

• *Manifest Destiny: The History of an Idea* •

In 1845, journalist John Louis O’Sullivan wrote, “Our manifest destiny is to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” The phrase “Manifest Destiny” soon came to sum up a view that it was inevitable and just that the United States would one day extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific, encompassing the entire continent of North America. It was the view that the United States was ordained by God or fate to spread across the continent, bringing the fruits of civilization with it everywhere. The 1840s are seen as the decade of Manifest Destiny, the turning point during which this vision of a vast United States continental empire was realized.

O’Sullivan may have coined the phrase “manifest destiny” only in 1845, but in a way the idea itself is as old as the republic, if not older. After all, the very first colonists settling in Jamestown and New England were Protestant English subjects who were the front line in a battle with Catholic Spain for control of vast new lands of the Americas. Later, during the American Revolution, many of the Founders already envisioned a new nation of vast extent. Thomas Jefferson described a growing population that would one day “cover the whole northern if not southern continent, with people speaking the same language, governed by the same forms, and by similar laws.” At first, the young nation was hemmed in on all sides by lands claimed by Spain, England, and France. However, the American spirit of independence was deeply ingrained in thousands of individual settlers who pushed westward, apparently determined not to be thwarted by any group, either European or Native American. As president, Jefferson would take a huge step in realizing his own vision of American expansion with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

If a sense of inevitable growth was part of the nation’s thinking from the start, why are the 1840s seen as a special time for the triumph of the spirit of Manifest Destiny?

The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 did add millions of square miles to the nation’s territory, yet even then,

many Americans still regarded the Rocky Mountains as a likely barrier to any future expansion. Moreover, Spain, Britain, and even Russia in the far west still made land claims that stood in the way of U.S. expansion. The many powerful Native American tribes and nations still populating and controlling large areas both east and west of the Mississippi River also posed an obstacle to expansion.

Starting with the War of 1812, however, a greater feeling began to set in that continent-wide expansion was a real possibility. That war with Great Britain may not have resolved many differences, but it did give Americans a huge boost in confidence. Several factors fueled a growing sense of patriotic pride and a heady feeling that the U.S. would become master of the continent. The early stages of industrial development had begun. Reports from explorers stirred interest in the western lands. Political democracy was expanding. The Second Great Awakening fostered a new spirit of reform, missionary zeal, and sense of perfectibility. All these factors convinced Americans that they were destined to play a unique role on the stage of history. A less easily romanticized factor was the equally relentless drive to spread slavery and cotton farming ever farther westward. The very survival of slavery seemed to many Southerners to depend on continually expanding the number of states committed to defending it.

These general trends still clashed with several key obstacles. For one thing, a newly independent Mexico stood squarely in the way of expansion into the Southwest. The British still claimed part of Oregon Country in the Northwest, and even on the eastern side of the Mississippi, powerful Native American communities stood in the way of a mushrooming land hunger driving thousands of settlers ever farther west. President Andrew Jackson’s ruthless Indian removal policies solved that problem in the 1830s, at a horrendous cost. Creeks, Choctaws, Cherokees, and other powerful tribes were forced hundreds or thousands of miles to homelands across the Mississippi River in Indian Territory (what is today Oklahoma). Death tolls on these forced marches were horrifying. In his defense,

Jackson claimed that masses of land-hungry settlers would in the end flood onto Indian lands and destroy native ways of life anyway. Whatever the truth of that claim, the removal policies were a tragic aspect of Manifest Destiny that the supporters of the concept rarely acknowledged as such.

The final factor standing in the way of Manifest Destiny was Mexico and its refusal to agree to grant Texas independence or sell California to the United States. When the U.S. annexed Texas in 1845, war became all but inevitable. It took that war, along with diplomacy with the British, to give expansionists the final victory and proving to them that Manifest Destiny was a reality and not merely an idea.

The concept of Manifest Destiny today is often seen negatively as a justification for ruthless conquest and empire, or more specifically, as the result of racist

views about African Americans, Spanish-speaking Mexicans, and Native American tribes—a triumphal sense of the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon people over them all. That is surely one aspect of it.

However, for many at the time, it was also linked with the idealism and romantic individualism of mid-1800s America. The idea of expansion was so bound up with notions of American individual liberty it is hard to see how it could not have developed. The settlers who continually pushed westward rarely asked anyone's permission. Was Manifest Destiny a result of deep flaws that the nation could and should have overcome, or was it an inevitable part of what was both flawed and admirable about American society? Manifest Destiny's admirers and critics have long debated such questions and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future.

