

Using the **Mexican-American War** to Understand "**Manifest Destiny**"

Our manifest destiny [is] to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.

John L. O'Sullivan, 1845

Background: "Manifest Destiny" was a phrase coined by John O'Sullivan in 1845 to describe, what he felt was, the God-given right of Americans to overspread North America and make it uniquely "American." Soon, Americans used the notion of the United States' "manifest destiny" to explain and justify America's westward expansion to the Pacific Ocean. Because of the tremendous amount of territory that the United States stood to gain if it defeated Mexico in the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), people's opinions on the U.S.'s "manifest destiny" also revealed their position on whether the United States should have been at war with Mexico.

As you read the excerpts below, **highlight the key ideas** and then **use the accompanying chart to list arguments** that support and oppose American "manifest destiny" and continental expansion in the 1840's.

Document A

But I am in danger of running into unnecessary details, which my debility will not enable me to close. The question is full of interest, also, as it affects our domestic relations and as it may bear upon those of Mexico to us. I will not undertake to follow it out to its consequences in those respects, though I must say that, in all aspects, the annexation of Texas to the United States promises to enlarge the circle of free institutions, and is essential to the United States, particularly as lessening the probabilities of future collision with foreign powers, and giving them greater efficiency in spreading the blessings of peace.

Andrew Jackson in a letter to Cong. Aaron V. Brown of Tennessee, February 12, 1843

Document B

John L. O Sullivan, the influential Democratic editor who gave the movement its name, wrote in 1845 that the American claim to new territory:

... is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative self government entrusted to us. It is a right such as that of the tree to the space of air and earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny of growth.

Richard N. Current et al., *A Survey of American History, Vol. 1*, 6th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p. 375

Document C

"We love to indulge in thoughts of the future extent and power of this Republic - because with its increase is the increase of human happiness and liberty... What has miserable, inefficient Mexico - with her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom, her actual tyranny by the few over the many- what has she to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race? Be it ours, to achieve that mission! Be it ours to roll down all of the upstart leaven of old despotism, that comes our way!"

Walt Whitman, Editorial, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 7, 1846

Document D

*"Then-Resolve,-Thet we wunt hev an inch o'slave territory;
Thet Presidunt Polk's hell perceedins air very tory;
Thet the war is a damned war, an' them thet enlist in it
Should hev a cravat with a dreffle tight twist in it;
'Thet the war is a war fer the spreadin' o' slavery;"*

James Russell Lowell, *The Biglow Papers*, 1846

Document E

However superior the Anglo-American race may be to that of Mexico, this gives the Americans no right to infringe upon the rights of the inferior race. The people of the United States may rightfully, and win if they use the proper means, exercise a most beneficial moral influence over the Mexicans and other less enlightened nations of America. Beyond this they have no right to go.

Albert Gallatin, "The Mission of the United States," in *Selected Readings in Great Issues in American History 1620-1968* from *Annals of America* (Chicago, Illinois: Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corporation, 1969), p. D-25.

Document F

For American expansion to the Pacific was always a precise and calculated movement. It was ever limited in its objectives. American diplomatic and military policy that secured the acquisition of both Oregon and California was in the possession of men who never defined their expansionist purposes in terms of a democratic ideal. The vistas of all from Jackson to Polk were maritime and they were always anchored to specific waterways along the Pacific Coast. Land was necessary to them merely as a right of way to ocean ports—a barrier to be spanned by improved avenues of commerce. Any interpretation of westward extension beyond Texas is meaningless unless defined in terms of commerce and harbors.

Norman A. Graebner, "The Land-Hunger Thesis Challenged," in *The Mexican War: Was It Manifest Destiny?* ed. by Ramon Eduardo Ruiz (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 48.

Document G

Less than a year before he became President, Lincoln wrote that, the act of sending an armed force among the Mexicans was unnecessary, in as much as Mexico was in no way molesting or menacing the United States or the people thereof; and that it was unconstitutional, because the power of levying war is vested in Congress, and not in the President" (June 1, 1860).

Abraham Lincoln quoted in *The American Pageant* by Thomas A. Bailey and David M. Kennedy (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath Company, 1983), p. 268.

Document H

Long-remembered Mexicans have never forgotten that their northern enemy tore away about half of their country. The argument that they were lucky not to lose all of it, and that they had been paid something for their land, did not lessen their bitterness. The war also marked an ugly turning point in the relations between the United States and Latin America as a whole. Hitherto, Uncle Sam had been regarded with some complacency, even friendliness. Henceforth, he was increasingly feared as the "Colossus of the North." Suspicious neighbors to the south condemned him as a greedy and untrustworthy bully, who might next despoil them of their soil.

Bailey and Kennedy, *The American Pageant*, p. 272.

Document I

Within the United States, indecision about how much territory the country should demand also impeded rapid settlement. At the beginning of the war, the ambitions of most Americans were relatively modest: California and New Mexico. But with each new, dazzling victory, the national appetite grew until "All Mexico" became a powerful slogan and movement.

The reluctance of most Americans to take on the responsibility of governing an alien, non-English-speaking people with different institutions and traditions, ultimately decided the All Mexico issue. Racism clearly played a part in the decision: Mexicans were "half-breeds," incapable of self-government; they would be a dead weight around the bounding young America's neck.

Irwin Unger, *These United States, Vol. 1* (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), p. 390-91.