HEATHER COX RICHARDSON, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS-Amherst, has reconceived the Reconstruction era in West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War (Yale University Press, 2007). A reviewer in the Atlantic Monthly heralded her interpretation of Reconstruction as “a national—rather than strictly Southern—phenomenon that united the North, South, and West, and created the creed of middle-class individualism that would define the 20th century.” The American West was shaped by both Reconstruction and America’s new postwar economic vision. Ranging from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt, Richardson reveals the emergence of a modern America in which a new middle class helped define the nation’s ideals and outlook. Historically Speaking associate editor Randall Stephens spoke with Richardson about her work in August 2007.

Randall Stephens: Your interest in this topic came in part from your students' questions about the Reconstruction era. How did teaching inform your writing?

Heather Cox Richardson: For me, writing and teaching are parts of the same process. The give and take of the classroom enables me to test out new ideas with the hardest possible audience, skeptical undergraduates. At the same time, I find that undergraduates tend to look at issues differently than I do, and their questions often open up whole new ways of looking at a problem I thought I knew. Many things came together to prompt me to begin the research for West from Appomattox, but one critical piece was a student's question in my Frontier and the American West class at MIT about why the cowboy has come to represent America when, as I had explained, there were cowboy types in many countries. I gave the standard answer about how the individual cowboy was an antidote to the increasingly impersonal industrialization of the late 19th century. The student thought about it for a minute, and then, in that wonderful MIT way, said: “I'll have to think about it, but that sounds like a description, not an explanation.” I decided he was right.

Stephens: You profile a number of individuals who lived through the late 19th century. How did you select your subjects?

Richardson: I wanted to use characters in the book to combat the general sense that this period is one dominated by large forces that are too impersonal for a non-specialist to grapple with. Real people lived through this era and they made decisions that were sometimes disgusting and sometimes heroic and mostly quotidian, but which ended up leading both to what we generally consider good outcomes—women's suffrage and child labor laws, for example—and to truly appalling ones, like the systematic lynching of African Americans and the war in the Philippines. I wanted to emphasize that events don't simply happen; people just like us make them happen.

The characters I set out to work with originally were not always the ones that ended up in the book. At first, I searched for characters simply by looking into the lives of people I wanted to know more about, people like the black politician W. Beverly Nash, for example, for whom I've always had a sneaking fondness. Then I made a list—after writing to colleagues for their opinions—of which people from this era every modern-day American should know. With these leads, I began researching various characters, but quickly realized that their presence in the book had to provide threads of continuity as well as personal voices across the decades of the book. That narrowed the field of possible candidates, since they had either to live through the entire period or die a significant death. Ultimately, I ended up with characters who seemed to me to contribute articulate perspectives on the period and who, with luck, would pique readers' interest in the era.

Stephens: West from Appomattox is a truly national history. Did you encounter challenges writing a book that ranges so far over space and time?

Richardson: This book damn near killed me. I went into it quite cheerfully, reflecting that many of us teach courses that cover the late 19th century, so it couldn't be that hard to write a book about it. I discovered that it's one thing to talk about a period, and quite another to explain it in writing. Suddenly I had to learn the details of everything from the cattle industry to germ theory, and I spent years feeling like a complete novice in whatever I was studying at the time. Even worse was my determination to keep the book under 350 pages; it was like trying to hang onto a fistful of eels. Events and developments would get away from me and run on too much longer, other things got short shrift. In the end, deciding what to let go was much harder than deciding what to keep. People who watched me write this book will attest that these were hard years; I kept swearing that it was done, only to start tinkering with it again.

For all that, though, both the experiment and the experience were worthwhile. I wanted to see if it was possible to write a narrative history—in this case, what is essentially a political history—that uses the multiplicity of voices and historical sources that social history has made available to us over the past several decades. While it was difficult to pull from all these fields at once and hold tight to a story that developed chronologically, I think West from Appomattox shows that it is possible, and I hope that others will try it, too. Similar experiments will not only advance our field, they will offer to historians new narrative techniques. This book was the most difficult I've written, but it was time well spent.

