Westward Expansion Unites and Divides the United States

Throughout the history of the United States, various forces have worked to unify the country while, at the same time, other forces have worked to divide the country. Examining this tension between unity and division help us learn about the history of the country. This report will explore how the westward expansion of the United States during and after the Civil War is an example of these conflicting forces.

During the Civil War era, certain advances in technology helped to unite U.S. territory west of the Mississippi with the rest of the United States. For example, by 1861, the transcontinental telegraph line connected San Francisco to the East Coast.¹ The telegraph enabled messages to be sent in a matter of seconds instead of months. The building of the transcontinental railroad was another major technological accomplishment. Finished in 1869, this rail line connected California with the eastern United States. Within about thirty years, five transcontinental lines were built.² These railroads united the various regions of the United States. They also reduced coast-to-coast travel time from six months or more to about one week. In addition, because of the ease and speed of train travel, the settlement of the West rose dramatically.³

However, the railroad gave rise to a major economic division in the United States. The railroad companies began to charge farmers high fees to transport crops to market. Also, the railroads often owned the grain elevators where farmers stored crops until shipment. The farmers had to pay high costs for this storage. On top of this, in the 1870s, the price of farm crops dropped because of overproduction.⁴

The high railroad rates and lower crop prices drove many farmers into debt and increased the division between the “haves” and “have nots” in U.S. society. The heads of the railroad companies kept getting richer, and farmers, in general, kept getting poorer. Some leaders encouraged

farmers to stand up for their rights. Activist speaker Mary Elizabeth Lease stated, “We will not pay our debts to the loan-shark companies until the Government pays its debts to us.”

Inspired by such leaders, many farmers, especially in the Midwest and West, united to form an organization called the Grange. Founded in 1867, the Grange actually was made up of many smaller chapters or Granges. In fact, by 1875, more than 21,000 Granges with about 850,000 members existed. The Grange represented the needs of the farmers and opposed the unfair practices of the railroad. Soon the Grange helped to secure state laws that limited railroad rates.

Although the settlement of the West helped to unify the United States, it also increased one of the deepest divisions in U.S. history. This division was between Native Americans and non-native peoples of the United States. As increasing numbers of settlers, prospectors, and ranchers moved west of the Mississippi, they began to trespass on Native American reservations. As a result, conflict arose between Native Americans and the U.S. government, which usually supported the trespassers. This conflict led to the Indian Wars, a series of battles between Native Americans and U.S. military. Several atrocities against the Native Americans, such as the Wounded Knee Massacre, were committed. In 1890, the Indian Wars ended. However, the division between Native Americans and the non-native peoples of the United States remained and still exists to this day. U.S. citizenship was not granted to all Native Americans until 1924. Recently, many tribes have gone to court to regain lost lands or to receive payment for them.

These examples from the Civil War era illustrate the forces of unity and division in U.S. history. Even in today’s world, technological advances, such as the Internet and cell phones, continue to enhance communications and unite people. At the same time, the gulf between the “haves” and “have nots” keeps on increasing, and political divisions are stronger than ever. As we move into the 21st century, the forces of unity and division will therefore continue to have a major impact on the development of our country.

Bibliography

Primary Sources


Web sites


Encyclopedia articles


Books

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Organization

A research report has three basic parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. The introduction states the thesis, or main idea. The body provides supporting details for your thesis. The conclusion can summarize or restate your thesis and also connect your report to life today.

Westward Expansion Unites and Divides the United States

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The high railroad rates and lower crop prices drove many farmers into debt and increased the division between the “haves” and “have nots” in U.S. society. The heads of the railroad companies kept getting richer, and farmers, in general, kept getting poorer. Some leaders encouraged farmers to stand up for their rights. Activist speaker Mary Elizabeth Lease stated, “We will not pay our debts to the loan-shark companies until the Government pays its debts to us.”

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Taking Notes

One method for taking notes is to write the name of one of the examples and a research question at the top of a note card. Be sure to include the information you need for the bibliography on the card. You do not have to use all the information you find in your research report.

This is the section of the research report where the note below was used:

The building of the transcontinental railroad was another major technological accomplishment. Finished in 1869, this rail line connected California with the eastern United States. Within about thirty years, five transcontinental lines were built.

railroads: How did they unify the United States?

On May 10, 1869, the tracks of the two railroads finally met at Promontory, Utah. North America became the first continent to have a rail line from coast to coast. By the end of the 1800s, the United States had five transcontinental lines.

Footnotes

A footnote tells the reader where you found certain information. When you use a fact or quotation, you should footnote it. Footnotes are identified by small numbers in the text that correspond to numbers at the bottom of the page. If possible, each footnote should include the title, publisher, date, page number, or Web address. Footnotes can have different styles, but the goal of all footnotes is to give the reader enough information to find the original source. What sources will you footnotes in your research report?

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Westward Expansion Unites and Divides the United States (continued)

Bibliographies

A bibliography lists the sources used to write a research report. Your bibliography should contain a primary source, a Web site, an encyclopedia article, and a book. If possible, each citation should include the title, author, publisher, date, page number, or Web address. Notice that the formats for footnotes and bibliographies are different. Also notice that different types of sources are grouped together, and that the sources within each group are listed alphabetically. Use the format below for your bibliography.

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