

Manifest Destiny

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The 1840s were years of extraordinary territorial growth for the United States. During a four year period, the national domain increased by 1.2 million square miles, a gain of more than sixty percent. So rapid and dramatic was the process of territorial expansion, that it came to be seen as an inexorable process, prompting many Americans to insist that their nation had a "manifest destiny" to dominate the continent.

Yet, the expansionist agenda was never a clearly defined movement, or one that enjoyed broad, bipartisan support. Whig party leaders vigorously opposed territorial growth, and even expansionist Democrats argued about how much new land should be acquired, and by what means. Some supporters of Manifest Destiny favored rapid expansion and bold pursuit of American territorial claims, even at the risk of war with other nations. Others, no less committed to the long-term goal of an American empire, opposed to the use of force to achieve these ends, believing that contiguous land would voluntarily join the Union in order to obtain the benefits of republican rule. In an often-used metaphor of the day, these regions would ripen like fruit and fall into the lap of the United States. Thus the champions of Manifest Destiny were at best a motley collection of interest groups, motivated by a number of divergent objectives, and articulating a broad range of uniquely American concerns.

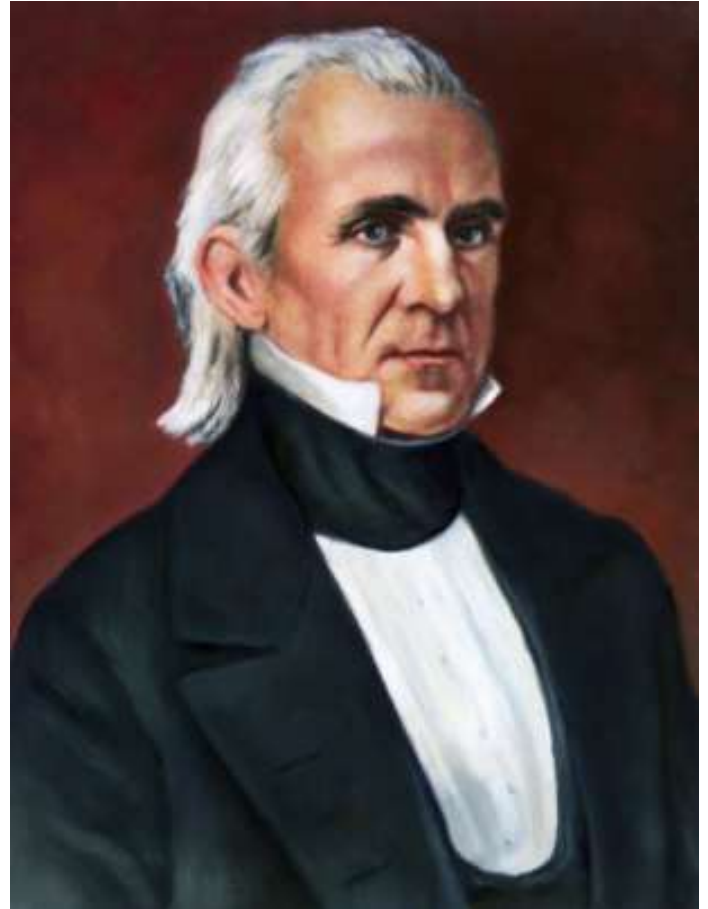
Several factors help to explain why the United States embarked upon an aggressive program of expansion during this period. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, many Americans had dismissed as fanciful the idea of a transcontinental republic, convinced that the bonds of Union would weaken as the nation grew larger. But such vast distances were quickly being conquered by technological innovations. By the 1840s, steamboats had turned America's waterways in busy commercial thoroughfares, while a network of railroads integrated eastern markets with towns and cities on the western slope of the Appalachians. The telegraph, first used in 1844, ushered in a modern age of long distance communication. An American dominion stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific now seemed within reach.

Although the United States had no shortage of unoccupied lands, expansionists argued that the republic must continue to grow in order to survive. Echoing the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson, they viewed an abundance of land as the mainstay of a prosperous republic, and warned against the concentration of political and economic power. Troubled by creeping urbanization and a rising tide of immigrants from Germany and Ireland, expansionists viewed Manifest Destiny as a means to obtain a new, long-term lease on the Jeffersonian ideal. Far from weakening the republic, they argued, territorial growth would actually serve to strengthen it, providing unlimited economic opportunities for future generations.

Expansionists were also motivated by more immediate, practical considerations. Southerners anxious to enlarge the slave empire were among the most ardent champions of the crusade for more territory. New slave states would enhance the South's political power in Washington and, equally important,

serve as an outlet for its growing slave population. For American commercial interests, expansion offered greater access to lucrative foreign markets. Washington policy-makers, anxious to compete with Great Britain for the Asia trade, had long been convinced of the strategic and commercial advantages of San Francisco and other ports on the Pacific coastline of Mexican-owned California. The disastrous Panic of 1837, which had resulted in huge surpluses and depressed prices for American farm products, also focused attention on the need to develop new foreign markets.

