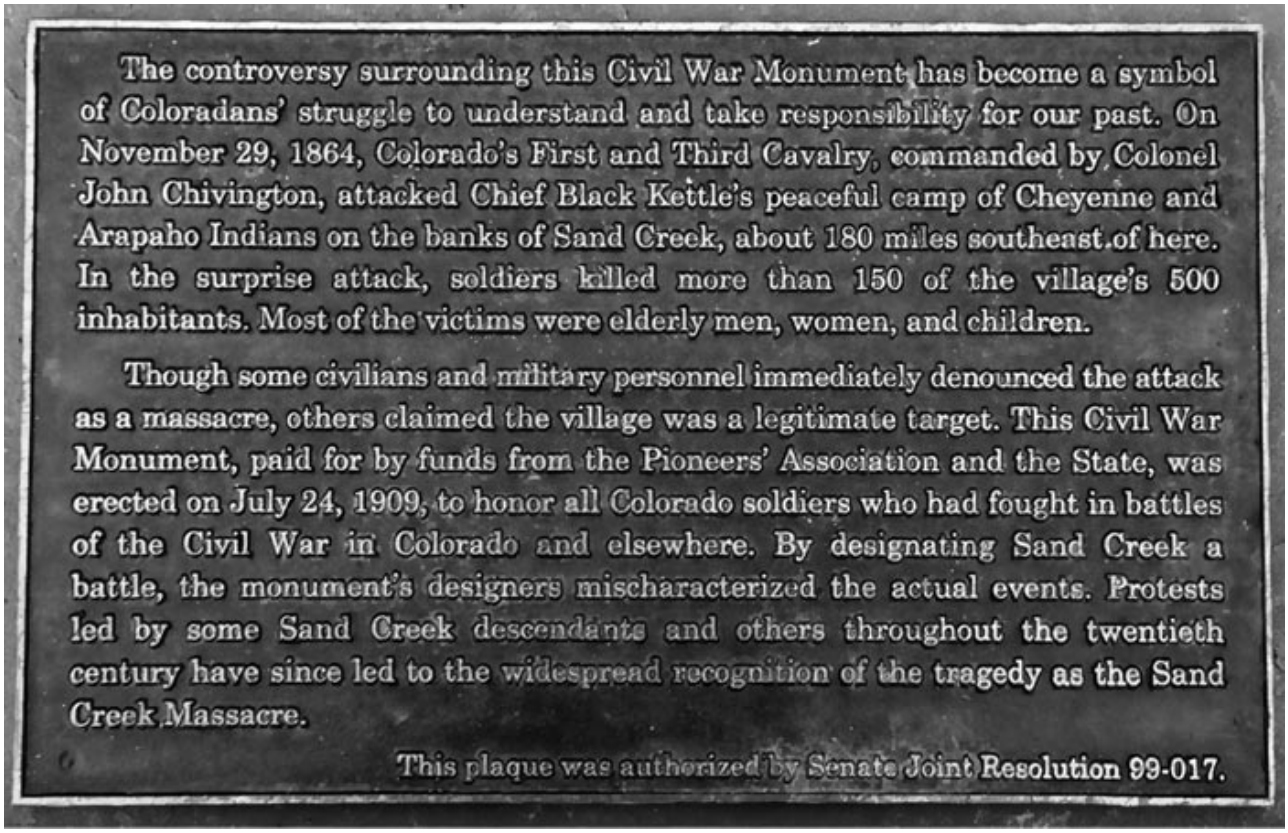
For Liberty and Empire



Remembering Sand Creek, Rethinking the Civil War

The runners were exhausted. Mostly young people from the Northern and Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, they dripped with sweat and nibbled on energy bars. They talked and sipped from bottles of water, striking odd poses to stretch their road-weary hamstrings. They had just finished a relay of roughly 200 miles, a "healing run" intended to protect them from the ravages of drugs and alcohol, violence and deprivation, boredom and sorrow—just some of the maladies that stalked them on the reservations where they lived.

Early that morning and throughout the previous day, Thanksgiving, they ran past stores gearing up for sales, past families crammed into cars speeding toward holiday gatherings, and past mile after mile of empty prairie landscapes. At impromptu rituals along their route, they reacquainted themselves with venerated tribal traditions and with land that had once belonged to their ancestors. Having finally arrived at their destination, the state capitol building in Denver, they were ready to complete their journey. They stopped to catch their breath and to commemorate a painful tragedy from their collective past. The date was November 29, 2002, the 138th anniversary of the Sand Creek massacre.

