Unit 12 - Manifest Destiny

Focus Questions

1. How were the Young America movement and economic trends related to ideas of manifest destiny in the mid-nineteenth century? What were some of the major controversies surrounding westward expansion in that time period?

2. What events catalyzed the Texas Revolution and the U.S.-Mexican War, and what consequences did those conflicts have for national politics?

3. In what ways did westward expansion influence changing patterns of migration and immigration to the United States?

4. How did the migration of Americans across the Great Plains to California and Oregon affect indigenous societies, and how did some of those societies respond?

Key Terms

Young America
Comanche
U.S.-Mexican War
Texas Revolution
Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo
Oregon Trail
Fort Laramie Treaty
Gold Rush

Introduction

John Louis O'Sullivan, a popular editor and columnist, articulated the long-standing American belief in the God-given mission of the United States to lead the world in the peaceful transition to democracy. In a little-read essay printed in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, O'Sullivan outlined the importance of annexing Texas to the United States:

> Why, were other reasoning wanting, in favor of now elevating this question of the reception of Texas into the Union, out of the lower region of our past party dissensions, up to its proper level of a high and broad nationality, it surely is to be found, found abundantly, in the manner in which other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves into it, between us and the proper parties to the case, in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.[1]

O'Sullivan and many others viewed expansion as necessary to achieve America's destiny and to protect American interests. The quasi-religious call to spread democracy coupled with the reality of thousands of settlers pressing westward. Manifest destiny was grounded in the belief that a democratic, agrarian republic would save the world.

John O'Sullivan, shown here in an 1874 Harper's Weekly *sketch, coined the phrase "manifest destiny" in an 1845 newspaper article. Wikimedia.*

Although called into name in 1845, manifest destiny was a widely held but vaguely defined belief that dated back to the founding of the nation. First, many Americans believed that the strength of American values and institutions justified moral claims to hemispheric leadership. Second, the lands on the North American continent west of the Mississippi River (and, later, into the Caribbean and Pacific) were destined for American-led political and agricultural improvement. Third, God and the Constitution ordained an irrepressible destiny to accomplish redemption and democratization throughout the world. All three of these claims pushed many Americans, whether they used the phrase *manifest destiny* or not, to actively seek the expansion of democracy. These beliefs and the resulting actions were often disastrous to anyone in the way of American expansion. The new religion of American democracy spread on the feet and in the wagons of those who moved west, imbued with the hope that their success would be the nation's success.

12.1 – Manifest Destiny in Popular Discourse

The **Young America** movement, strongest among members of the Democratic Party but spanning the political spectrum, downplayed divisions over slavery and ethnicity by embracing national unity and emphasizing American exceptionalism, territorial expansion, democratic participation, and economic interdependence.[2] Poet Ralph Waldo

Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way, *1862. Mural, United States Capitol.*

Emerson captured the political outlook of this new generation in a speech he delivered in 1844 titled "The Young American":

> In every age of the world, there has been a leading nation, one of a more generous sentiment, whose eminent citizens were willing to stand for the interests of general justice and humanity, at the risk of being called, by the men of the moment, chimerical and fantastic. Which should be that nation but these States? Which should lead that movement, if not New England? Who should lead the leaders, but the Young American?[3]

However, many Americans, including Emerson, disapproved of aggressive expansion. For opponents of manifest destiny, the lofty rhetoric of the Young Americans was nothing other than a kind of imperialism that the American Revolution was supposed to have repudiated.[4] Many members of the Whig Party (and later the Republican Party) argued that the United States' mission was to lead by example, not by conquest. Abraham Lincoln summed up this criticism with a fair amount of sarcasm during a speech in 1859:

> He (the Young American) owns a large part of the world, by right of possessing it; and all the rest by right of wanting it, and intending to have it . . . Young America had "a pleasing hope—a fond desire—a longing after" territory. He has a great passion—a perfect rage—for the "new"; particularly new men for office, and the new earth mentioned in the revelations, in which, being no more sea, there must be about three times as much land as in the present. He is a great friend of humanity; and his desire for land is not selfish, but merely an impulse to extend the area of freedom. He is very anxious to fight for the liberation of enslaved nations and colonies, provided, always, they have land . . . As to those who have no land, and would be glad of help from any quarter, he considers they can afford to wait a few hundred years longer. In knowledge he is particularly rich. He knows all that can possibly be known; inclines to believe in spiritual trappings, and is the unquestioned inventor of "Manifest Destiny."[5]

But Lincoln and other anti-expansionists would struggle to win popular opinion. The nation, fueled by the principles of manifest destiny, would continue westward. Along the way, Americans battled both native peoples and foreign nations, claiming territory to the very edges of the continent. But westward expansion did not come without a cost. It exacerbated the slavery question, pushed Americans toward civil war, and, ultimately, threatened the very mission of American democracy it was designed to aid.

