

large chunk of territory in the Pacific northwest. In early May 1846, a few weeks before the Oregon agreement, the United States declared war on Mexico and went on to conquer California and most of what is today the American southwest. In the space of two years, the United States had grown by 1.2 million square miles, or about 64 percent. The territorial size of the United States, according to the head of the Census Bureau, was now "nearly ten times as large as that of France and Britain combined; three times as large as the whole of France, Britain, Austria, Prussia, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Holland, and Denmark together . . . [and] of equal extent with the Roman Empire or that of Alexander."¹⁵

Expansion across the continent was pretty much complete by the late 1840s, although the United States did acquire a small portion of territory from Mexico in 1853 (the Gadsden Purchase) to smooth out the border between the two countries, and the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867. However, the United States did not acquire all the territory it wanted. In particular, it aimed to conquer Canada when it went to war with the United Kingdom in 1812, and many of its leaders continued to covet Canada throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁶ There was also pressure to expand southward into the Caribbean, where Cuba was considered the prize target.¹⁷ Nevertheless, expansion to the north and south never materialized, and the United States instead expanded westward toward the Pacific Ocean, building a huge territorial state in the process.¹⁸

The United States had little need for more territory after 1848—at least for security reasons. So its leaders concentrated instead on forging a powerful state inside its existing borders. This consolidation process, which was sometimes brutal and bloody, involved four major steps: fighting the Civil War to eliminate slavery and the threat of dissolution of the union; displacing the Natives who controlled much of the land that the United States had recently acquired; bringing large numbers of immigrants to the United States to help populate its vast expanses of territory; and building the world's largest economy.

During the first six decades of the nineteenth century, there was constant friction between North and South over the slavery issue, especially as it applied to the newly acquired territories west of the Mississippi.

Indeed, the issue was so poisonous that it threatened to tear apart the United States, a result that would have had profound consequences for the balance of power in the Western Hemisphere. Matters finally came to a head in 1861, when the Civil War broke out. The North, which was fighting to hold the United States together, fared badly at first but eventually recovered and won a decisive victory. Slavery was quickly ended in all parts of the United States, and despite the ill will generated by the war, the country emerged a coherent whole that has since remained firmly intact. Had the Confederacy triumphed, the United States would not have become a regional hegemon, since there would have been at least two great powers in North America. This situation would have created opportunities for the European great powers to increase their political presence and influence in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁹

As late as 1800, Native American tribes controlled huge chunks of territory in North America that the United States would have to conquer if it hoped to fulfill Manifest Destiny.²⁰ The Natives hardly stood a chance of stopping the United States from taking their land. The Natives had a number of disadvantages, but most important, they were greatly outnumbered by white Americans and their situation only grew worse with time. In 1800, for example, about 178,000 Natives lived within the borders of the United States, which then extended to the Mississippi River.²¹ At the same time, the population of the United States was roughly 5.3 million (see Table 7.1). Not surprisingly, the U.S. army had little trouble crushing the Natives east of the Mississippi, taking their land, and pushing many of them west of the Mississippi in the first few decades of the nineteenth century.²²

By 1850, when the present borders of the continental United States were largely in place, there were about 665,000 Native Americans living inside them, of whom roughly 486,000 lived west of the Mississippi. The population of the United States, however, had grown to nearly 23.2 million by 1850. Not surprisingly, then, small and somewhat inept U.S. army units were able to rout the Natives west of the Mississippi and take their land in the second half of the nineteenth century.²³ Victory over the Natives was complete by 1900. They were living on a handful of reserva-