They gathered around the plinth of a Civil War memorial atop the capitol steps, which seemed to some of the Cheyennes and Arapahos like an odd classroom in

which to study tribal history. A teenager wearing Nike gear—from her hat all the way down to her fluorescent pink shoes—had traveled from Concho, Oklahoma, to participate in the healing run. She looked up at the statue and said, "I don't get it." A uniformed federal soldier, seemingly only a few years older than the athlete standing by his feet, gazed westward into the middle distance, across Denver's Civic Center Park and toward the Rocky Mountains (fig 1). He carried his rifle in two hands and thrust one leg in front of the other, ready to meet the enemy or Colorado's bright future, whichever crossed his path first. The runner asked, of nobody in particular, "Will someone tell me why we're here? What does this Civil War guy have to do with us? With Indians? With Sand Creek?"

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She did not have to wait long for answers. Drum beats and the opening strains of Chief White Antelope's death song signaled the start of a ceremony to reinterpret a plaque affixed to the north-facing side of the Civil War memorial (fig. 2). That marker first related the state's early history and then boasted of its citizens' patriotism—it reported that nearly 5,000 Coloradans had volunteered to serve the Union during the Civil War, "the highest average of any state or territory and with no draft or bounty"—before listing in neat columns the names of all of the "battles and engagements" in which those soldiers had fought, including, at the bottom right, a bloodletting typically labeled "a massacre": Sand Creek.

Although that episode may have seemed out of place on what otherwise appeared to be an honor roll, the story of Sand Creek's inclusion on that list suggests that as the United States continues its Civil War sesquicentennial celebration, taking a moment to study the intersection of Native and national histories, as well as the collision of the past and the present, may help to reshape popular conceptions of the Civil War's causes and consequences in the American West. Confronting Sand Creek's place as part of the Civil War forces onlookers to reckon with the fact that a conflict most often recalled only as a war of liberation should more properly be remembered as a war of empire as well.

Such an understanding may be foreign or uncomfortable for Americans, who often recall their history as one of steady progress punctuated by the occasional righteous war. In this view, the nation fought the Civil War only because of slavery and to expand freedom. Even the best scholarship can inadvertently contribute to such misconceptions. James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, for instance, the most influential study of the war written in recent decades, begins in the far West. McPherson suggests that the conflict grew out of struggles between North and South over territory acquired from Mexico—struggles, in short, over the shape of an emerging American empire. By

book’s end, though, McPherson largely drops the issue, focusing instead on the fate of the newly freed people, on struggles over definitions of citizenship, and on the growth of the federal government in the postbellum years. In other words, *Battle Cry* locates the roots of the war in the West, but then, with the return of peace, largely forgets the region.

1. Colorado Civil War Memorial, Denver. Unveiled in 1909, the statue is sited on the west side of the state capitol building. It faces the city’s Civic Center Park. Photograph courtesy of History Colorado (Subject file collection, Scan #10037235), Denver, Colorado.

Popular culture, much more even than scholarship, now typically frames the Civil War exclusively as a war of liberation. The recent film *Lincoln*, for example, might best be understood as answering a question Stephen Spielberg posed at the end of another of his war epics, *Saving Private Ryan*. Painting the earlier film’s final scene against a perfect commemorative canvas, the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial, Spielberg places an aging James Ryan amidst a forest of gleaming white crosses. After kneeling before the gravesite of the man who saved his life during the war, Ryan, a synecdoche for citizen soldiers, asks his wife if he has led a good life and if he is a good man. She replies that he has and that he is. With that, Spielberg, as close to a national narrator as the United States has, reassures moviegoers that World War II was a good war. The music rises, Ryan salutes his fallen comrade, the scene fades to a backlit American flag stiff in the breeze, and then to black.