12.2 – Western Migration and Indian Removal

Artistic propaganda like this promoted the national project of manifest destiny. Columbia, the female figure of America, leads Americans into the West and into the future by carrying the values of republicanism (as seen through her Roman garb) and progress (shown through the inclusion of technological innovations like the telegraph) and clearing native peoples and animals, seen being pushed into the darkness. John Gast, American Progress, *1872. Wikimedia.*

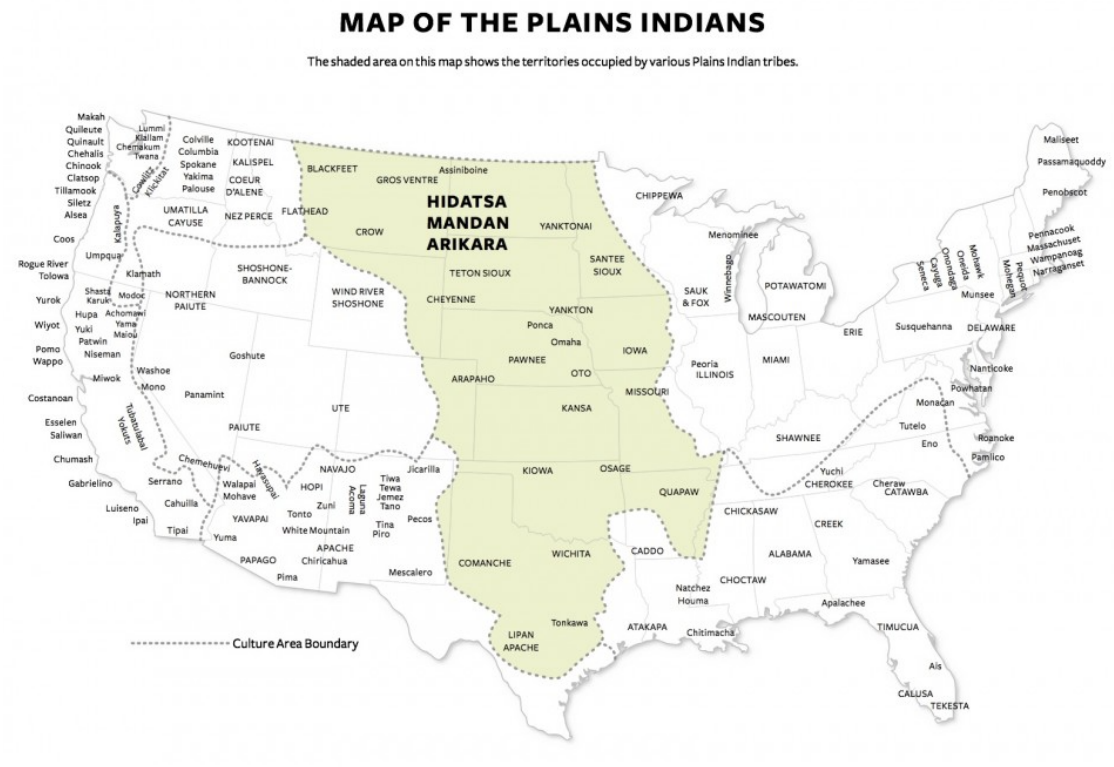
After the War of 1812, Americans settled the Great Lakes region rapidly thanks in part to aggressive land sales by the federal government.[6] Missouri's admission as a slave state presented the first major crisis over westward migration and American expansion in the antebellum period. Farther north, lead and iron ore mining spurred development in Wisconsin.[7] By the 1830s and 1840s, increasing numbers of German and Scandinavian immigrants joined easterners in settling the Upper Mississippi watershed.[8] Little settlement occurred west of Missouri as migrants viewed the Great Plains as a barrier to farming. Farther west, the Rocky Mountains loomed as undesirable to all but fur traders, and American Indians west of the Mississippi appeared too powerful to allow for white expansion.

"Do not lounge in the cities!" commanded publisher Horace Greeley in 1841, "There is room and health in the country, away from the crowds of idlers and imbeciles. Go west, before you are fitted for no life but that of the factory."[9] The *New York Tribune* often argued that American exceptionalism required the United States to conquer the continent benevolently as the prime means of spreading American capitalism and American democracy. However, the vast West was not empty. American Indians controlled much of the land east of the Mississippi River and almost all of the West. Expansion hinged on federal policies and practices of Indian removal.