### **Points to Keep in Mind**

#### **Historians' Questions**

Most historians agree that the concept of Manifest Destiny swept the nation in the 1840s. They do not agree as to how deep or powerful a guiding idea it was before or after that decade. Nor do they agree about its causes, or how to judge or evaluate it.

Some see it as a purely dishonest justification for land hunger, greed, and imperial ambition. In this view, Manifest Destiny was based on a growing view of humanity as divided into superior and inferior races, with Americans as the noble Anglo-Saxon bearers of higher civilization. In this view, superior Americans were destined by God and nature to spread across the continent, replacing and/or civilizing all others in their path.

Other historians say the concept had an idealistic side. They point to those who promoted the idea of Manifest Destiny as the way to ensure the triumph of America's democratic heritage of freedom.

Along with this argument, historians also argue about how much choice the government had to either foster or resist Manifest Destiny and the expansion it justified. Did America's very freedom make such expansion inevitable as settlers simply headed west on their own? These and many other aspects of the concept are still debated today.

#### **The Primary Source Evidence**

For this lesson, you will study ten primary source documents on Manifest Destiny and related topics, such as Andrew Jackson's Indian removal policies, the Mexican War, or the expansion of slave states and free states. Together, these sources will give you evidence to help you better understand and evaluate the concept of Manifest Destiny. They will also enable you to make some informed judgments of your own about what two historians say about this decade.

#### **Secondary Source Interpretations**

After studying and discussing the primary sources, you will read two short passages from two books that deal with the place of Manifest Destiny in the nation's history. The two historians who wrote these passages agree about most of the facts, but they make different overall judgments about the causes of Manifest Destiny. You will use your own background knowledge and your ideas about the primary sources as you think about and answer some questions about the views of these two historians.

## The Primary Sources for the Lesson

### Document 1

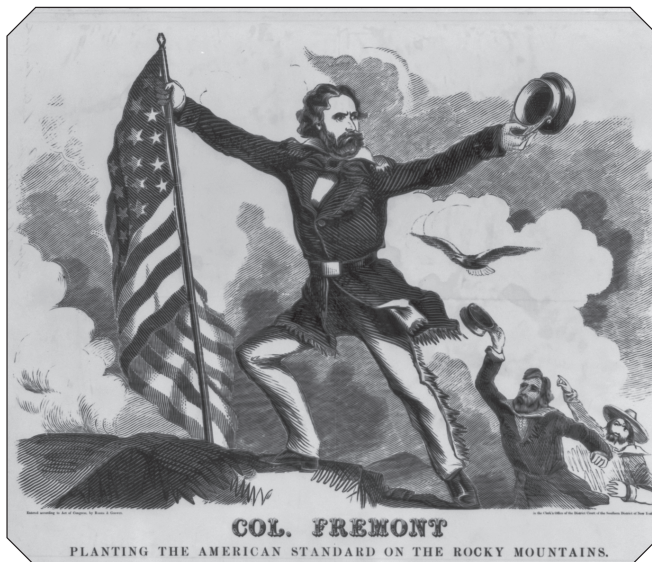
**Information on the source:** John Louis O’Sullivan, editor of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, coined the phrase “manifest destiny” in 1845. Even earlier, however, he had begun expressing the idea in very similar terms, as he does in these passages from “The Great Nation of Futurity,” from *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, November 1839.

*The American people having derived their origin from many other nations, and the Declaration of National Independence being entirely based on the great principle of human equality, these facts demonstrate at once our disconnected position as regards any other nation; that we have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any of them, and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history...and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity...*

*We have no interest in the scenes of antiquity, only as lessons of avoidance of nearly all their examples. The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and*

*who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can. We point to the everlasting truth on the first page of our national declaration, and we proclaim to the millions of other lands, that “the gates of hell”—the powers of aristocracy and monarchy—“shall not prevail against it.”*

*The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High—the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere—its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its congregation an Union of many Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions, calling, owning no man master, but governed by God’s natural and moral law of equality, the law of brotherhood—of “peace and good will amongst men.”*



### Document 2

**Information on the source:** A large woodcut campaign poster for John C. Fremont, Republican presidential contender in 1856. Fremont is shown here planting an American flag on a mountain peak. He is clad in fringed trousers and military coat and waves a visored cap in the air. Below, at right, are a bearded trapper or fellow explorer and a Mexican wearing a wide-brimmed hat. An eagle soars in the air beyond them. This scene seems designed to evoke heroic memories of Fremont’s famous exploring expeditions to the Rocky Mountains in 1842 and 1843.