Lincoln recapitulates the same queries and repurposes similar tropes. Forgetting that the war exploded not just out of the sectional conflict over slavery, but also out of the fight between the North and the South to control a growing Anglo-American empire in the West, Spielberg ignores that region and also the war itself, confining himself to a detailed recounting of the Thirteenth Amendment’s passage. In doing so, he suggests that President Lincoln died so that the United States might live and that the nation, because it destroyed the institution of slavery during the war, redeemed itself in blood. *Lincoln* provides an object lesson in catharsis through suffering, as Spielberg transfigures tragedy, the death of more than 600,000 soldiers, into triumph, and violence into virtue. Was the Civil War a good war? Has the United States lived a good life in the years since? Yes and yes, the filmmaker reassures his vast audience. And so, by viewing the war through a narrow lens and a crimped regional perspective, Spielberg shades collective memory into teleology. With *Lincoln*, he reads the past backward, obscuring as much as he reveals.

But no matter how it is portrayed in cinema, cast in monographs, or understood in the popular consciousness, the Civil War was rooted, from its beginning to its end, in the far West. Long after Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, long after President Lincoln’s assassination, long after the Thirteenth Amendment’s ratification, the nation continued to focus on how

best to settle the land beyond the 100th meridian, on how best to secure an empire that stretched from the Atlantic coast to the shores of the Pacific and beyond. And even after the war boasted a moment of redemption, a day of jubilee, for many Americans, it also featured episodes of terrible subjugation, days of dispossession, for others. Which is to say, even after the Civil War evolved into a war of liberation, it remained one of empire. For people who hope to understand this disjuncture, the experiences of Native Americans during the war, including at Sand Creek in 1864, may help.

Returning to November 29, 2002. As participants gathered around the memorial, state, municipal, and tribal officials spoke about Colorado's early Anglo and Native histories. Then Laird Cometsevah, a Southern Cheyenne chief and leader of a Sand Creek descendants' organization, recounted the details of the massacre. Cometsevah's version of the Sand Creek story served as an official narrative for many Northern and Southern Cheyenne people. He explained that after a gold strike in 1859 triggered a rush to the mountains near Denver, his ancestors endured years of escalating violence with settlers on the plains to the east. Cometsevah's forebears, weary of bloodshed and chaos by 1864, sought a truce with white authorities in Colorado. Late in September of that year, a group of peace chiefs, including Black Kettle, traveled to Denver, where they met with Governor John Evans and Colonel John Chivington. After Evans placed the negotiations in the hands of the region's military leaders, Chivington suggested to the Native emissaries that if they wanted to keep their bands safe, they should travel immediately to Fort Lyon, a federal installation in southeastern Colorado. The Cheyennes and Arapahos did as they were directed. The fort's commander told them to camp along the banks of Sand Creek. Then Colonel Chivington betrayed their trust.

Before daybreak on November 29, 1864, Cometsevah continued, 700 soldiers, men from the First and Third Colorado Regiments, "attacked that camp of peaceful Indians." By day's end, the Colorado volunteers had "slaughtered more than one hundred and fifty Indians," most of whom were women, children, and the elderly. Cometsevah pressed on: "The white soldiers had no mercy. They desecrated their victims' bodies, cutting open the belly of a pregnant woman, murdering children, and slicing the genitals from the corpses lying on the ground." He concluded: "Our people still haven't recovered from that treachery."

As the assembled dignitaries and runners contemplated Cometsevah's words, Bob Martinez, a Colorado state senator, stood next to a freshly cast plaque shrouded in sweetgrass. After Arapaho and Cheyenne singers performed an honor song, Martinez unveiled a bronze plaque, narrating the politics of memory surrounding Sand Creek's placement on the nearby memorial (fig. 3). The text noted, "The controversy surrounding this Civil War monument has become a symbol of Coloradans' struggle to understand and take responsibility for our past." It then recounted the Sand Creek story before returning to the topic of the contingent and contested nature of public memory: "Though some civilians and military personnel immediately denounced the attack as a massacre, others claimed the [Cheyenne and Arapaho] village was a legitimate target." The

sponsors of the Civil War memorial, for their part, had “mischaracterized the actual events” when they “designated Sand Creek a battle.” In contrast, the plaque concluded by pointing to the “widespread recognition of the tragedy as the Sand Creek Massacre.” The ceremony complete, Martinez posed for pictures with the Cheyenne and Arapaho runners.