The harassment and dispossession of American Indians—whether driven by official U.S. government policy or the actions of individual Americans and their communities—depended on the belief in manifest destiny. Of course, a fair bit of racism was part of the equation as well. The political and legal processes of expansion always hinged on the belief that white Americans could best use new lands and opportunities. This belief rested on the idea that only Americans embodied the democratic ideals of yeoman agriculturalism extolled by Thomas Jefferson and expanded under Jacksonian democracy.

The allure of manifest destiny encouraged expansion regardless of terrain or locale, and clearly influenced Jacksonian policies of Indian removal in the Southeast. Indian removal also took place, to a lesser degree, in northern lands. In the Old Northwest, Odawa and Ojibwe communities in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota resisted removal as many

lived on land north of desirable farming land. Moreover, some Ojibwe and Odawa individuals purchased land independently. They formed successful alliances with missionaries to help advocate against removal, as well as with some traders and merchants who depended on trade with Native peoples. Yet Indian removal occurred in the North as well—the Black Hawk War in 1832, for instance, led to the removal of many Sauk to Kansas.[10]



"Map of the Plains Indians," undated. Smithsonian Institute.

12.3 – Resistance and Violence

Some Indian groups remained too powerful to remove. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the **Comanche** rose to power in the Southern Plains region of what is now the southwestern United States. By quickly adapting to the horse culture first introduced by the Spanish, the Comanche transitioned from a foraging economy into a mixed hunting and pastoral society. After 1821, the new Mexican nation-state claimed the region as part of the northern Mexican frontier, but they had little control. Instead, the Comanche remained in power and controlled the economy of the Southern Plains. A flexible political structure allowed the Comanche to dominate other Indian groups as well as Mexican and American settlers.

In the 1830s, the Comanche launched raids into northern Mexico, ending what had been an unprofitable but peaceful diplomatic relationship with Mexico. At the same time, they forged new trading relationships with Anglo-American traders in Texas. Throughout this period, the Comanche and several other independent Native groups, particularly the Kiowa, Apache, and Navajo, engaged in thousands of violent encounters with northern Mexicans. Collectively, these encounters comprised an ongoing war during the 1830s and 1840s as tribal nations vied for power and wealth. By the 1840s, Comanche power peaked with an empire that controlled a vast territory in the trans-Mississippi west known as Comancheria. By trading in Texas and raiding in northern Mexico, the Comanche controlled the flow of commodities, including captives, livestock, and trade goods. They practiced a fluid system of captivity and captive trading, rather than a rigid chattel system. The Comanche used captives for economic exploitation but also adopted captives into

kinship networks. This allowed for the assimilation of diverse peoples in the region into the empire. The ongoing conflict in the region had sweeping consequences on both Mexican and American politics.[11]

In the Great Basin region, Mexican independence also escalated patterns of violence. This region, on the periphery of the Spanish empire, was nonetheless integrated in the vast commercial trading network of the West. Mexican officials and Anglo-American traders entered the region with their own imperial designs. New forms of violence spread into the homelands of the Paiute and Western Shoshone. Traders, settlers, and Mormon religious refugees, aided by U.S. officials and soldiers, committed daily acts of violence and laid the groundwork for violent conquest. This expansion of the American state into the Great Basin meant groups such as the Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe had to compete over land, resources, captives, and trade relations with Anglo-Americans. Eventually, white incursion and ongoing Indian wars resulted in traumatic dispossession of land and the struggle for subsistence.

The federal government attempted more than relocation of American Indians. Policies to "civilize" Indians coexisted along with forced removal and served an important "Americanizing" vision of expansion that brought an ever-increasing population under the American flag and sought to balance aggression with the uplift of paternal care. Thomas L. McKenney, superintendent of Indian trade from 1816 to 1822 and the Superintendent of Indian Affairs from 1824 to 1830, served as the main architect of the civilization policy. He asserted that American Indians were morally and intellectually equal to whites and sought to establish a national Indian school system.

Congress rejected McKenney's plan but instead passed the Civilization Fund Act in 1819. This act offered $10,000 annually to be allocated toward societies that funded missionaries to establish schools among Indian tribes. However, providing schooling for American Indians under the auspices of the civilization program also allowed the federal government to justify taking more land. Treaties, such as the 1820 Treaty of Doak's Stand made with the Choctaw nation, often included land cessions as requirements for education provisions. Removal and Americanization reinforced Americans' sense of cultural dominance.[12]

After removal in the 1830s, the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw began to collaborate with missionaries to build school systems of their own. Leaders hoped education would help ensuing generations to protect political sovereignty. In 1841, the Cherokee Nation opened a public-school system that within two years included eighteen schools. By 1852, the system expanded to twenty-one schools with a national enrollment of 1,100 pupils.[13] Many of the students educated in these tribally controlled schools later served their nations as teachers, lawyers, physicians, bureaucrats, and politicians.

