The Civil War in the American West

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The West during the Civil War has been too often forgotten or presented in a fragmented fashion. In this volume Alvin Josephy gives the topic careful and comprehensive consideration. Using a wide variety of secondary sources and published memoirs, Josephy offers a sweeping view of the West between 1861 and 1865. Not only is this survey particularly effective, but it also establishes how the Civil War years fit into the broader context of western history.

The volume is divided into discussions of five geographical areas that saw distinctive kinds of warfare: New Mexico; Minnesota and the High Plains; Louisiana; California and the Central Plains; and, finally, Arkansas, Missouri, and Indian Territory. In New Mexico and Louisiana Josephy emphasizes the maneuvering and clashes of Union and Confederate armies. In Minnesota the focus is on the Union’s deteriorating relations with the Sioux. Subduing southern sympathizers and escalating conflicts with Indian tribes characterized the Civil War years in the Far West and Central Plains. The tragic brother-against-brother confrontation not only occupied whites in Missouri and Arkansas, but each side also sought allies among the Native Americans in present-day Oklahoma. It is a complex story that Josephy tells well.

Accompanied by a fine series of maps, Josephy’s crisp narrative informs the casual reader and scholar alike how troops moved and why. Woven throughout the volume are portrayals of the personalities of the commanders and their troops which add color and augment the tragic nature of the war. Attention to the interests of Native Americans further balances those chapters dealing with Indian-white relations. Readers interested in Iowa’s contribution to the war will encounter those often forgotten regiments that did not fight with Grant or Sherman. Iowa troops appear in accounts about Pea Ridge, the Red River campaign, the patrols along the Oregon Trail, and elsewhere.
Josephy is successful in another crucial aspect. For him, the Civil War is not simply an isolated four years of conflict. Instead he explores the context of the wartime activities. Readers will come away with a better sense of the prelude of the campaigns and the long-term consequences of others. For example, Texas's decades-long interest in controlling New Mexico helps explain the campaigns along the western Rio Grande and the penultimate clash at Glorieta Pass in March 1862. Tensions between full- and half-breeds in the Five Civilized Tribes over their forced removal to Indian Territory provided fertile ground for Confederate and Union agents to exploit. The result was intratribal warfare.

This "mosaic of frontier conflict" (230) during the Civil War, which had so many roots before 1861, often foretold the ugliness of Indian-white relations well afterwards. For example, a series of broken treaties with the Sioux in Minnesota formed the context for the outbreak of hostilities there. Not only did American forces do battle along the Minnesota River, they also struck out west. General John Pope's campaign, which included several Iowa regiments, evoked sufficient bad feelings among Sioux in the Dakotas to provide the basis for a senseless Indian war that would last several decades beyond Appomattox.

Similar disastrous decisions plagued areas south and west. With the outbreak of war, some U.S. Army Regulars in the west quit to join the Confederacy. Most of the others came east to engage the main bodies of southern troops. In their absence, volunteer regiments from the western states and territories manned the posts and forts. Many of these troops and their commanders operated under their prejudices against Native Americans. With minimal control from Washington they used deception and force to drive tribes from desirable lands. The massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians at Sand Creek in 1864 was just one manifestation.

While Civil War buffs will find parts of this story very familiar, most will be struck by the grandness of the West's experience. Scholars will wish that more unpublished primary source materials—government records and private manuscripts—would have informed the narrative. Recent studies of the guerrilla warfare in Missouri have been neglected and the general topic is surprisingly abbreviated. Nevertheless Josephy's summary of the Civil War military maneuvers will remain the standard account for years to come. His insights about the relevance of the Civil War for the course of western and Native American history are persuasive and well founded.