For some onlookers, Senator Martinez’s participation in the ceremony might have seemed incongruous. Four years earlier, rather than seeking to reinterpret elements of the monument, Martinez had tried to erase them. He had sponsored a bill in the state legislature to delete Sand Creek from the list of battles and engagements on the statue’s base. Congress had just authorized the National Park Service to commemorate Sand Creek at a new historic site located near the killing field, thrusting the massacre back into the spotlight in Colorado. Martinez found himself shocked when he walked by the statue on his way to work in the capitol.

It seemed to Martinez that Sand Creek, “a horrible atrocity,” in his view, had no place on this list of “battles.” After all, he believed the massacre “had nothing to do with the Civil War,” a conflict best remembered, he believed, for preserving the Union and ending slavery. Sand Creek’s inclusion on the memorial, Martinez suggested, insulted the tragedy’s Native American victims and diminished the sacrifices of the “Colorado Civil War veterans who fought and died in the actual Civil War battles that are listed.” Martinez’s colleagues in the state legislature agreed. On May 5, 1998, they passed a joint resolution reading, “Sand Creek was not, in fact,” part of the Civil War. Nor, the document continued, was it “a battle.” Instead, it was “a massacre,” and therefore it would have to “be removed from the memorial.”

A bit less than a century before that vote took place, Coloradans likely would have been shocked to learn that Sand Creek would someday be severed from its Civil War context. On July 24, 1909, the Pioneers Association, a heritage organization that celebrated Colorado’s earliest settlers, participated in a national commemorative project by unveiling the state’s Civil War memorial. With veterans of the war nearing the end of their lives around the country, archives throughout the United States acquired vast document collections, authors published stacks of regimental histories, and cities unveiled monuments designed to shape how future generations would remember the war.

As David Blight, Michael Kammen, Edward Linenthal, and other scholars have argued in recent years, this upsurge of memorialization embodied a reconciliationist impulse. A heroic narrative of the war emerged around the turn of the century, a glorious martial story in which Union and Confederate soldiers fought bravely, well, and in service of virtuous goals. The war’s root causes—struggles over the fate of slavery, over competing definitions of federal authority and citizenship, and over the right to shape an emerging American empire in the West—could be set aside in service of an amicable reunion between the North and the South.


2. A plaque affixed to the base of the Colorado Civil War Memorial. Sand Creek is included, at the bottom right, among the list of “Battles and Engagements” in which Coloradans fought during the war. Photograph courtesy of the author.

At the dedication of Colorado’s Civil War memorial in 1909, event organizers stitched together national unity and regional pride, seamlessly integrating visions of empire and liberty. Robert Steele, chief justice of the state supreme court, oversaw the event. The statue’s designer, John Howland, had served in the First Colorado Regiment, and he, along with a crowd of other veterans, participated in the ceremony. A huge audience gathered to celebrate the heroic Colorado volunteers who had helped save the Union, and, at Sand Creek, cleared the way for the nation to realize its Manifest Destiny—projects that would have been inseparable for most onlookers.

A phalanx of riflemen fired a twenty-one-gun salute as Chief Justice Steele pulled back an American flag, unveiling the bronze foot soldier. A military band then broke the “hush of patriotic awe,” balancing the emancipationist spirit of “Marching Through Georgia” (“Hurrah! Hurrah! We bring the jubilee! Hurrah! Hurrah! The flag that makes you free!”) with the Lost Cause nostalgia of “Dixie” (“I wish I was in the land of Cotton, Old times they are not forgotten”). As he rose to speak, Thomas Patterson, a former U.S. Senator and owner of Denver’s *Rocky Mountain News*, invoked the spirit of reconciliation, declaring that, “we are all Americans today, and we all glory in one flag and one country.” General Irving Hale, who a decade earlier had gained fame during the Spanish-American War as a proud imperialist and who later had helped to found the Veterans of Foreign Wars, followed Patterson to the dais, celebrating the Civil War “for making freedom universal for all Americans.” Hale’s remarks ignored the conflict’s effect on Native peoples, including the Cheyennes and Arapahos, but captured the spirit of the day. Nether Hale nor anyone else at the event seem to have given a moment’s notice to the fact that Sand Creek enjoyed pride of place on the monument.