Stephens: You argue in West from Appomattox and elsewhere that Reconstruction extends far beyond the political compromise of 1877. Why is that chronological distinction important?
Richardson: I think the temporal signposts of Reconstruction are important for two reasons. The first is that the way we define an era changes the story we find within it. Many participants considered Reconstruction over in 1870 with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment and the readmission of Georgia to the Union as a state in good standing. If you accept 1870 as the end of Reconstruction, though, you miss the Ku Klux Klan’s activities in the early 1870s, the Mississippi Plan, and Wade Hampton’s violent Red Shirts, things that certainly change the way we see the early postwar years. If, instead, you take as an end point April 1877—as so many textbooks do—the date when newly installed President Rutherford B. Hayes removed the U.S. troops from around the South Carolina statehouse, where they were protecting the Republican government from challenges by the Democratic government of Hampton, your focus is on the end of Republican control of the South. But that focus means you miss other vital aspects of this period—the women’s suffrage battle, which led to the organization of the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Women’s Suffrage Association in 1869, the struggle between labor and capital, the overwhelming technological changes after the war, the economic gains of certain African Americans in the 1880s, the final end to the Indian wars.

If we widen our perspective on the period, we will see different patterns there, just as the inclusion of Hampton’s Red Shirts changes the way we think about 1870. Broadening our perspective on the postwar period suggests that it was an era defined by the question of citizenship, when Americans grappled with the problem of who should be included in American society. This question affected not just African Americans, but also women, Indians, immigrants, ex-Confederates, loyal Unionists, and even, occasionally, children—in short, virtually everyone in American society. Looking at the period this way offers an inclusive picture of the postwar years that raises fundamental questions about American equality, questions that continue to speak to us today. This is not to say that other patterns are wrong, by the way. They’re valuable, too. Each approach illuminates a different aspect of the way human societies operate.

The second reason a redefinition of the Reconstruction period is important grows from the first point. We look to 1877 as the critical date of the era largely because of the viciously racist political diatribes written from 1888 to 1890, culminating in W’by the Solid South by Alabama congressman Hilary Herbert, which claimed that 1877 marked the “redemption” of the South from the pollution of “negro rule.” These diatribes were written to oppose the Federal Elections bill of 1890 and were aimed specifically at that contemporary political fight. Revisionist historians have demolished this interpretation, of course, but by operating within the parameters established by the racist reactionaries of the 1890s, we remain bound by their worldview. This annoys me. It continues to give them far more power than we should allow them to have. If modern historians ultimately conclude that Hayse’s removal of the troops from the South Carolina statehouse was the critical event of the era, let’s get there on our own terms. We need to end the influence of the Hillary Herberths of the world once and for all.

Stephens: I was surprised to read that so many Americans in the postwar years feared both specific interests and government intervention. Why? Do you see parallels here between early 21st-century and late 19th-century America?

Richardson: My UMass colleagues have heard me argue so often that we’re reliving the 1890s that I suspect they consider running for cover when the subject comes up. Absolutely, there are parallels between the two eras. In the 1860s, Americans opened up the suffrage and permitted a number of new voices to participate in government and social life. By the 1870s, politicians, often with strong ties to the increasingly powerful business establishment, realized they could garner votes by frightening moderates into believing that these new participants—African Americans, labor organizers, activist women—intended to take over the government. They would elect representatives who would cater to them rather than acting for the good of all, passing legislation to raise taxes on hardworking Americans in order to provide government jobs and social programs for their lazy and greedy constituents. This rhetoric solidified in the 1880s, when people like William Graham Sumner pushed the idea of lazy non-producers even farther, arguing that legislation protecting such people was not just wasteful, it was actively dangerous to the country. So far in the story, you could almost replace the 18s in these dates with 19s.

