manifest destiny

from The Columbia Encyclopedia

belief held by many Americans in the 1840s that the United States was destined to expand across the continent, by force, as used against Native Americans, if necessary. The controversy over slavery further fueled expansionism, as the North and South each wanted the nation to admit new states that supported its section's economic, political, and slave policies. By the end of the 19th cent., this belief was used to support expansion in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

Summary Article: Manifest Destiny

From Encyclopedia of American Studies

From the establishment of the earliest American colonies, the European settlement of North America was imbued with an attitude of “chosenness.” Whether in the form of John Winthrop's call for Massachusetts to function as a “city upon the hill” or that of the founding fathers’ placing their trust in America as humanity’s “grand experiment,” the U.S. culture has always been constructed to reify geographic expansion and economic development as national ideals. Possibly the best example in U.S. history is the movement of European settlers across the North American continent.

The hunger for additional land was not always a universal ideal. Through the nation's first fifty years, many Americans remained fearful of the nation growing too large. Even a tremendous land deal such as Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase of 1802 was met with criticism for creating a sprawling nation impossible of being governed. An attitude of American “exceptionalism” took root during the 1830s. In the 1840s this spirit found expression in the policies of presidents Franklin Pierce and James K. Polk as each struggled to justify the taking of western lands from Native peoples and from European control.

The belief that U.S. expansion westward and southward was inevitable, just, and divinely ordained was first labeled Manifest Destiny by John L. O’Sullivan, editor of the United States Magazine and Domestic Review. This logic was quickly attached to expansionist rhetoric during the 1840s. Among the long-standing objectives of expansionists was the Republic of Texas, which in addition to Texas included parts of present-day Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico. After winning its independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico encouraged the development of its rich but remote northern province, offering large tracts of land virtually free to settlers. The settlers in turn agreed to become citizens of Mexico, and by 1835 thirty-five thousand former U.S. citizens lived in Texas. Expansionists began clamoring for the nation to accept the inhabitants' desire for statehood. The annexation of Texas, O'Sullivan wrote in 1845, was “the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”

It was exactly this spirit that Polk would parlay into a rationale for the contrived 1848 war with Mexico. Thanks to this expansionist war and other negotiations, by 1850 the United States stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. This expression of Manifest Destiny forced the nation to confront territorial issues such as slavery, culminating in the Civil War. The spirit of Manifest Destiny did not die with secure borders; in fact, many historians argue that this “exceptionalism” has fueled U.S. diplomacy.
since the Monroe Doctrine. Such an idea is particularly applicable in the case of Theodore Roosevelt’s “big-stick policies.” In many instances economic and intellectual influence took the place of actual land acquisition.

The legacy of Manifest Destiny is the U.S. economic and cultural dominance that shaped the twentieth century. This was particularly evident in the American West, where the pioneer spirit led to the conversion of arid lands into the agricultural empire that feeds much of the world. There is, however, a downside. In the carnage caused by war and the dislocation of populations such as Native Americans, Manifest Destiny has left an uncomfortable legacy for many Americans.


Battle of Molino del Rey, Fought September 8th 1847. Blowing up the Foundry by the Victorious American Army under General Worth. 1848. James Bailie, artist. National Archives and Records Administration.

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