That Sand Creek would be depicted on the statehouse steps both as a battle and as a chapter in Colorado’s Civil War story culminated nearly half a century’s wrangling over memories of the violence. John Chivington, for instance, worked from November 1864 until his death three decades later to shape public perceptions of Sand Creek. He always insisted that the engagement had been a legitimate part of the fight to preserve the Union and to spread civilization into the West. Late in 1864, when he first bragged about Sand Creek, the bloodshed’s status as part of the Civil War seemed like a foregone conclusion. Two years earlier, Chivington had secured his reputation for courage, fighting for the Union in New Mexico at the Battle of Glorieta Pass. Chivington recognized Sand Creek and the Civil War as having been catalyzed by the nation’s struggle over the future of the West. An abolitionist and Methodist minister, he had ridden the circuit in Kansas in the 1850s, hoping to ensure

that territory's future as free soil. He had experienced the 1860 election as a national referendum on competing visions of expansion: the Republican Party's free soil campaign, kin to Thomas Jefferson's promised "empire for liberty" in the West, versus the Democrats' insistence that slavery should be allowed to root itself in land acquired during the U.S.-Mexican War.

The Republicans carried the day in the 1860 election and then, after most Southern members of Congress absented themselves, passed legislation (the Morrill Act, the Pacific Railroad Act, and the Homestead Act) and created new pieces of the federal apparatus (including the Department of Agriculture) to ensure that the conquest and settlement of the West would proceed according to the party's plans. Chivington knew that many of his men in 1864 had volunteered to fight for the Union because they believed that the Lincoln administration had promised them the West as fair recompense for their service. In this vision, Native peoples would have to make way for onrushing white civilization—or, as in the case of the Arapahos and Cheyennes at Sand Creek, be crushed by the gears of war.

In spring of 1865, Chivington fine-tuned his Sand Creek story for the first of many times. In the months since the massacre, two things had happened to force changes in his recollections. First, despite his concerted public relations efforts, several of his former subordinates, haunted by memories of the carnage, had begun suggesting that Sand Creek had been a massacre, convincing federal authorities to launch inquiries into the violence. And second, the Civil War had ended, leaving the nation struggling to understand what had caused such a terrible paroxysm of violence. Chivington was determined that as this triage of national memories took place, Sand Creek would be bathed in the reflected glory of the war.

In April 1865, Chivington provided federal investigators with a lengthy account of Sand Creek, including lessons about the relationship between the Civil War, the nascent Indian Wars, and the future of the West. For several years prior to Sand Creek, Chivington claimed, he had "been in possession of the most conclusive evidence of an alliance, for the purposes of hostility against the whites, of the Sioux, Cheyennes, Arapahos, Comanche river, and Apache Indians." Ignoring diplomatic barriers and the bloody history separating those Native nations, Chivington insisted that the allied tribes had represented an existential threat both to white settlers in Colorado Territory and to the Republican vision for control of the Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and beyond. Without Colorado, without Sand Creek, he noted, the party of Lincoln and liberty would have lost its surest toehold in the West.

Chivington placed the horror of Sand Creek against a backdrop of Confederate intrigue. "Rebel emissaries," he revealed, "were long since sent among the Indians to incite them against the whites." George Bent, son of a borderlands trade tycoon and former federal Indian agent named William Bent and his Cheyenne wife, Owl Woman, had supposedly served as the South's agent. Bent, Chivington claimed, had promised the Plains tribes that with "the Great Father

at Washington having all he could do to fight his children at the south, they could now regain this country." In other words, Chivington suggested, with federal authorities distracted by fighting the Civil War back east, Native peoples could push white settlers out of the West, retaking land they had steadily lost since the beginning of the rush to Colorado. The specter of such carnage seemed terrifying in context. With memories of the Dakota uprising in Minnesota in 1862 and the Cherokees' decision to side with the Confederacy still fresh, Chivington insisted that Sand Creek should properly be understood as part of the successful struggle to preserve the Union.

Federal investigators were unmoved by Chivington's claims. Each of the investigations into Sand Creek damned Chivington and the violence he wrought, with none doing so more stridently than the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War (JCCW). Founded in 1861, the JCCW inquired into a vast array of controversial topics, including the causes of Union losses, the treatment of wounded and imprisoned soldiers, and the use of so-called colored troops in the North's armies. Its report in 1865, for example, covered the debacles the previous year at the Crater outside Petersburg, the infamous massacre of African American soldiers at Fort Pillow in Tennessee, and Sand Creek, among other contentious issues.