What was missing in the parallel between the two eras until recently was a distrust of wealthy businessmen commandeering the government, a distrust that began by the 1870s and was in full swing by 1890, when the William McKinley Tariff created a widespread backlash against the influence of business in politics, a backlash that led not only to the relatively toothless Sherman Anti-Trust Act, but also, more importantly, to voters’ utter rejection of the Republican Party in the 1890 midterm elections. This fury at the manipulation of government by businessmen seemed strangely missing in today’s America until the Jack Abramoff scandal broke. Since then, the media has showcased middle-class anger at the apparent control of government by business—an anger just like that of the 1890s. I actually rewrote the conclusion of West from Appomattox after the Abramoff scandal surfaced. Initially the conclusion mused about why mainstream concern about business in government was currently absent. I had to rewrite it to acknowledge that anger had finally appeared.

Looking forward, it’s worth remembering that the bitter divisions of the 1890s gave us the Progressive era. That was a time when middle-class Americans recognized the need for government to level the economic and social playing fields in order to give more people access to a basic standard of living. It was also a time when Americans enthusiastically repressed those they perceived as threats to that middle-class dream. We need to be cognizant of both aspects of the Progressive era now. Presidential candidates of both parties use the inclusive language of “the great middle,” promising to protect and expand the middle class. At the same time, the popular press increasingly vilifies immigrants, and our legal system disproportionately—and scandalously—punishes black men. It would be nice to relive the admirable parts of the Progressive era without its horrifying ones.

Stephens: Historians have long described 1896 as a critical turning point for the nation. You note that the election of 1896 was especially important. How did that election reshape the country?

Richardson: The election of 1896 committed the nation to the peculiar American ideology we still live with, an ideology based on an image of middle-class individualism but whose adherents are, in reality, supported by government activism. It was not preordained that America would embrace this worldview. The post-Civil War years were ones of tremendous possibility, as Americans worked out the identity of the reunified nation. This was a time when middle-class Americans recognized the need for government to level the economic and social playing fields in order to give more people access to a basic standard of living. It was also a time when Americans enthusiastically repressed those they perceived as threats to that middle-class dream. We need to be cognizant of both aspects of the Progressive era now. Presidential candidates of both parties use the inclusive language of “the great middle,” promising to protect and expand the middle class. At the same time, the popular press increasingly vilifies immigrants, and our legal system disproportionately—and scandalously—punishes black men. It would be nice to relive the admirable parts of the Progressive era without its horrifying ones.
But these new voices did not go unchallenged. Quickly, powerful men constructed political platforms to reinforce their own economic, gender, and racial dominance. They defined labor activism, women's rights agitation, equal racial rights, and so on, as a threat to the nation. By 1871, the expansion of voting, and its potential to change the status quo, had already inspired a backlash. “Taxpayers' Conventions,” for example, in South Carolina and New York charged that poor freedmen and immigrants were electing representatives who promised to confiscate the wealth of hardworking Americans. Virginia Minor's lawsuit defending her right to vote launched the legal postwar contraction of the suffrage. In 1875 the Supreme Court declared that women were indeed citizens but went on to assert that citizenship did not necessarily convey the right to vote. This decision had enormous implications for the direction of American society. For the rest of the century, Americans struggled over which vision of the nation would prevail.

The 1896 election, with the Republicans' relentless rhetoric describing Bryan and his followers as wild radicals, swung the majority of American voters firmly behind the individualist vision that limited participation in the nation. It was not clear that that alignment would be longstanding, but McKinley's assassination by a man identified with anarchy and Theodore Roosevelt's assumption of the presidency cemented it. Roosevelt backed the Progressive era legislation that quieted challenges to individualist beliefs by mitigating the extremes of capitalism and making the middle-class dream reachable for more Americans. The Klondike gold strikes helped, too, by loosening the money supply, dulling the power of money-based critiques of the excesses of American capitalism. So while its status as a watershed was confirmed only by the events of the next several years, the election of 1896 marked America's long-term embrace of its peculiar middle-class identity.

**Stephens: Most college history majors and even professional historians would not associate the American West with Reconstruction. How did Reconstruction extend into the West?**

**Richardson:** The flippant answer is: “How did it not?” It’s odd that we recognize the terrific importance of westward expansion in the 1840s, the Oregon Trail, the Gold Rush, the annexation of Texas, the Mexican Cession, and the organization of California, but then suddenly snap back to the East to look at the coming of the Civil War, the war, and Reconstruction. The conflict between the North and South began over control of the West, of course, and during the war years the Republican Congress deliberately organized western territories to become part of the Union while the Confederacy’s attempts to push into the West largely failed. Mining strikes in those regions helped to keep the Union solvent when the cost of the war was crippling the treasury, and Americans pouring west during the war helped to fan the smoldering conflicts between Indians and eastern migrants into full-scale war by 1865.