12.4 – Life and Culture among Western Migrants

The dream of creating a democratic utopia in the West ultimately rested on those who picked up their possessions and their families and moved west. Western settlers usually migrated as families and settled along navigable and potable rivers. Settlements often coalesced around local traditions, especially religion, carried from eastern settlements. These shared understandings encouraged a strong sense of cooperation among western settlers that forged communities on the frontier.

Before the Mexican War, the West for most Americans still referred to the fertile area between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River with a slight amount of overspill beyond its banks. With soil exhaustion and land competition increasing in the East, most early western migrants sought a greater measure of stability and self-sufficiency by engaging in small-scale farming. Boosters of these new agricultural areas along with the U.S. government encouraged perceptions of the West as a land of hard-built opportunity that promised personal and national bounty.

Women migrants bore the unique double burden of travel while also being expected to conform to restrictive gender norms. The key virtues of femininity, according to the "cult of true womanhood," included piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. The concept of "separate spheres" expected women to remain in the home. These values accompanied men and women as they traveled west to begin their new lives. While many of these societal standards endured, there often existed an openness of frontier society that resulted in modestly more opportunities for women. Husbands needed partners in setting up a homestead and working in the field to provide food for the family. Suitable wives were often in short supply, enabling some to negotiate more power informally in their own households.[14]

Americans debated the authority of government in westward expansion. This debate centered on the proper role of the U.S. government in paying for the internal improvements that soon became necessary to encourage and support economic development. Some saw frontier development as a self-driven undertaking that necessitated private risk and investment devoid of government interference. Others saw the federal government's role as providing the infrastructural development needed to give migrants the push toward engagement with the larger national economy. In the end, federal aid proved essential for the conquest and settlement of the region.

Economic busts constantly threatened western farmers and communities. The economy worsened after the Panic of 1819. Falling prices and depleted soil meant farmers were unable to make their loan payments. The dream of subsistence and stability abruptly ended as many migrants lost their land and felt the hand of the distant market economy forcing them even farther west to escape debt. As a result, the federal government consistently sought to increase access to land in the West, including efforts to lower the amount of land required for purchase. Smaller lots made it easier for more farmers to clear land and begin farming faster.[15]

Early railroads like the Baltimore and Ohio line hoped to link mid-Atlantic cities with lucrative western trade routes. Railroad boosters encouraged the rapid growth of towns and cities along their routes. Not only did rail lines promise to move commerce faster, but the rails also encouraged the spreading of towns farther away from traditional waterway locations. Technological limitations, constant repairs, conflicts with American Indians, and political disagreements all hampered railroading and kept canals and steamboats as integral parts of the transportation system. Nonetheless, this early establishment of railroads enabled a rapid expansion after the Civil War. Economic chains of interdependence stretched over hundreds of miles of land and through thousands of contracts and remittances. America's manifest destiny became wedded not only to territorial expansion but also to economic development.[16]

12.5 – Texan Independence and Annexation

The debate over slavery became one of the prime forces behind the **Texas Revolution** and the resulting republic's annexation to the United States. After gaining its independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico hoped to attract new settlers to its northern areas to create a buffer between it and the powerful Comanche. New immigrants, mostly from the southern United States, poured into Mexican Texas. Over the next twenty-five years, concerns over growing Anglo influence and possible American designs on the area produced great friction between Mexicans and the former Americans in the area. In 1829, Mexico, hoping to quell both anger and immigration, outlawed slavery and required all new immigrants to convert to Catholicism. American immigrants, eager to expand their agricultural fortunes, largely ignored these requirements. In response, Mexican authorities closed their territory to any new immigration in 1830—a prohibition ignored by Americans who often squatted on public lands.[17]

In 1834, an internal conflict between federalists and centralists in the Mexican government led to the political ascendency of General Antonio López de Santa Anna. Santa Anna, governing as a dictator, repudiated the federalist Constitution of 1824, pursued a policy of authoritarian central control, and crushed several revolts throughout Mexico.

Anglo settlers in Mexican Texas, or Texians as they called themselves, opposed Santa Anna's centralizing policies and met in November. They issued a statement of purpose that emphasized their commitment to the Constitution of 1824 and declared Texas to be a separate state within Mexico. After the Mexican government angrily rejected the offer, Texian leaders soon abandoned their fight for the Constitution of 1824 and declared independence on March 2, 1836.[18] The Texas Revolution of 1835–1836 was a successful secessionist movement in the northern district of the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas that resulted in an independent Republic of Texas.

