For a long time, Chief Looking Glass explained, the soldiers of the U.S. Army and the Nez Perce lived together in peace in the Pacific Northwest. But if the Army insisted on building corrals for his people, he warned, "they will not hold us back. We are not horses. The country is large ... We know the roads and mountains well."

In 1877, Elliott West, a professor of American History at the University of Arkansas, reminds us, the Nez Perce were told to hand over their lands, move to a shrunken reservation and attend white schools and Christian congregations. A majority of them (according to West, government agents projected on the Nez Perce a single identity with one man in command) decided to fight. Outmanned and outgunned, they held off the inevitable for months with "courage, stamina, strokes of tactical brilliance and luck."

Perceptive and poignant, "The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story" sets the conflict in the context of the "Greater Reconstruction" of mid-19th-century America. While the Civil War settled the North-South split, West points out, the East-West divide gave way to a vision of national greatness, sovereignty of the federal government "and of conquest as irresistible as a sunrise."

The surrenders of Chief Joseph and Robert E. Lee, two talented warriors "abandoning a lost cause, heroically fought, to spare their peoples further suffering," moreover, "played their mythic parts in knitting together the nation." The "new America's most beloved losers," they allowed the defeated a sense of pride and the winners feelings of magnanimity.

Chief Joseph's words -- "I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever" -- became the most quoted of any remarks by an Indian leader. Ironically, West suggests, those words may have been put in Joseph's mouth by Charles Erskine Scott Wood, aide-de-camp to General O.O. Howard, who became increasingly critical of the treatment of Indians by the U.S. government.

The "Greater Reconstruction," Elliott concludes, unfolded through "bloodshed, liberation, consolidation and cultural assault." As the United States emancipated slaves, granted freed blacks citizenship and made equality a "deferred commitment," federal authorities avoided confronting the status of Native Americans.

In 1940, Yellow Wolf, a veteran of the Nez Perce wars, decided to tell his story, so to end his life "as truth, not as lie." Wars are made, he told a friend, to seize land to which greedy nations have no legitimate claim. Above all, Yellow Wolf wanted "the next generation of whites to know and treat the Indians as themselves."

Details:  
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