The close relationship between the East and the West didn’t stop in 1865. It’s no accident that our strongest cultural symbol of the Reconstruction years is the cowboy. The Western cattle industry captured the imagination of all postwar Americans, but for white Southerners, furious at federal Reconstruction measures, and for white Westerners, angry at federal land and Indian policies, the cowboys came to represent the opposite of what they saw as an intrusive federal bureaucracy. The portrayal of the Westerner as an individualist living in an untrammeled wilderness was inaccurate, of course, but it became a rallying symbol in the late 19th century for those who hated the Republican stranglehold on the government, which represented to them corruption, nepotism, and what we would call pork-barrel legislation, at its worst. This image translated to politics, as outsiders insisted that their opponents were maintaining power by passing legislation that distributed benefits to their supporters and was paid for by taxes on hardworking Americans. This remains an enormously influential image in American life.

While my own work on the relationship between East and West focuses on politics, other historians are opening up fascinating explorations of national infrastructure and race relations, and making suggestions about environmental influences in the West that may well change our approach to eastern history. To name just a few, Richard White has argued convincingly that the federal government cut its teeth in the West, while Donald Worster’s book about John Wesley Powell showed how Western exploration tied the federal government to science. National infrastructure—land offices, the agricultural department, bond distribution, tax collection, army deployment—seems to me a terrifically fruitful area for future studies in how the national system worked. David Rich Lewis, Bonnie Lynn-Sherow, and William Carrigan have explored how social and cultural patterns consistently favored white Westerners; it would be fascinating to see their approaches carried back to studies of race in the East. William Cronon and Elliott West have used environmental history to reexamine the role of the economy and of ideas in late 19th-century history; their work begs others to follow. I’m excited about the new national studies that cross the East/West divide and hope this is a field that will continue to grow.

**Stephens: Why has the West, for Americans as well as non-Americans, remained such a powerfully symbolic region?**

**Richardson:** After the Civil War, the West became an anti-urban, anti-government idea that represented a hardworking American individual supported by a good woman. This image had very little to do with reality, of course; it came from the peculiar conditions of the postwar years that I wrote about in *West from Appomattox*. Theodore Roosevelt took that anti-government, individualist image into the White House first, of course, but it became powerful in the modern era after World War II. Historians Robert Atcham, John Mack Faragher, and Robert Hine have covered this era well in their studies of the modern Western myth, showing, among other things, how the cowboy became a symbol of the antithesis of communism. Where communism seemed to stand for large government, the cowboy stood for a land without government; where communism seemed to shove men and women both into drab sexlessness, the cowboy was a true man with a homebound, loving woman; where communism redistributed wealth, the cowboy was an individualist. At the same time, the federal government was enforcing desegregation, and white Southerners opposed to the integration of the University of Mississippi, for example, began to tie the language of anticommunism both to their views on Reconstruction and their complaints about federal activism. One of the most telling slogans from the Ole Miss fight in 1962, I’ve always thought, was the bumper sticker claiming that “The Castro Brothers”—that would be JFK and RFK, of course—were in the White House.

This era strongly reinforced the Western image, as people donned denim and cowboy hats as a symbol of opposition to the federal government, and to authority in general. Lynyrd Skynyrd and some of the other southern rock bands played this particularly well; as Faith Davis Ruffins, curator at the Smithsonian, has pointed out, in this era the Confederate flag made a conspicuous national reappearance among rock bands as a symbol of opposition to authority. This Western anti-government image remains powerful, especially as politicians since the 1980s have flayed the social welfare legislation of the post-World War II era as a game to keep corrupt politicians in power, taxing hardworking Americans to support lazy urban voters—often characterized as minorities—on welfare. So we have come full circle.