At the Alamo and the town of Goliad, Santa Anna crushed smaller rebel forces and massacred hundreds of Texian prisoners. The Mexican army pursued the retreating Texian army deep into East Texas, spurring a mass panic and evacuation by American civilians known as the Runaway Scrape. The confident Santa Anna consistently failed to make adequate defensive preparations, an oversight that eventually led to a surprise attack from the outnumbered Texian army led by Sam Houston, a migrant from Tennessee, on April 21, 1836. The battle of San Jacinto lasted only eighteen minutes and resulted in a decisive victory for the Texians, who retaliated for previous Mexican atrocities by killing fleeing and surrendering Mexican soldiers for hours after the initial assault. Santa Anna was captured in the aftermath and compelled to sign the Treaty of Velasco on May 14, 1836, by which he agreed to withdraw his army from Texas and acknowledged Texas independence. Although a new Mexican government never recognized the Republic of Texas, the United States and several other nations gave the new country diplomatic recognition.[19]

Texas annexation remained a political landmine after the Republic declared independence from Mexico in 1836. American politicians feared that adding Texas to the Union would provoke a war with Mexico and re-ignite sectional tensions by throwing off the balance between free and slave states. However, after his expulsion from the Whig party, President John Tyler saw Texas statehood as the key to saving his political career. In 1842, he began work on opening annexation to national debate. Harnessing public outcry over the issue, Democrat James K. Polk rose from virtual obscurity to win the presidential election of 1844. Polk and his party campaigned on promises of westward expansion, with eyes toward Texas, Oregon, and California. In the final days of his presidency, Tyler at last extended an official offer to Texas on March 3, 1845. The republic accepted on July 4, becoming the twenty-eighth state.

12.6 – Escalating Tensions with Mexico

Mexico denounced annexation as "an act of aggression, the most unjust which can be found recorded in the annals of modern history."[20] Beyond the anger produced by annexation, the two nations both laid claim over a narrow strip of land between two rivers. Mexico drew the southwestern border of Texas at the Nueces River, but Texans claimed that the border lay roughly 150 miles farther west at the Rio Grande. Neither claim was realistic since the sparsely populated area, known as the Nueces strip, was in fact controlled by Native Americans.

In November 1845, President Polk secretly dispatched John Slidell to Mexico City to purchase the Nueces strip along with large sections of New Mexico and California. The mission was an empty gesture, designed largely to pacify those in Washington who insisted on diplomacy before war. Predictably, officials in Mexico City refused to receive Slidell. In preparation for the assumed failure of the negotiations, Polk preemptively sent a four-thousand-man army under General Zachary Taylor to Corpus Christi, Texas, just northeast of the Nueces River. Upon word of Slidell's rebuff in January 1846, Polk ordered Taylor to cross into the disputed territory.

The president hoped that this show of force would push the lands of California onto the bargaining table as well. Unfortunately, he badly misread the situation. After losing Texas, the Mexican public strongly opposed surrendering

any more ground to the United States. Popular opinion left the shaky government in Mexico City without room to negotiate. On April 24, Mexican cavalrymen attacked a detachment of Taylor's troops in the disputed territory just north of the Rio Grande, killing eleven U.S. soldiers. It took two weeks for the news to reach Washington. Polk sent a message to Congress on May 11 that summed up the assumptions and intentions of the United States:

> Instead of this, however, we have been exerting our best efforts to propitiate her good will. Upon the pretext that Texas, a nation as independent as herself, thought proper to unite its destinies with our own, she has affected to believe that we have severed her rightful territory, and in official proclamations and manifestoes has repeatedly threatened to make war upon us for the purpose of reconquering Texas. In the meantime we have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.[21]

12.7 – The U.S.-Mexican War

The **U.S.-Mexican War** can be seen as a culmination of decades of violence and competition, and though it was hotly debated in public discourse the declaration of war was largely unopposed in Washington. The cagey Polk knew that since hostilities already existed, political dissent would be dangerous—a vote against war became a vote against supporting American soldiers under fire. Congress passed a declaration of war on May 13. Only a few members of both parties, notably John Quincy Adams and John C. Calhoun, opposed the measure. Upon declaring war in 1846, Congress issued a call for fifty thousand volunteer soldiers. Spurred by promises of adventure and conquest abroad, thousands of eager men flocked to assembly points across the country.[22] However, opposition to "Mr. Polk's War" soon grew.

