

Manifest Destiny -- An Introduction

Manifest Destiny -- a phrase used by leaders and politicians in the 1840s to explain continental expansion by the United States -- revitalized a sense of "mission" or national destiny for Americans.

- The people of the United States felt it was their mission to extend the "boundaries of freedom" to others by imparting their idealism and belief in democratic institutions to those who were capable of self-government.
- It excluded those people who were perceived as being incapable of self-government, such as Native American people and those of non-European origin.

- But there were other forces and political agendas at work as well; the following points illustrate some of the economic, social and political pressures promoting U.S. expansion:
 - ✓ The United States was experiencing a periodic high birth rate and increases in population due to immigration.
 - ✓ Because agriculture provided the primary economic structure, large families to work the farms were considered an asset.
 - ✓ U.S. population grew from more than five million in 1800 to more than 23 million by mid-century → there was a need to expand into new territories to accommodate this rapid growth.
 - ✓ It's estimated that nearly 4,000,000 Americans moved to western territories between 1820 and 1850.
 - ✓ The United States suffered two economic depressions -- one in 1818 and a second in 1839 → these crises drove some people to seek their living in frontier areas.
 - ✓ Frontier land was inexpensive or, in some cases, free.
 - ✓ Expansion into frontier areas opened opportunities for new commerce and individual self-advancement.
 - ✓ Land ownership was associated with wealth and tied to self-sufficiency, political power and independent "self-rule."
 - ✓ Maritime merchants saw an opportunity to expand and promote new commerce by building West Coast ports leading to increased trade with countries in the Pacific.

What were the driving forces behind the United States' quest for Manifest Destiny during the 19th century?

- The term "Manifest Destiny" was, in part, an expression of a genuine ideal on the part of Americans.
- But it was also a justification, in that they wanted territory and needed an excuse or justification for a push into territory that they did not control. Manifest Destiny was a conviction that God intended North America to be under the control of Americans. It's a kind of early projection of Anglo-Saxon supremacy and there's a racist element to it.
- It was very hard to measure the two, since it would differ from person to person. If you asked a person to define Manifest Destiny, he might tell you it is an ideal, or he might say, "Well, we want the land and this is the easiest way to justify our taking it."

How were the United States' actions to fulfill its perceived Manifest Destiny viewed by outside nations?

- The attitude of Europeans and other observers was one not of fear of the United States, but a combination of lack of respect and a conviction that Americans were essentially hypocrites to talk about ideals then aim at expanding their land holdings.
- The Americans did a great deal of talking and writing about liberty, but at the same time, they expanded the idea of Manifest Destiny. It was their destiny to expand across North America. The people poised in the way of that expansion, were aware of this, especially the Mexicans.
- Mexicans were torn between two conflicting attitudes about the United States:
 - ✓ one was an attitude of admiration;
 - ✓ the other was an attitude of fear that the Americans would try to detach border territories from Mexico's lands.
- Many Mexicans wanted to imitate the United States--its prosperity, the development of its economy and its agriculture. But they wanted to do so without losing land in the process.

Who were the people and what were the forces behind U.S. OPPOSITION to western expansion and the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny?

- Expansion was always a very divisive issue that provoked as much opposition as support in some parts of the country.
- There were many citizens who felt that a democracy like the United States could succeed only if it were relatively small and close to the people. In a sense, this was a Jeffersonian ideal.
- There were others who saw possibilities for greatness on the part of the United States in growth and economic development. This was, in some degree, the Hamiltonian ideal and those who supported it stood behind expansion of the United States, especially in the West, and the expansion of American commerce.
 - ✓ At first, basis for opposition to U.S. expansion was a feeling that it would contribute to the downfall of the nation.
 - ✓ Later, the Northeast and East Coast felt they would lose power if the United States admitted more states in to the Union.
 - ✓ Finally, the abolitionists in the North were afraid that the victory over Mexico would lead to the incorporation of more slave territory into the United States.
- During the course of the conflict with Mexico, there was, of course, some sympathy with the Mexicans and some pacifist opposition to the war itself as the casualty lists grew longer. But the abolitionist movement became a means of focusing this opposition into a powerful political movement that President Polk had to pay attention to.