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Eras / Manifest Destiny / Manifest Destiny, 1790-1850 (Overview)

By the 1840s, American expansionism was at its highest and was aimed toward the West. History reveals a variety of political, economic, religious, and racial reasons for the United States' claim to new territories. Politically, Americans believed that expansionism was an altruistic way to extend U.S. liberty to new realms—as well as a way to control and populate the country as they saw fit. Furthermore, they wanted to ensure the security of the United States by extending its borders from ocean to ocean. Economically, Americans were attracted to the boundless tracts of sparsely settled land just beyond the borders of their country. They also wanted new trade routes to the Far East that would increase trade profits. Some Americans even believed that it was God's will that Americans spread over the entire continent, that it was their divine providence. A negative side of that belief was that it gave the white man the right to destroy anything and anyone—namely Native Americans and Mexicans—who got in the way.

This movement was given the name "manifest destiny" by a journalist, John Louis O'Sullivan. In July 1845, he wrote an editorial discussing the annexation of Texas in which he defended the United States' claim to new territories as ". . . the right of our manifest destiny to over spread and possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given for the development of the great experiment of liberty . . . ."

**Promising to Acquire, Acquire, Acquire**

Indeed, in the 1844 presidential election, James K. Polk won the Democratic nomination and later the election because he supported manifest destiny. He promised to acquire Texas, California, and Oregon for the United States. (As it happened, Texas was annexed just a few days before he took office.) During his campaign, he demanded that Great Britain cede the whole of the disputed Oregon Territory up to the 54° 40' line. After assuming office, he settled for a compromise—the 49th parallel, the northern border of today's Washington State.

Polk was so intent on acquiring California that he was willing to push the nation into its first aggressive war. Most historians agree that the Mexican-American War, 1846-1848, was fought primarily for motives of territorial gain. When Mexican troops fired on American soldiers in territory claimed by both nations, Polk asked Congress to declare a state of war. However, some evidence exists that the U.S. troops may actually have been sent into the area deliberately to provoke a conflict. Opponents of the war suspected that the war was a proslavery conspiracy to gain additional territories where slavery could be planted.

Advancing as far south as Mexico City, the United States won a complete military victory. By way of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, in exchange for $15 million, Mexico turned over California and all the land between Texas and California. Mexico also agreed that the Rio Grande was the southern boundary of Texas. The newly annexed land eventually became the states of Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. Although the United States now stretched from ocean to ocean, there were still those supporters of manifest destiny who thought all of Mexico should have been turned over to the United States!

**MLA:**
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