Pulling no punches, the JCCW recommended that Governor Evans be sacked and that Chivington—who, the committee concluded, had committed "murder"—be cashiered and court martialed. At once acknowledging Sand Creek's place within the Civil War and also attempting to segregate the massacre from the struggle to crush the rebellion, the report's authors raged, "It is difficult to believe that beings in the form of men and disgracing the uniform of the United States, soldiers and officers, could commit or countenance such acts of cruelty and barbarity." Chivington, they noted, had "deliberately planned and executed a foul and dastardly massacre which would have disgraced the veriest savages among those who were the victims of his cruelty." Sand Creek so threatened the honor of the Union cause that the JCCW hoped its perpetrators would be regarded not as federal soldiers but as frontier rogues, less civilized even than the Indians they had killed.

Westerners, and Coloradans especially, did not accept that verdict. After the JCCW issued its findings, the *Rocky Mountain News* lauded Chivington and defended Sand Creek as a necessary part of taming the savage West. And years later, William Byers, the *News*'s editor at the time of Sand Creek, began a print war with Indian reformer Helen Hunt Jackson, who had recently used Sand Creek as an example of the federal government's malice toward Native peoples. In his attacks on Jackson, Byers hewed to the line drawn by Chivington, insisting that the Colorado volunteers had been loyal Union men who had killed hostile Indians. Although federal troops were still grappling with Native nations during the Indian Wars when Byers attacked Jackson, he nevertheless claimed that Chivington and his men had pacified rather than inflamed the Plains tribes. He concluded that Sand Creek had "saved Colorado and taught the Indians the most salutary lesson they ever learned."

Jackson scoffed at the idea that Sand Creek had quieted the region's tribes, rebutting Byers's claims by waving the bloody shirt. The Indian Wars that the massacre had precipitated had cost federal authorities millions of dollars, she explained, requiring that some 8,000 troops be "withdrawn from the effective forces engaged with the Rebellion." Not only had the massacre been an atrocity, she argued, it had also detracted from the Union war effort. Two years later, when Jackson published *Century of Dishonor*, she expanded her argument, suggesting that Sand Creek had been a predictable outgrowth of longstanding federal Indian policy. The Republican Party's vision of empire, of a white man's republic in the West, had helped set the nation on the path to the Civil War and the Indian Wars.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, with men like William Byers still trying to shape public memory of Sand Creek, George Bent decided that he had to weigh in on the massacre's history. Anthropologists were arguing at the time that Native Americans were a vanishing race, historians were lamenting the closing of the frontier, and the public was consuming mountains of dime novels. The West, in popular culture and public policy, stood at the center of discussions about the nation's future. Bent worried that Indians had no voice in those conversations. He began collecting tribal history and lore for James Mooney, a renowned Smithsonian ethnographer, and George Bird Grinnell, a founder of the discipline of anthropology. After the two scholars disappointed him (Mooney because he would not listen, Grinnell because he withheld proper credit), Bent sought out another collaborator. He began working with George Hyde, a relatively obscure historian. In 1906, the two men placed six articles in a magazine called *The Frontier*.

Those essays, published under Bent's name, inverted Chivington's Sand Creek stories. Although Bent acknowledged that he had fought for the South—he had served in General Sterling Price's First Missouri Cavalry—he mocked the "men in Colorado [who] talked about Rebel plots" to ally with the region's Indian peoples. Pointing to the constraints of Native diplomacy, he noted that the Kiowas and Comanches were "inveterate foes of Texas," and suggested that the Cheyennes and Arapahos, though hardly staunch Unionists, likewise had no incentive to join with the Confederacy. Turning to the massacre itself, Bent, who survived a wound he received there, related details of Chivington's betrayal of the Cheyenne and Arapaho peace chiefs; of Black Kettle's decision to raise a white flag over his lodge, signaling that his people were friendly; and of the Colorado troops' butchery. (In 2002, Laird Cometsevah would draw on Bent's Sand Creek stories when, speaking on the steps of Colorado's capitol building, he recounted the history of the massacre.)

For the lion's share of his articles, though, Bent moved beyond the massacre's particulars, instead considering the implications of the violence. He understood the Civil War as a war of imperialism rather than liberation, a conflict that, after it ended, left the Plains tribes and white Westerners awash in blood. Unlike Chivington and Byers, who maintained that Sand Creek had brought peace to the region, Bent believed that the fighting begat more

fighting. The massacre touched off a period of violence that only ended with the subjugation of his people during the dawning Reservation Era. Sand Creek, in Bent's telling, was part of the rotten foundation upon which the federal government constructed an empire in the West.