### Document 3

**Information on the source:** Part of Andrew Jackson's Second Annual Message to Congress, December 6, 1830, justifying his Indian removal policy. Against strong opposition, Jackson was able to carry out this plan, which forced many of the most powerful Indian tribes and confederations to move from areas east of the Mississippi to lands set aside for them in what is now Oklahoma.

*The consequences of a speedy removal will be important to the United States, to individual States, and to the Indians themselves. The pecuniary advantages which it promises to the Government are the least of its recommendations. It puts an end to all possible danger of collision between the authorities of the General and State Governments on account of the Indians. It will place a dense and civilized population in large tracts of country now occupied by a few savage hunters. By opening the whole territory between Tennessee on the north and Louisiana on the south to the settlement of the whites it will incalculably strengthen the southwestern frontier and render the adjacent States strong enough to repel future invasions without remote aid. It will relieve the whole State of Mississippi and the western part of Alabama of Indian occupancy, and enable those States to advance rapidly in population, wealth, and power...*

*The tribes which occupied the countries now constituting the Eastern States were annihilated or have melted away to make room for the whites. The waves of population and civilization are rolling to the westward, and we now propose to acquire the countries occupied by the red men of the South and West by a fair exchange, and, at the expense of the United States, to send them to land where their existence may be prolonged and perhaps made*

*perpetual. Doubtless it will be painful to leave the graves of their fathers; but what do they more than our ancestors did or than our children are now doing? To better their condition in an unknown land our forefathers left all that was dear in earthly objects. Our children by thousands yearly leave the land of their birth to seek new homes in distant regions. Does Humanity weep at these painful separations from everything, animate and inanimate, with which the young heart has become entwined? Far from it. It is rather a source of joy that our country affords scope where our young population may range unconstrained in body or in mind, developing the power and facilities of man in their highest perfection. These remove hundreds and almost thousands of miles at their own expense, purchase the lands they occupy, and support themselves at their new homes from the moment of their arrival. Can it be cruel in this Government when, by events which it can not control, the Indian is made discontented in his ancient home to purchase his lands, to give him a new and extensive territory, to pay the expense of his removal, and support him a year in his new abode? How many thousands of our own people would gladly embrace the opportunity of removing to the West on such conditions!*

### Document 4

**Information on the source:** Andrew Jackson's March 30, 1830, "Proclamation on Public Lands Near Huntsville, Alabama."

*Now, therefore, I, Andrew Jackson, President of the United States, have thought proper to issue this my proclamation, commanding and strictly enjoining all persons who have unlawfully taken possession of or made any settlement on, or who now unlawfully occupy, any of the public lands within the district of lands subject to sale at Huntsville, in the State of Alabama, as aforesaid, forthwith to remove therefrom; and I do hereby further command and enjoin the marshal, or officer acting as marshal, in that State,*

*where such possession shall have been taken or settlement made, to remove, from and after the 1st day of September, 1830, all or any of the said unlawful occupants; and to effect the said service I do hereby authorize the employment of such military force as may become necessary in pursuance of the provisions of the act of Congress aforesaid, warning the offenders, moreover, that they will be prosecuted in all such other ways as the law directs.*

### Document 5

**Information on the source:** Part of the lyrics for “We’ll Conquer All Before Us,” an 1846 song by George Washington Dixon, a popular blackface minstrel.

*The Mexicans are on our soil,  
In war they wish us to embroil;  
They’ve tried their best and worst to vex us,  
By murdering our brave men in Texas.*

Chorus

*We’re on our way to Rio Grande,  
On our way to Rio Grande,  
On our way to Rio Grande,  
And with arms they’ll find us handy.*

*We are the boys who fear no noise,  
We’ll leave behind us all our joys,  
To punish those half savage scamps,  
Who’ve slain our brethern in their camps.*

### Document 6

**Information on the source:** J. H. Ingraham grew up in New England, but in 1830, he moved to Natchez, Mississippi. In 1835, he wrote about the region in his book *The South-West*. This short passage on the rapid spread of cotton culture is from that book.

