



THINKING LIKE A HISTORIAN: MANIFEST DESTINY



Westward Course of Empire: Emanuel Leutze, 1861

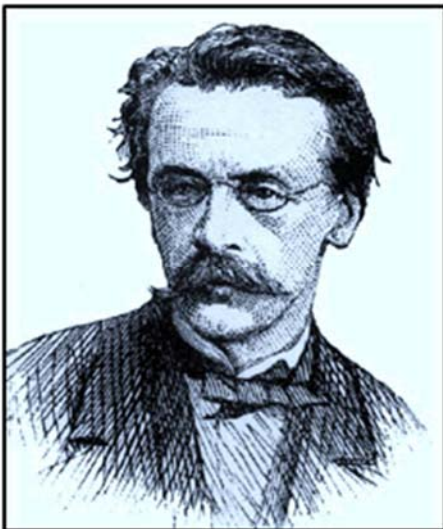
Unit Overview

The concept of Manifest Destiny, a phrase first used by John O'Sullivan, encouraged Americans to view the occupation of the North American continent as their God-given right. It motivated settlers to move west and gave them

confidence in the future. At the same time, Manifest Destiny was used to justify the removal of Native Americans from their lands and the expansion of slavery. Let's see how it all happened.

Manifest Destiny

Since colonial times, some Americans believed that their nation had a special mission to fulfill. By the 1800s, people began to think that the country should spread its ideals and its culture by occupying the entire continent. For many, it was simply part of God's divine plan. The idea that the United States had a special role to play inspired men and women to dream big dreams and motivated them to move west. For this to continue, the United States had to acquire more territory through negotiation or war. At the same time, political leaders used this to justify the removal of Native Americans from their lands, the annexation of Texas and threats of war against Great Britain over Oregon. When writing an article about the importance of making Texas part of the United States, **John O'Sullivan**, a newspaper editor, referred to this concept as **Manifest Destiny**. In other words, it was the obvious fate of the United States to rule from the Atlantic to the Pacific.



.... the right of our manifest destiny to over spread and to the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and the development of self-government entrusted to us. It is right such as that to the space of air and the earth suitable for the full expansion principle and destiny of growth.

John L. O'Sullivan: 1845

The desire to expand the borders of the United States to the western edge of the continent was not accepted by everyone. Critics argued that Manifest Destiny had nothing to do with God's will. They saw it as a way to defend the seizure of

someone else's land. Was Manifest Destiny just an excuse to takeover more territory, or did it represent the nation's true mission? During the 1830s and the 1840s, these questions became the subjects of many heated debates. The video listed below further explains the philosophy of Manifest Destiny.



Manifest Destiny, 1845



Go to Questions 1 through 3.

The Argument for Manifest Destiny

The expansionists, as those who favored Manifest Destiny were called, thought of the United States as a nation on a mission. In their opinion, the country had an obligation to bring its advanced civilization, along with its superior technology and culture, to the West. They claimed that the rapidly growing American population required more land for settlement and agriculture. Manifest Destiny would result in greater opportunities for Americans and more states. The expansionists also argued that extended borders made it easier to defend and to secure the United States. Although the power to add territory was not specifically mentioned in the Constitution, expansionists insisted that it was covered under the implied powers. Read the primary sources quoted below to learn more about the attitudes of those Americans who supported Manifest Destiny.

As our population has expanded, the Union has been cemented and strengthened. As our boundaries have been enlarged and our agricultural population has been spread over a large surface, our federal system has acquired additional strength and security. It may well be doubted whether it would not be in greater danger of overthrow if our present population were confined to the comparatively narrow limits of the original thirteen States than it is now that they are sparsely settled over a more expanded territory. It is confidently believed that our system may be safely extended to the utmost bounds of our territorial limits, and that as it shall be extended the bonds of our Union, so far from being weakened, will become stronger.

James K. Polk (adapted)
Inaugural Address, 1845

What has miserable, inefficient Mexico - with her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom, her actual tyranny by the few over the many - what has she to do with the great mission of peopling the new world with a noble race? Be it ours, to achieve that mission!