Chivington's loyalists did not allow Bent's charges to stand unchallenged. With most veterans of the First and Third Colorado Regiments well into their golden years, Jacob Downing read Bent's essays in the *Frontier* as an attack on the memory of his own and his comrades' honorable Civil War service. A retired major who, prior to Sand Creek, had distinguished himself fighting Confederates—at Apache Canyon, Glorieta Pass, and several other engagements in the conflict's far western theater—Downing had in the years after the war become one of Denver's most prominent citizens, a businessman and philanthropist devoted to various municipal causes. In 1906, he remained active in several local heritage organizations, including the Colorado chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic.

As a steward of the state's early history and Civil War memory, Downing tried to uphold the status quo by attacking the Bent family. Outraged that an Indian had dared to label the actions of white men "savage," in the pages of the *Denver Times* he called William Bent a "squaw man" and George Bent "a halfbreed." Sand Creek, Downing continued, should be recalled as Chivington had always suggested: a righteous battle fought against hostile Indians determined to slow the march of progress in Colorado, and also as a critical part of the Union war effort in the West.

Before Downing died the next year, he helped to influence early planning for Colorado's Civil War memorial, the statue that would sit atop the state capitol steps. After 1909, that monument would carve Chivington's Sand Creek story into stone, lending an aura of permanence to what had been a contested narrative.

Less than a century later, in 1998, Senator Martinez decided to recast that story, a reminder of the contingent nature of public commemoration. After Martinez's resolution passed the state legislature, the Capitol Building Advisory Committee hired a local metal worker. The artisan would remove the plaque from the statue's base, grind the words "Sand Creek" away, burnish the remaining twenty-one "battles and engagements" to match their original color, and then reattach the nameplate to the memorial. The horror of the past could be erased for just $1,000.

Or not. When David Halaas, chief historian at the Colorado Historical Society, heard about Martinez's resolution, he thought "it was a well-intentioned but lousy plan." Halaas worked at the time with Cheyenne representatives on other efforts to memorialize the massacre, including the Park Service's national historic site. He contacted Laird Cometsevah and Steve Brady, head of the Northern Cheyenne Sand Creek descendants committee. Cometsevah thought "that Sand Creek should not be a battle," but he did not want to see it "erased" from the Civil War memorial. Brady agreed: "Sand Creek was part of the Civil War,

though not as a battle." He elaborated: "There were more than a few Indian massacres that happened during the Civil War, though white people tend to forget those stories."

As word spread that the legislature had not consulted with the Sand Creek descendants, opposition to Martinez's well-intentioned revisionism surfaced in Denver. Tom Noel, a historian and public intellectual known as "Dr. Colorado," entered the fray, writing an opinion piece in the *Denver Post* just after Independence Day 1998. Noel argued that Coloradans should grapple with their history, warts and all, rather than forget it. He suggested that the state's Civil War memorial should remain untouched and that "the story of Sand Creek, with all of its various interpretations, needs to be left open for public discussion and reflection."

Some of Chivington's latter-day defenders, including Mike Koury, an author, editor, and member of a national heritage organization known as the Order of the Indian Wars, agreed with Noel that the plaque should be left alone. "Taking [Sand Creek] off a statue," Koury pointed out, "is not going to make it disappear. You gain nothing by hiding it under a blanket." Unlike Noel, though, Koury advocated a conservative course not out of respect for the complexity of ever-shifting collective memories, but because he thought "politically correct" meddling would "dishonor people who fought in the Civil War." Duane Smith, an American historian on the faculty at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, piled on. Annoyed by bureaucrats and activists doing violence to the past, Smith sneered that it would be "absolutely stupid" to alter the statue to suit the politics of the day. He concluded, "Sand Creek was a tremendously important Civil War battle," suggesting that the volunteer soldiers under Chivington should still be honored for their patriotism.