*Cotton and negroes are the constant theme—the ever harped upon, never worn out subject of conversation among all classes. But a small portion of the broad rich lands of this thriving state is yet appropriated. Not till every acre is purchased and cultivated—not till Mississippi becomes one vast cotton field, will this mania, which has entered into the very marrow, bone and sinew of a Mississippian’s system, pass away. And not then, till the lands become exhausted and wholly unfit for farther cultivation.*

### Document 7

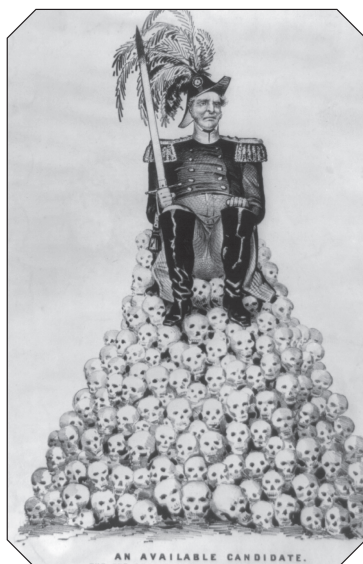
**Information on the source:** O’Sullivan actually first used the exact phrase “manifest destiny” in an editorial supporting annexation of Texas in the July–August 1845 edition of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. In that same editorial, O’Sullivan specifically sought to answer charges that Texas was annexed solely to allow the spread of slavery and ensure its survival.

*Nor is there any just foundation for the charge that Annexation is a great pro-slavery measure—calculated to increase and perpetuate that institution... The greater value in Texas of the slave labor now employed in [the northern tier of Slave States], must soon produce the effect of draining off that labor southwardly, by the same unvarying law that bids water descend the slope that invites it. Every new Slave State in Texas will make at least one Free State from among those in which that institution now exists—to say nothing of those portions of Texas on which slavery cannot spring and grow—to say nothing of the far more rapid growth of new States in the free West and North-west, as these fine regions are overspread by the emigration*

*fast flowing over them from Europe, as well as from the Northern and Eastern States of the Union as it exists. On the other hand, it is undeniably much gained for the cause of the eventual voluntary abolition of slavery, that it should have been thus drained off towards the only outlet which appeared to furnish much probability of the ultimate disappearance of the negro race from our borders. The Spanish-Indian-American populations of Mexico, Central America and South America, afford the only receptacle capable of absorbing that race whenever we shall be prepared to slough it off—to emancipate it from slavery, and (simultaneously necessary) to remove it from the midst of our own.*

### Document 8

**Information on the source:** This cartoon criticizes the Whig Party's presidential candidate for 1848. Here the "available candidate" is either General Zachary Taylor or General Winfield Scott, both of whom were seeking the nomination. The skulls and sword allude to the bloody but successful Mexican War campaigns waged by both Taylor and Scott. This made them popular with many Whigs, but not with this artist. The figure is usually identified as Taylor, but may have been Scott, whose support was rising before the party's convention on June 7, 1848. Taylor won that nomination.



### Document 9

**Information on the source:** In this part of his inaugural address on March 4, 1845, President James K. Polk speaks of the need to acquire the Oregon territory.

*Nor will it become in a less degree my duty to assert and maintain by all constitutional means the right of the United States to that portion of our territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains. Our title to the country of the Oregon is "clear and unquestionable," and already are our people preparing to perfect that title by occupying it with their wives and children. But eighty years ago our population was confined on the west by the ridge of the Alleghanies. Within that period—within the lifetime, I might say, of some of my hearers—our people, increasing to many millions, have filled the eastern valley of the Mississippi, adventurously ascended the Missouri to its headsprings, and are already engaged in establishing the blessings of self-government in valleys of which the rivers flow to the Pacific. The world beholds the peaceful triumphs of the industry of our emigrants. To us belongs the duty of protecting them adequately wherever they may be upon our soil. The jurisdiction of our laws and the benefits of our republican institutions should be extended over them in the distant regions which they have selected for their homes.*



### Document 10

**Information on the source:** Settlers in 1889 rush into the "Unassigned Lands" in what was then the Indian Territory, on the day the government finally opened these lands up for settlement. At noon on April 22, 1889, settlers would be able to enter these lands and choose 160 acres for a homestead. The illustration is dated 1905.