Most important of all, perhaps, was the growing sense of anxiety which Americans felt toward Great Britain. Americans had always been suspicious of British activities in the western hemisphere, but inevitably this fear had grown as the United States began to define its strategic and economic interests in terms that extended beyond its own borders. Great Britain's claim to the Pacific Northwest and its close relationship with Mexico were matters of great concern to American interests, which viewed Great Britain as the United States' only rival for control of the Pacific coastline. Fearful of being "hemmed in" by Great Britain, Democratic leaders saw Her Majesty's government poised to block American territorial ambitions at every turn. In addition, southern slave owners were particularly apprehensive of Great Britain, which had abolished slavery in its West Indies colonial possessions in 1833. In 1843, southern statesmen alleged, on the basis of little evidence, that Great Britain was actively engaged in a plot to abolish slavery throughout North America. These rumors provoked a frenzied outcry in the South, which called for the immediate annexation of the Texas Republic in order to secure the interests of the planter class in the cotton-growing regions of North America.



James K. Polk

This fear of British designs, real and imagined, changed the face of Manifest Destiny, converting many advocates of gradual expansion into apostles of a new, more militant brand of imperialism. By the mid-1840s, with Great Britain rumored to be plotting with Mexico to block Washington's efforts to annex the Texas Republic and scheming to acquire California, U.S. expansionism took on a greater sense of urgency. Elected on a pro-expansion platform in 1844, Democrat James K. Polk moved quickly to annex

Texas as the twenty-eighth state. Polk also threatened to disregard long-standing British claims to Oregon, convinced that the only way to deal with "John Bull is to look him straight in the eye." Polk's defiant brinkmanship would ultimately lead to a compromise with Her Majesty's government over the Oregon territory, while precipitating a war with Mexico, whose government, Polk incorrectly believed, was acting in concert with Great Britain to thwart U.S. territorial ambitions. Although Polk insisted that the United States was not waging a war of conquest, critics accused the president of manufacturing a war to seize California and New Mexico. In the months following the war, Polk also considered extending U.S. sovereignty over the Yucatan peninsula and Cuba, two regions which he believed were vulnerable to encroachments from the British. These initiatives received little support in Congress, however, and were abandoned shortly before Polk stepped down from office.

In the 1850s, having established itself as a transcontinental empire, the United States ceased to regard British activities in the western hemisphere with alarm. Preoccupied with the increasingly bitter sectional conflict over slavery, many Americans rejected Manifest Destiny. Although southern extremists would sponsor filibuster expeditions into Latin America with the objective of gaining new lands to extend the slave empire, the expansionist movement faded from the national agenda in the years prior to the outbreak of the Civil War.

SAQs:

1. Answer A, B, & C:
 - a. Select one of the following events and argue for why it best illustrates the beginning of Westward Expansion in the 1840s.
 - i. Immigration
 - ii. Technology
 - iii. Manifest Destiny
 - b. Explain a specific piece of evidence which illustrates your choice in (a).
 - c. Make an argument for why one of the other options is not the better choice.
2. Answer A, B, & C:
 - a. Explain one specific cause of American anxiety toward Great Britain in the 1840s.
 - b. Explain another specific cause of American anxiety toward Great Britain in the 1840s.
 - c. Explain one specific result of American anxiety toward Great Britain in the 1840s.

Directions: Annotate the text on the left in the space on the right. At the end, you will write a summary for each document.

| Primary Document Summary: James K. Polk, "Calling for a Declaration of War against Mexico" | |
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| <p>. . . The strong desire to establish peace with Mexico, on liberal and honorable terms, and the readiness of this Government to regulate and adjust our boundary, and other causes of difference with that Power, on such fair and equitable principles as would lead to permanent relations of the most friendly nature induced me . . . to seek the reopening of diplomatic relations . . . An Envoy of the United</p> | <p>Annotations</p> |

States repaired to Mexico with full powers to adjust every existing difference

. . . The Mexican Government not only refused to receive him, or listen to his propositions, but after a long-continued series of menaces, have at last invaded our territory and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil. . . . The redress of the wrongs of our citizens naturally and inseparably blended itself with the question of boundary . . . I could not, for a moment, entertain the idea that the claims of our much-injured and long-suffering citizens, many of which had existed for more than twenty years, should be postponed, or separated from the settlement of the boundary question . . .

