

Manifest Destiny

In the 1840s, a journalist named John O’Sullivan invented a new phrase. “Manifest Destiny” was used to describe what he believed was the mission of America; to spread democracy and American values by annexing¹ the entire North American continent. Before long, this phrase became a slogan for anyone who believed that the nation should stretch “from sea to shining sea.” Although the phrase was new, the idea certainly was not. For many years, Americans had been pushing their geographic boundaries farther and farther west, always looking for new land and a better way of life.

Manifest destiny begins with the belief that the American way of life is the very best. American laws are the most just, its government the most sound, its values the most righteous. For this reason, God called upon America to show others the way. Since it came from God, Americans also believed they had to take whatever actions were necessary to complete their mission, despite the consequences. In 1845, some Americans believed that Texas would bring the nation one step closer toward fulfilling its destiny.

At that time, Texas was an independent nation. White settlers living in Texas had recently fought for and won independence from Mexico. However, many of those settlers had always assumed that the United States eventually would absorb Texas. That was, in fact, part of the reason they settled there in the first place. The situation, however, was complicated. The Mexican government was still bitter over the loss of Texas. Some politicians warned that Mexico would retaliate if the United States annexed Texas. Nevertheless, Congress voted to allow Texas into the Union in December 1845.

At the same time, the United States and Britain were involved in a border dispute. The Treaty of 1818 had established the border between the Oregon Territory and Canada along the 49th parallel. However, some Americans argued the border should be much farther north, at 54° 40’. While President John Tyler remained silent, journalists such as O’Sullivan wrote in favor of the expanded border. “Manifest destiny” was again used to justify the argument. Some were beginning to call for war with Britain. “Fifty-four Forty or Fight!” and “manifest destiny” were becoming popular slogans. However, since neither government wanted to go to war, an agreement was quickly reached. Although the dispute was settled without bloodshed, it was clear that Americans were willing to fight for

¹ Annex – (v) to take or seize control.

their right to occupy the entire continent.

Meanwhile, tensions with Mexico erupted when President James K. Polk sent troops to defend the Rio Grande Valley, territory claimed by both Texas and Mexico. On April 25, 1846, Mexican troops attacked. The Mexican-American War had begun. At the same time, the famous explorer John C. Fremont led an expedition to California. While there, Fremont encouraged a rebellion among white settlers. The Bear Flag Revolt ended with California winning independence from Mexico.

The war with Mexico lasted more than two years and led to major land gains for the United States². With the path now clear, settlers began to spread into the newly acquired territories. Additional waves of settlers made the journey west after hearing of the discovery of gold in California and the rich farmland of the Oregon Territory. While the expansion of America was far from over, Manifest Destiny had been realized; and Americans were living “from sea to shining sea.”



American Progress
John Gast, 1872

² These new territories included California, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming.

Name: _____ Date: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. Explain in your own words the idea of “Manifest Destiny.”
2. Who first used the phrase “Manifest Destiny”?
3. Describe the event that led to “Manifest Destiny” becoming a popular slogan?
4. Describe the events that led to war with Mexico?

5. Examine the painting *American Progress* by John Gast. How does this painting support the idea of Manifest Destiny?