3. A revised plaque placed in 2002 near the Colorado Civil War Memorial. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Finally, on July 31, 1998, Cometsevah and Halaas testified before Colorado's legislature. They explained that Sand Creek had been part of the Civil War. Halaas noted that details about the slaughter could be found in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (otherwise known as the*OR*), the go-to source for historians researching military aspects of the war; that the men of the First and Third Colorado Regiments had mustered into the Union army; and that Evans and Chivington had believed that the Native people at Sand Creek had likely forged an alliance with the Confederacy. Cometsevah and Halaas then offered the legislators a compromise. Rather than "removing Sand Creek," the state should provide the memorial's visitors with context, "inform[ing] the public about the massacre through historical markers." Within a few months, the legislature adopted the suggestion.

Close to four years passed before the new interpretative plaque could be unveiled, four years filled with committee meetings and public outreach events, four years spent trying to spin a single narrative thread that would explain Sand Creek's relationship to the Civil War while also satisfying descendants of the massacre's victims and contemporary Coloradans fiercely proud of their state's heritage. In the end, 138 years after Colonel Chivington and his Colorado volunteers descended on the Native Americans camped along Sand Creek, the plaque was ready.

After the unveiling ceremony, the Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders and the young runners from their tribes prepared to leave Colorado's capitol, to make their long drives back to Oklahoma, Montana, and Wyoming. Laird Cometsevah asked the teenage girl wearing Nike gear if she had an answer to her question, if she understood what she was doing there, what Sand Creek had to do with the Civil War, and what the Civil War had to do with Indians. She replied, "I think so."

Cometsevah later regretted that he did not press her to elaborate. "I hope she realized that white people were fighting over who would control Colorado and the West at that time," he said, "and I hope she and other people who see the statue understand that Sand Creek happened during the Civil War, but that it wasn't in any way, shape, or form a battle. Chivington and his men were Civil War soldiers, but it was a massacre." With a sigh, Cometsevah concluded, "I hope that young lady understood all of that. But it's always hard to know what people do and don't understand. All we can do at these sorts of things [the healing run and the reinterpretation of the Civil War memorial] is the very best we can."

In the ten years since the state of Colorado rededicated its Civil War memorial, hundreds of thousands of people have visited the capitol steps in Denver. Since 2007, tens of thousands more have traveled to the southeastern part of the state, where they have climbed a small rise overlooking the Sand Creek killing field, located within the National Park Service's historic site. And now, with the Civil War sesquicentennial celebrations ongoing and the sesquicentennial of Sand Creek upcoming, the University of Denver and Northwestern University are grappling with John Evans's role in the founding of their institutions, the Park Service is set to release an interpretive film about the relationship between Sand Creek and the Civil War, and the Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples are planning more healing runs to mark the 150th anniversary of the massacre.

But even amid this uptick in memorial activity, it remains difficult, as Laird Cometsevah suggested, to know for certain what onlookers will make of their experiences, of the history and repercussions of Sand Creek, and of the massacre's relationship to the Civil War—or even if they will make anything at all of that relationship. Most Americans, after all, prompted by popular culture and scholarship, still remember the Civil War only as a war of emancipation, a good war.

But viewed from Indian Country—from the gibbets of Mankato, Minnesota, in 1862, where thirty-eight Dakota Sioux were hanged; from the Bosque Redondo in New Mexico in 1864, where Navajos staggered to the end of their Long Walk; and from the banks of Sand Creek, where peaceful Arapahos and Cheyennes fell before John Chivington's men—the Civil War looked different. It looked like a war of empire. Perhaps visitors to Colorado's state capitol, when confronted with a reinterpreted statue of a Union soldier, will learn that the Civil War could actually be both of those things at once. Perhaps they will learn that the nation's history is often shot through with such painful ironies and that the act of memorializing the past is fraught with unexpected lessons.

Further Reading

John M. Carroll, *Sand Creek Massacre, a Documentary History* (New York, 1973); Jerome A. Greene and Douglas D. Scott, *Finding Sand Creek: History, Archeology, and the 1864 Massacre Site* (Norman, Okla., 2006), David F. Halaas and Andrew E. Masich, *Halfbreed: The Remarkable True Story of George Bent—Caught Between the World of the Indian and the White Man* (New York, 2005); Stan Hoig, *The Sand Creek Massacre* (Norman, Okla., 1974); George E. Hyde (author) and Savoie Lottinville (editor), *Life of George Bent: Written from His Letters* (Norman, Okla., 1968); Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013); Gary Leland Roberts, "Sand Creek: Tragedy and Symbol" (PhD dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1984); Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers & the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1998).

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