Thus the Government of Mexico, though solemnly pledged by official acts in October last to receive and accredit an American envoy, violated their plighted faith, and refused the offer of a peaceful adjustment of our difficulties. Not only was the offer rejected, but the indignity of its rejection was enhanced by the manifest breach of faith in refusing to admit the Envoy, who came because they had bound themselves to receive him.

. . . the Mexican Government refused all negotiation, and have made no proposition of any kind. . . .

I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position "between the Nueces and Del Norte." This had become necessary to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces . . . The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined, in accordance with a solemn resolution of the Congress of the United States, to annex herself to our Union, and, under these circumstances, it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil . . .

The movement of the troops to the Del Norte . . . under positive instructions to abstain from all aggressive acts towards Mexico, or Mexican citizens, and to regard the relations between that Republic and the United States as peaceful, unless she should declare war, or commit acts of hostility indicative of a state of war. He was specially directed to protect private property and respect personal rights.

The Mexican forces at Matamoras assumed a belligerent attitude . . . General Arista, who had succeeded to the command of the Mexican forces, communicated . . . that "he

considered hostilities commenced, and should prosecute them." . . .

The grievous wrongs perpetrated by Mexico upon our citizens throughout a long period of years, remain undressed; and solemn treaties, pledging her public faith for this redress, have been disregarded . . .

Our commerce with Mexico has been almost annihilated. It was formerly highly beneficial to both nations; but our merchants have been deterred from prosecuting it, by the system of outrage and extortion which the Mexican authorities have pursued . . . 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.

As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon, by every consideration of duty and patriotism, to vindicate, with decision, the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.

Primary Document Summary: Joshua Giddings "Debate on the Mexican War"

. . . I apprehend that much blood and much treasure will be expended before the people of New Mexico will be compelled to unite with slaveholding Texas. Those Mexicans love freedom. They have abolished slavery, for which they entertain an unconquerable detestation . . . But the President says this Mexican country "is now included in one of our congressional districts." These thirty thousand people who, so soon as the bill which passed this House yesterday shall receive the sanction of the Senate, and shall be approved by the President, will be in a state of war with this nation, are to be represented on this floor because Texas has on paper attached them to one of her congressional districts . . .

I regard the message as having been put forth to divert public attention from the outrage committed by the President upon our own Constitution, and the exercise of

usurped powers, of which he has been guilty in ordering our army to invade a country with which we are at peace, and of provoking and bringing on this war. I am led to this inevitable conclusion from the fact that he dare not rest his justification upon truth. He reminds us of the grievous wrongs perpetrated (as he says) by Mexico upon our people in former years, and alludes to the delay of that government in the payment of debts due our people, and mourns over the loss of our commerce with Mexico; all for the purpose of justifying himself in sending the army to the Rio Grande, and commencing the work of human butchery!

If the country be ours, why does he seek to justify the taking possession of it by reference to the fact that Mexico is indebted to some of our people? If it be not ours, and he has taken possession of it in order to compel Mexico to pay those debts, why not say so? The fact that Mexico has not paid the debts due to our citizens can have no legitimate connection with taking possession of our own soil. But the writer of the message was obviously conscious that this invasion of the Mexican territory could not be justified; and he endeavored to extenuate the act by assuring us that "the movement of the troops to the Del Norte was made under positive instructions to abstain from all aggressive acts toward Mexico or Mexican citizens unless she should declare war."

What aggressive acts toward a foreign power could our army commit while on our own territory? While the army was within the United States they could not commit violence upon Mexico. The order was also to abstain from all aggressive acts toward "Mexican citizens." It seems that the President expected General Taylor to find Mexican citizens located within the United States . . .

. . . The President obviously intended to involve us in war with Mexico. No sophistry can disguise that fact. That truth will stand on the page of history in all coming time, to the disgrace of this nation and of the age in which we live . . .

Sir, no man regards this war as just. We know, the country knows, and the civilized world are conscious, that it has resulted from a desire to extend and sustain an institution on which the curse of the Almighty most visibly rests. Mexico has long since abolished slavery. She has purified herself from its crimes and its guilt. That institution is now circumscribed on the southwest by Mexico, where the slaves of Texas find an asylum . . . It has therefore become

necessary to extend our dominions into Mexico in order to render slavery secure in Texas

. . . . This war is waged against an unoffending people, without just or adequate cause, for the purposes of conquest; with the design to extend slavery; in violation of the Constitution, against the dictates of justice, of humanity, the sentiments of the age in which we live, and the precepts of the religion we profess. I will lend it no aid, no support whatever. I will not bathe my hands in the blood of the people of Mexico, nor will I participate in the guilt of those murders which have been and which will hereafter be committed by our army there. For these reasons I shall vote against the bill under consideration and all others calculated to support this war

Polk Summary

Giddings Summary