

Elliott West
The General and the Chief: The Nez Perce War and Chief Joseph
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[Note: These notes were taken by the Project Manager during the summer institute. Please check everything for accuracy.]

The Greater Reconstruction transformed the American West and brought the West into the Union. What it did was try to extinguish traditional ways of life for American Indians.

The War began with a massive attack on white settlers in Idaho—the largest since the Civil War. The war begins in Idaho in June of 1877 near the Clearwater River. Nez Perce engage the army three times, and then decide to retreat. Go over to the Bitterroot. Gibbon comes to chase the Indians by the Big Hole. This becomes a crucial turning point in the War. Go through YNP and cross Canyon Creek near Billings. They get to Bear's Paw about 40 miles from Canada, where they are caught by General Miles, who forces them to surrender. They crossed 1500 miles being chased by the army, which had access to the telegraph and railroad. In fact, the chase was coordinated by the telegraph. They were caught in September and surrendered October 5, 1877.

What were the Indians thinking? They were thinking of the West as multiple regions. If they just left the area, they could get away from the army. However, Americans were thinking of the West in the “new” way—it was an integrated space. Localism: small, radius worlds....

Not only were they engaging the army, but they were also bringing everything they needed to start a new life. They were moving all of their belongings and horses with them.

“I will fight no more forever” Chief Joseph's “speech” Thunder Rising to Loftier Heights

Oliver Otis Howard: Abolitionist, Civil War, O.O. Howard, led the Freedman's Bureau

Nez Perce believed they were from the area of the Heart of the Monster—a lava outcropping is the place of their creation. The Nez Perce were a group of people. Their identities were rooted in villages at crucial points along rivers. The Clearwater River divided them into the Upper and Lower Nez Perce. The Upper lived along the Clearwater and the Lower along the *** valley in Oregon.

Their identity was local. Our first instinct when identifying ourselves is with a nation. The Nez Perce would identify themselves with a specific band, tied with a certain location. The essential identity was tied to the band and it only extended out to the group through blood and alliances. Leadership was therefore fluid, situational, and localized. The leader was the most respected individual. His job was not to tell people what to do, but to speak to the outside world, give input, and try to facilitate the people to work together. This leader wasn't necessarily the same individual that led people into war. Different leaders were responsible for different things. Who the leader was depended upon what the people wanted to do. The leader was “chosen” based on census. People gravitated toward “leaders” that had strengths with the particular things they needed done. The Nez Perce's economy was primarily hunting, gathering, fishing, and trade. It

was an elaborate economy that worked very well. Their sense of spirituality was place-based. They were bound by place. Who they were spiritually depended on where they were. *Wyakin* were spiritual leaders discovered during their quest at youth. These were animals that gave power. Worldly empowerment was also extremely important. It depended on what their strengths were as given by the *wyakin*.

Looking Glass was considered the “warrior.” Chief Joseph was a band leader and brilliant orator. He was the central spokesman or diplomat. Joseph only steps forward as a “military” leader when all of the other war leaders were dead.

The Nez Perce were profoundly impacted by Euro-Americans before they ever saw white people. They were influenced by the horse and became very wealthy and great horsemen. They were also profoundly affected by the small pox epidemic in the 1780s. In the 1820s they were impacted by the malaria epidemic. Their first contact with white people was with Lewis and Clark in 1803-1804. The Nez Perce “save” them by not killing them. Clark takes a Nez Perce wife and has a child. This child is with Chief Joseph’s band in the 1870s.

The Nez Perce became very wealthy during the fur trade period and were considerably richer than the white settlers around them.

The first stage of outside influence on the Nez Perce was good. With the exception of the epidemics, the contact gave them considerable power and wealth and was considered “good.” The Nez Perce’s religious tradition was inclusive and adaptive. If another religion had “power,” they would incorporate that “power” into their own spiritual beliefs. The Nez Perce sent four representatives to the east to get the “white man’s book” in 1831. The Protestants and Catholics took it as the Indians wanting to be “saved.” From the beginning the language of spirituality was very different.

In 1830, O.O. Howard was born

Narcissa and Marcus Whitman (doctor)

Henry H. Spalding

Missionaries left for the Pacific Northwest to convert the Indians. The missionaries were Presbyterian and required full conversion. Full conversion meant an entirely new way of life: be a farmer, be monogamous, and settle in one area.