In the early fall of 1846, the U.S. Army invaded Mexico on multiple fronts and within a year's time General Winfield Scott's men took control of Mexico City. However, the city's fall did not bring an end to the war. Scott's men occupied Mexico's capital for over four months while the two countries negotiated. In the United States, the war had been controversial from the beginning. Embedded journalists sent back detailed reports from the front lines, and a divided press viciously debated the news. Volunteers found that war was not as they expected. Disease killed seven times as many American soldiers as combat.[23] Harsh discipline, conflict within the ranks, and violent clashes with civilians led soldiers to desert in huge numbers. Peace finally came on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.**

The United States gained lands that would become the future states of California, Utah, and Nevada; most of Arizona; and parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. Mexican officials would also have to surrender their claims to Texas and recognize the Rio Grande as its southern boundary. The United States offered $15 million for all of it. With American soldiers occupying their capital, Mexican leaders had no choice but to sign.

The new American Southwest attracted a diverse group of entrepreneurs and settlers to the commercial towns of New Mexico, the fertile lands of eastern Texas, the famed gold deposits of California, and the Rocky Mountains. This postwar migration built earlier paths dating back to the 1820s, when the lucrative Santa Fe trade enticed merchants to New Mexico and generous land grants brought numerous settlers to Texas. The Gadsden Purchase of 1854 further added to American gains north of Mexico.

"General Scott's entrance into Mexico." Lithograph. 1851. Originally published in George Wilkins Kendall & Carl Nebel, The War between the United States and Mexico Illustrated, Embracing Pictorial Drawings of all the Principal Conflicts *(New York: D. Appleton), 1851. Wikimedia Commons.*

The U.S.-Mexican War had an enormous impact on both countries. The American victory helped set the United States on the path to becoming a world power. The war elevated Zachary Taylor to the presidency and served as a training ground for many of the Civil War's future commanders. Most significantly, however, Mexico lost roughly half of its territory. Yet the United States' victory was not without danger. Ralph Waldo Emerson, an outspoken critic, predicted ominously at the beginning of the conflict, "We will conquer Mexico, but it will be as the man who swallows the arsenic which will bring him down in turn. Mexico will poison us."[24] Indeed, the conflict over whether to extend slavery into the newly won territory pushed the nation ever closer to disunion and civil war.

12.8 – Crossing the Plains

California, part of Mexico prior to 1848, was at least three arduous months' travel from the nearest American settlements. There was some sparse settlement in the Sacramento Valley, and missionaries made the trip occasionally to such far-flung locations as the Willamette Valley. The fertile farmland of Oregon, like the black dirt lands of the Mississippi Valley, attracted more settlers than California. Dramatized stories of Indian attacks filled migrants with a sense of foreboding, although most settlers encountered no violence and often no Indians at all. During the 1840s, however, a steady flow of migrants made the arduous, months-long journey across the Plains to settle in the West. Some went for missionary activities, some fled the economic downturn that resulted from the Panic of 1837, and some were romanced by the illusory promise of land and opportunities.

St. Louis, Missouri became a popular starting point for westward migration. After passing through the western Missouri town of Independence, travelers often followed the **Oregon Trail** to the Pacific Northwest or to northern California. The trail spanned over 2,000 miles and had been mapped in the early 1840s by several prospecting "mountain men," whose route to Oregon ran roughly parallel to the Rocky Mountain range. Travelers would spend about 5-6 months on the Trail, mostly walking or riding on horseback or in covered wagons. Throughout the dry summer months, midwestern and Plains territories experienced heavy flows of wagon traffic as well as overuse of water resources, waves of infectious disease, exhaustion and injuries among travelers, and the sanitary pressures of humans and their animals maintaining close contact in wagon trains. The slow progress, disease, human and oxen starvation, poor trails, terrible geographic preparations, lack of guidebooks, threatening wildlife, vagaries of weather, and general confusion

were all more formidable and frequent than Indian attacks. California migrants had to cross the Rockies as well as the Sierra Nevada mountains before the winter snows began lest they become trapped in the mountains without enough food or water to see them through until spring.

One group of travelers known as the Donner Party experienced significant delays and bad luck as they traversed a poorly-tested route to California in 1846, and were caught in the Sierra Nevadas for several months; nearly half of the group died of starvation and exposure, and several survivors resorted to cannibalizing bodies of the deceased before they were rescued in February of 1847. Despite the harshness of the journey, by 1848 approximately twenty thousand Americans were living west of the Rockies, with about three fourths of that number in Oregon. By the time railroads surpassed overland travel to the west later in the century, hundreds of thousands of people had taken the Oregon Trail and other major routes to settle west of the Rockies. Their wagon wheels carved permanent ruts in the midwestern prairies that remain in some places to this day.

American artist George Catlin traveled west to paint Native Americans. In 1832 he painted Eeh-nís-kim, Crystal Stone, wife of a Blackfoot leader. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The great environmental and economic potential of the Oregon Territory led many to pack up their families and head west along the Oregon Trail. The Trail represented the hopes of many for a better life, represented and reinforced by images like Bierstadt's idealistic Oregon Trail. Albert Bierstadt, Oregon Trail (Campfire), 1863. Wikimedia.