Walt Whitman
Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Editorial), 1846

It is our glory that while other nations have extended their dominions by the sword we have never acquired any territory except by fair purchase or, as in the case of Texas, by the voluntary determination of a brave, kindred, and independent people to blend their destinies with our own. Even our acquisitions from Mexico form no exception. Unwilling to take advantage of the fortune of war against a sister republic, we purchased these possessions under the treaty of peace for a sum which was considered at the time a fair equivalent. Our past history forbids that we shall in the future acquire territory unless this be done by the laws of justice and honor. Acting on this principle, no nation will have a right to interfere or to complain if in the progress of events we shall still further extend our possessions. Hitherto in all our acquisitions the people, under the protection of the American flag, have enjoyed civil and religious liberty, as well as equal and just laws, and have been contented, prosperous, and happy. Their trade with the rest of the world has rapidly increased, and thus every commercial nation has shared largely in their successful progress.

James Buchanan (adapted)
Inaugural Address, 1857



Go to Questions 4 through 14.

The Argument against Manifest Destiny

The opponents of Manifest Destiny insisted that it did not represent a noble mission. Instead, they believed that it was based on greed and disrespect for the rights of others. For them, Manifest Destiny resulted in the cruel treatment of Native Americans and the growth of slavery. It also increased the tension among the United States and foreign governments, such as Mexico and Great Britain. Some anti-expansionists declared the concept unconstitutional because the acquisition of land was not directly discussed in the Constitution. Critics of Manifest Destiny disputed the idea that the growing population made additional territory a necessity. They also reasoned that it made the country less secure since

it spread the U.S. military across the continent. The primary sources quoted below are examples of the arguments presented against Manifest Destiny.

Why is it, sir, that we of the United States, a people of yesterday, compared with the older nations of the world, should be waging war for territory or for "room"? Look at your country, extending from the Allegheny Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, capable itself of sustaining, in comfort, a larger population than will be in the whole Union for one hundred years to come. Over this vast expanse of territory, your population is now so sparse that I believe we provided, at the last session, a regiment of mounted men to guard the mail, from the frontier of Missouri to the mouth of the Columbia; and yet you persist in the ridiculous assertion, "I want room". One would imagine, from the frequent reiteration of the complaint, that you had a bursting, teeming population, whose energy was paralyzed, whose enterprise was crushed, for want of space.

Thomas Corwin (adapted)
Speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate, 1847

The Indians have melted before the white man, and the mixed, degraded race of Mexico must melt before the English-speaking people. Away with this evil dishonesty! There is no necessity for crime. There is no fate to justify greedy nations, any more than to justify gamblers and robbers, in plunder ... We talk of accomplishing our destiny. So did Napoleon Bonaparte, the late conqueror of Europe. Destiny consigned him to a lonely rock in the ocean, the prey of ambition which destroyed no peace but his own.

William Ellery Channing, Unitarian minister (adapted)
Letter to Henry Clay, 1837

Had one come and demanded Bunker Hill of the people of Massachusetts, had England's lion ever showed himself there, is there a man over 13 and under 90 who would not have been ready to meet him; is there a river on this continent that would not have run red with blood; is there a field but would have been piled high with the unburied bones of slaughtered Americans before these consecrated battlefields of liberty should have been wrested from us? But this same American goes into a sister republic and says to poor, weak Mexico, 'Give up your territory— you are unworthy to possess it—I have got one-half already—all I ask of you is to give up the other!'....

Thomas Corwin
Speech before the U.S. Senate, 1847



Go to Questions 15 through 25.

What Happened Next?

Statehood for Texas did not mark the end of the disagreements between the United States and Mexico. A dispute over the state's southern border resulted in the Mexican-American War and the sale of the entire Southwest from New Mexico to California to the United States. When gold was discovered in California, thousands of travelers pushed across the Great Plains with the hope of getting rich. California soon had enough settlers to become a state, but this request again threatened the balance between slave states and free states. Would the slavery question split the Union? Would Henry Clay come up with another compromise? You will find the answers to these questions in the next unit.