Protestant and Roman Catholic Ladders used to teach church history

The main religious presence was Protestant. Initially, the Protestant missionaries have some good success. In 1839, the first baptisms were done. The Nez Perce wanted to tap into the spiritual power that the missionaries brought with them. This causes the beginnings of the division. “Young” Joseph was born in 1840 into a Christian family. By the time these guys were born, you can begin to see the division and stresses put on the Nez Perce. These divisions are accelerated by the Greater Reconstruction in the 1840s.

Whitman goes east to convince officials to not close the mission. In 1843, Marcus Whitman leads the first immigrants to Oregon. 800-1000 immigrants (1/3 of the Nez Perce population) are brought to Oregon by Whitman. It would be the equivalent of the Nez Perce bringing near 15,000 Indians to Boston and saying "don't worry, we're not staying, but there are more of us coming."

Elijah White: 11 laws designed to protect the missions. The laws require the Indians to choose a head chief. The head chief then becomes the person responsible for the whole in the eyes of the U.S. government.

Revival movements and (Smohalla prophet) were the dreamers. Joseph becomes a dreamer and is evidenced by the hairstyle. Old Joseph recants

1847: The Whitman's and several others were "massacred" by the Cayuses. The military responds and the Cayuses are crippled. These events are followed by increasing demand for treaties. In 1855, Isaac Stevens demands a series of treaties in the Pacific Northwest. There are a series of wars and uprisings against the military. The Indians are crippled. The Nez Perce's remain "neutral." They aren't crippled, but are left with no allies.

1855: O. O. Howard graduates from West Point. In 1857, Howard undergoes a conversion. He becomes a fanatical evangelical. Joseph follows father away from Christianity towards the dreamer movement at the same time Howard becomes an ardent Christian.

1860: Gold discovered in Idaho. As with every gold or silver rush in the West, it is followed by a major Indian war. It results in the treaty of 1863 in which the reservation is reduced by 85%. This would be the equivalent of the U.S. signing a treaty that requires them to give up all land east of Las Vegas.

1863: Howard is with the Union army on his way to Gettysburg. He was at almost every major battle in the War. His arm was shot off, but he remained and fought. While he made all sorts of very bad decisions, he still was brave. He became the head of the Freedman's Bureau. He founded Howard University in 1867 for blacks. He founded Lincoln Memorial University in Tennessee for poor whites. He was dedicated to bringing races together. He felt he was the "Moses" of the black man, and would go be the "Moses" of the Indian.

In the period from 1863-1877, things had cooled off. But, in the end, the decision is made that all of the Nez Perce had to be brought onto the reservation. It is the high point in consolidating the nation. By that time, the Nez Perce's are deeply divided.

War ends at the Bear's Paw near Snake Creek. Joseph spoke no English, so he could not have said the speech. Joseph comes down to meet Howard. He hands his rifle to Howard, but could not have given the speech. Two Christian Nez Perce are sent to the camp. Joseph gives his surrender to two Nez Perce who then tell it to someone in the military that translates it and gives the surrender to Howard.

Charles Erskine Scott Wood is the individual that writes down the surrender. Wood was very fearful of Indians to begin with, but then converted and developed deep empathy and sympathy for the Indians. He became adamantly against U.S. social and Indian policy. Wood was Howard's aid to camp. It was his job to write up Howard's reports. The speech is written in Wood's handwriting. In the document, he wrote a note: insert later. Did he write the speech later himself and put it in the document? Something like that was said, but Wood probably wrote it. Americans respond to it. They get the speech through the telegraph. The public's image of Joseph changes. By the end of the war, the public is primed for this speech, which crystallizes the public's image of Chief Joseph. He turns into a mythic figure that represents the plight of Indians.

Chief Joseph becomes at the end of the war what he had been at the beginning of the war. Joseph is exiled to Oklahoma to "the hot place." Most of the children die there, including Chief Joseph's daughter and Daytime Smoke—Clark's son. Some are allowed to return to the reservation in Idaho. Joseph is sent to the Colville reservation in Washington. He is allowed to return to Idaho twice. Joseph goes to Washington, D.C. four times and eats buffalo steak with Teddy Roosevelt. Joseph never learns English. He uses the myth to help his people. He never says he didn't say the speech, but he never says he does either. Joseph dies in 1904.

The final step in the Greater Reconstruction is the re-writing of history. There is no longer room for the messy complexity that was before. Take the complicated story and re-write and mythologize it to make the characters something popular culture understands, can sympathize, and connect with their own ideas of the heroic part of the American West.