12.9 – The Problem of the Bison

The land these migrants traversed was neither static nor empty. The Great Plains and American West were the homes of numerous Native nations, many of whom had been largely unknown to the United States prior to the Louisiana Purchase. Indian removal policies and warfare with nations like the Comanche had led to significant tensions with Native Americans by the 1830s, and many white American migrants (as well as the U.S. government) feared the possibility of Indian attacks on wagon trains. New American towns and military forts were constructed along major travel routes to protect Americans against the perceived threat, but few Americans considered the significant damage that such traffic and development actually had on the environment and social dynamics of the West.

Prior to the 1840s, the Great Plains had supported a large population of bison (also known as American buffalo), an indigenous bovine species that had become the cornerstone of many Indian cultures in the region. Nations like the Sioux had developed patterns of settlement, trade, and culture based on following bison herds and utilizing the animals for food, clothing, shelter, and spiritual customs. The influx of western migrants, military personnel, and prospectors threatened the bison population in a number of ways. First, the introduction of new grazing animals in the region (particularly the horses and oxen that accompanied wagon trains) threatened the bison with zoonotic diseases and competition for grass to eat. Second, wagon traffic and curious American hunters were thinning herds and disrupting traditional migratory patterns for bison populations. Third, bison herds that interfered with construction--of roads, railroads, forts or towns--were often killed indiscriminately. The decline of bison also heightened competition between indigenous groups, who fought one another over hunting territory and, in some cases, had delicate territorial agreements that were disrupted when the herds altered their patterns.

George Catlin, Buffalo Chase with Bows and Lances, *1832-33. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Wikimedia.*

As early as 1842, Native Americans in the Plains complained to federal officials about the impact of westward migration on the bison, but such complaints were initially ignored as the government focused on tensions with Mexico. In 1851, after years of wagon train interruptions and intertribal conflict, the United States sent commissioners to Fort Laramie (in modern-day Wyoming) to negotiate with representatives from a number of the Plains Native American nations including the Sioux, Cheyenne, Crow, Arapaho, Assiniboine, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara. Several other tribes were included in the arrangement but refused to send representatives to Fort Laramie because it was in enemy Sioux territory. After several weeks of negotiation, the **Treaty of Fort Laramie** was signed by eight nations to solidify their territorial boundaries and maintain intertribal peace, but also to promise not to interfere with forts, road construction, or wagon traffic along the Oregon Trail that fell within. Their territories. In exchange, the U.S. government agreed to compensate Native nations with annual payments over the next fifty years. Although the treaty was broken almost immediately (the Lakota and Cheyenne engaged in a war against the Crow over the next several

years), the Treaty of Fort Laramie set an important precedent for the United States to develop and control lands in Indian territories, and would influence the subsequent creation of Indian reservations in the American West.

12.10 – The Gold Rush

If the great draw of the West served as manifest destiny's kindling, then the discovery of gold in California was the spark that set the fire ablaze. Most western settlers sought land ownership, but the lure of getting rich quick drew younger single men (and some women) to gold towns throughout the West. These adventurers and fortune-seekers then served as magnets for the arrival of others providing services associated with the **Gold Rush**. On January 24, 1848, James W. Marshall, a contractor hired by John Sutter, discovered gold on Sutter's sawmill land in the Sacramento Valley area of the California Territory. That discovery inspired throngs of prospectors ("forty-niners") from around the world—including Central and South America and Asia—to move to California over the next several years. Many were so convinced of gold's abundance in the region they invested all of their resources in the journey and prospect, assuming they would "strike it rich" once they arrived. Towns and cities grew rapidly throughout the West, notably San Francisco, whose population grew from about five hundred in 1848 to almost fifty thousand by 1853. Few Gold Rush migrants actually found a significant amount of gold, but some were able to make fortunes in other enterprises; Levi Strauss, for example, prospered from the sale of his tent-cloth "levis," or blue jeans, to miners. Most migrants, however, were forced into demanding labor as miners, railroad workers, or agricultural laborers. Lawlessness, the predictable failure of most fortune seekers, racial conflicts, and the slavery question all threatened manifest destiny's promises.

