska. We analyze these events in Chapter 13.

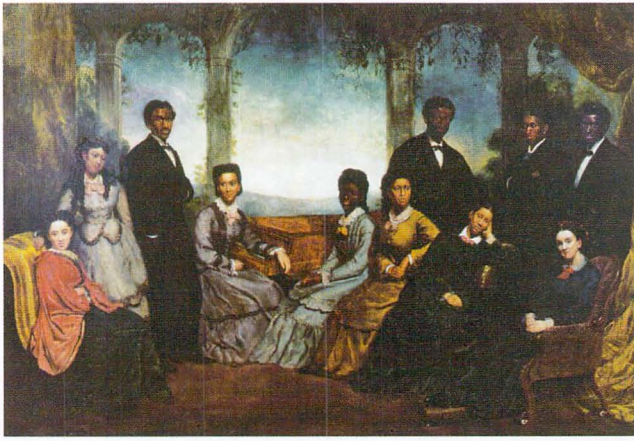
This process of expansion and state building, combined with the arrival of millions of immigrants, created new systems of racial and ethnic conflict. In the East, Irish Catholics and German-speaking migrants organized politically to protect their churches, saloons, and cultural identity, prompting a sharp reaction among native-born Protestants. In the West, the U.S. government fought wars against Cheyennes, Sioux, and Comanches on the Great Plains as it sought to integrate the region into the national economy. In the conquered Mexican territories, newly arriving whites jostled uneasily with Hispanic residents and despised Chinese immigrants. In an era of rapid economic development, western disputes often centered on access to land, jobs, and natural resources. For these conflicts, see Chapters 13 and 16.



Sectional Tensions, Political Divisions, and Civil War

The Mexican War prompted a decade-long debate over the expansion of slavery into the newly acquired lands. This bitter struggle led to the Compromise of 1850, a complex legislative agreement that won little support either in the North or in the South and divided the Whig Party. As southern Whigs became Democrats and northern Whigs turned into Republicans or Know-Nothings, the parties split along sectional lines. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 began a downward spiral of political conflict that ended in the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and the secession of eleven southern states. Chapter 13 details this breakdown of the political system.

In the long Civil War that followed, the military forces of the North and South were at first evenly matched. However, the North's superior financial and industrial resources gradually gave it the advantage, as did Lincoln's proclamation of freedom for slaves in 1863. Emancipation undermined European support for the secessionists and added thousands of African Americans to the northern armies. Union forces swept across the South and ended the war, which left a legacy of half-won freedom for blacks and decades of bitter animosity between northern and southern whites. The Civil War is the focus of Chapter 14.



National Power and Consolidation

The Civil War increased national authority. Three Republican-sponsored constitutional amendments limited the powers of the states and imposed definitions of citizenship—prohibiting slavery, mandating suffrage for black men, and forbidding state action that denied people equal protection under the law. The U.S. Army remained a significant force, enforcing Reconstruction in the South as late as 1877, while suppressing Indian uprisings and extending national control in the West.

The Civil War created a powerful American state, as the Union government mobilized millions of men and billions of dollars. It created a modern fiscal system, an elaborate network of national banks, and—for the first time in American history—a significant national bureaucracy. Inspired by Whig ideology, Republican-run Congresses intervened forcefully to integrate the national economy and promote industrialization, granting subsidies to railroad companies, protecting industries and workers through protective tariffs, and distributing western lands to farmers and cattlemen. In the 1850s and 1860s, U.S. officials also intervened aggressively in Japan and then built coaling stations that enabled U.S. steamships to carry products to Asia and bring Chinese workers to the United States. The nation's dynamic postwar economy had set the nation on a course toward global power. Chapters 15 and 16 discuss all of these events.

Creating and Preserving a Continental Nation 1844–1877

Thematic Understanding

This timeline arranges some of the important events of this period into themes. Consider the events listed under each of the five themes. Which set of events seems the most important? The least important? The theme of “Politics and Power” begins with a reference to sectional conflict and concludes with the section-driven Compromise of 1877. Based on other entries in this theme and your reading in Chapters 13, 14, and 15, explain how the nature of sectionalism and the power of the various sections changed between 1844 and 1877. >

	POLITICS & POWER	AMERICA IN THE WORLD	CULTURE & SOCIETY	WORK, EXCHANGE, & TECHNOLOGY	MIGRATION & SETTLEMENT
1840	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mexican War and Wilmot Proviso (1846) increase sectional conflict • Gold rush makes California eligible for statehood—free or slave? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. confronts Mexico and Britain: annexes Texas (1845), acquires Oregon (1846), fights Mexican War (1846–1848) extending U.S. borders to Pacific 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideology of Manifest Destiny prompts U.S. expansionism • Free-Soil Party (1848) advocates white smallholder farm society • Women seek legal rights at Seneca Falls (1848) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irish immigrants build northern canal system • Some states default on canal bonds • Walker Tariff (1846) lowers rates, increases foreign imports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whites migrate to Oregon and California • Arrival of millions of Germans and Irish causes social conflicts • Wars against Seminole peoples in Florida (1835–1842, 1855–1858)
1850	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compromise of 1850 • Whig Party disintegrates; Know-Nothing Party attacks immigrants • Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) sparks creation of Republican Party 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President Pierce opens Japan to trade; seeks to expand American territory and slavery into Caribbean by diplomacy and filibustering actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harriet Beecher Stowe's <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> (1852) attacks slavery • <i>Dred Scott</i> decision (1857) opens way to legalize slavery nationwide • Southern secessionists agitate for independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enslaved blacks expand cotton output in South • White settlers expand farm society to trans-Mississippi west • Entrepreneurs promote railroad building and manufacturing in North and Midwest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict of Hispanics and Anglos in the Southwest • White diseases and brutality kill most California Indians • Comanches and Sioux dominate Great Plains peoples and control trade in horses and buffalo hides
1860	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eleven southern states secede from Union, sparking Civil War (1861–1865); the Union's triumph preserves a continental nation • Fourteenth Amendment (1868) extends legal and political rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. diplomacy and Union army victories in 1863 cause British government to stop sale of ironclad ships to the Confederacy • Secretary of State Seward buys Alaska from Russia (1867) • Burlingame Treaty (1868) protects missionaries in China and limits Chinese immigration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confederate States of America (1861–1865) vow to continue slavery • Republicans seek to impose equal rights ideology on South • Black families accept ideal of domesticity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Republicans enact Whigs' economic policies: Homestead Act (1862), railroad aid, high tariffs, and national banking • Women assume new tasks in war economies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and Thirteenth Amendment (1865) free blacks from slavery • Aided by Freedmen's Bureau, African Americans struggle for freedom, land, and education
1870	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fifteenth Amendment (1870) extends vote to black men • Compromise of 1877 ends Reconstruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Britain pays the U.S. \$15.5 million for the depredations of the <i>Alabama</i> during the war • Anti-Chinese riots in San Francisco in late 1870s prompt Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ku Klux Klan attacks Reconstruction governments • Republicans embrace classical liberalism • White elites challenge ideal of universal suffrage and deny women's suffrage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharecropping spreads in South • Ranchers create cattle empire on Great Plains • Depression of 1873 halts railway expansion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. wars against Plains Indians (Cheyennes, Sioux, Apaches, and Nez Perce) open their lands to white miners, ranchers, and farmers • Dawes Act (1887) seeks Indian assimilation