The great influx of diverse people clashed in a combative and aggrandizing atmosphere of individualistic pursuit of fortune.[25] Linguistic, cultural, economic, and racial conflict roiled both urban and rural areas. By the end of the 1850s, Chinese and Mexican immigrants made up one fifth of the mining population in California and faced significant harassment from their white coworkers and competitors. The ethnic patchwork of western "frontier" towns belied a clearly defined a socioeconomic arrangement that saw whites on top as landowners and managers, with poor whites and ethnic minorities working the mines and assorted jobs. The competition for land, resources, and riches furthered individual and collective abuses, particularly against Indians and older Mexican communities. California's towns, as well as those dotting the landscape throughout the West, such as Coeur D'Alene in Idaho and Tombstone in Arizona, struggled to balance security with economic development and the

This cartoon depicts a highly racialized image of a Chinese immigrant and Irish immigrant "swallowing" the United States–in the form of Uncle Sam. Networks of railroads and the promise of American expansion can be seen in the background. "The great fear of the period That Uncle Sam may be swallowed by foreigners: The problem solved," 1860-1869. Library of Congress.

protection of civil rights and liberties. Throughout the 1850s, Californians beseeched Congress for a transcontinental railroad to provide service for both passengers and goods from the Midwest and the East Coast. The potential economic benefits for communities along proposed railroads made the debate over the route rancorous.

12.11 – Antebellum Visions of Overseas Imperialism

Even though support for the spirit of manifest destiny was widespread, the consequences of western expansion and how it would impact existing social and political structures grew. Bitter disagreements over the expansion of slavery into the new lands won from Mexico began even before the U.S.-Mexican war ended. Many northern businessmen and southern slave owners supported the idea of expanding slavery into the Caribbean as a useful alternative to continental expansion, since slavery already existed in these areas. Some were critical of these attempts, seeing them as evidence of a growing slave-power conspiracy. Many others supported attempts at expansion, like those previously seen in eastern Florida, even if these attempts were not exactly legal. Filibustering, as it was called, involved privately financed schemes directed at capturing and occupying foreign territory without the approval of the U.S. government.

Filibustering took greatest hold in the imagination of Americans as they looked toward Cuba. Fears of racialized revolution in Cuba (as in Haiti and Florida before it) as well as the presence of an aggressive British abolitionist influence in the Caribbean energized the movement to annex Cuba and encouraged filibustering as expedient alternatives to lethargic official negotiations. Despite filibustering's seemingly chaotic planning and destabilizing repercussions, those intellectually and economically guiding the effort imagined a willing and receptive Cuban population and expected an agreeable American business class. In Cuba, manifest destiny sympathizers sought territory off the continent and hoped to put a unique spin on the story of success in Mexico. Yet the annexation of Cuba, despite great popularity and some military attempts in the 1850s led by Narciso López, a Cuban dissident, never succeeded.[26]

Other filibustering expeditions were launched elsewhere, including two by William Walker, a former American soldier. Walker seized portions of the Baja peninsula in Mexico and then later took power and established a slaving regime in Nicaragua. Eventually Walker was executed in Honduras.[27] These missions violated the laws of the United States, but wealthy Americans financed various filibusters, and less-wealthy adventurers were all too happy to sign up. Filibustering enjoyed its brief popularity into the late 1850s, at which point slavery and concerns over secession came to the fore. By the opening of the Civil War, most saw these attempts as simply territorial theft.

12.12 – Conclusion

Debates over expansion, economics, diplomacy, and manifest destiny exposed some of the weaknesses of the American system. The chauvinism of policies like Native American removal, the Mexican War, and filibustering existed alongside growing anxiety. Manifest destiny attempted to make a virtue of America's lack of history and turn it into the very basis of nationhood. To locate such origins, John O'Sullivan and other champions of manifest destiny grafted biological and territorial imperatives—common among European definitions of nationalism—onto American political culture. The United States was the embodiment of the democratic ideal, they said. Democracy had to be timeless, boundless, and portable. New methods of transportation and communication, the rapidity of the railroad and the telegraph, the rise of the international market economy, and the growth of the American frontier provided shared platforms to help Americans think across local identities and reaffirm a national character.

12.13 Reference Material

This chapter was edited by Joshua Beatty and Gregg Lightfoot, with content contributions by Ethan Bennett, Dea Boster, Michelle Cassidy, Jonathan Grandage, Gregg Lightfoot, Jose Juan Perez Melendez, Jessica Moore, Nick Roland, Matthew K. Saionz, Rowan Steinecker, Patrick Troester, and Ben Wright.

Recommended bibliographic citation:

Bennett, Ethan et al. "Manifest Destiny." Joshua Beatty and Gregg Lightfoot, eds. In *The American Yawp.* Vol. 1, Dea Boster, Christianna Hurford, and Jennifer Nardone, eds. A derivative of *The American Yawp* published by Stanford University Press. Columbus: Columbus State Community College, 2019. https://oh-cr-materials-01.s3.amazonaws.com/hist_1151_american_yawp_vol1/index.html. Licensed CC BY-SA 4.0 / A derivative from the original work.

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