

The history of manifest destiny history essay



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Americans have always believed that they have a unique mission. They have always thought that they possess a destiny to do exceptional things and accomplish extraordinary feats. This is evident from the first American “ City Upon a Hill”, to the just cause democratic of the American revolution, to Jefferson’s Empire of Liberty, and nowadays in American foreign policy. Nowhere is the self-righteous principle more evident than in the idea of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny has served as the basis and inspiration for outstanding acts of American unity and nationalism, but it also is responsible for the horrible mistreatment of Native Americans and bloody wars, including the American Civil War. Although a loose, abstract idea, Manifest Destiny has had an unparalleled effect on the course this great nation has taken.

The definition of Manifest Destiny is a topic of much historical disagreement and inconsistency, but it is largely agreed upon that Manifest Destiny refers to the God-given right of the United States to further develop and expand its institutions and democratic values. Before delving into the complex meaning of Manifest Destiny, it is imperative to understand the origins and basis for the idea.

The term, “ Manifest Destiny” was first seen in writing in 1845 in an essay entitled Annexation by John L. O’Sullivan. In his essay, Sullivan urges the United States to annex Texas not only because the Texans wanted us to, but also because it was our “ Manifest Destiny” to annex areas and spread our democratic values. “ Manifest Destiny” went relatively unnoticed in Sullivan’s Annexation and received minimal public response. This all changed the second time Sullivan mentioned his idea of Manifest Destiny. O’Sullivan,

in his article entitled Manifest Destiny in the New York Morning News, argued that the United States held the higher ground in the dispute between itself and Britain over the Oregon country because we had the god-given right to expand throughout North America. From this article, American exceptionalism and America's Manifest Destiny was born (Steffen).

Both Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism are most commonly associated with the 19th century Era of Expansion in American history starting with the Louisiana Purchase.

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson pushed through Senate the best business deal ever negotiated and what was to become the future of the United States of America, the Louisiana Purchase. The Louisiana Purchase was the most important event of President Thomas Jefferson's first administration. In this transaction, the United States bought 827, 987 square miles of land from France for about fifteen million dollars. This vast area lay between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border. The purchase of this land greatly increased the economic resources of the United States, and cemented the geographic presence of America. This purchase more than doubled the size of America. This vast, unexplored backyard that the US now had sole ownership of posed many questions and mysteries to the American people. Thomas Jefferson commissioned Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to answer these questions and solve these mysteries. In 1804, Lewis and Clark set out with their corps of discovery on the first government-funded transcontinental expedition that would bring back glorious stories of the west

and contribute immensely to the westward expansion of the United States (“Louisiana Purchase”).

The Corps of discovery started their journey in St. Louis, Missouri in May of 1804. From there, they started their long journey up Missouri river. By late October, the Corps had reached the settlement of Hidatsa, North Dakota, where they decided to hold up for the winter. Here, they enlisted the help of a Shoshone woman named Sacajawea who’s experience and nativity among the native people of the western territory proved to be an invaluable asset to the Corps. As the group pressed westward, Lewis kept maps of terrain they had covered, notes on new vegetation that they encountered, and journals of the types of people that inhabited the places that they traveled through.

Early in 1805, Lewis dispatched 12 members of the Corps back to Washington with many scientific and topographic discoveries that would intrigue both Thomas Jefferson and the American people alike. By November 1805, the expedition had accomplished their goal of traveling across the territory to the Pacific Ocean and decided to spend the remainder of the winter close to the temperate coast. When spring time came, they retraced their footsteps all the way back to the Missouri tributary, which they took back down to St. Louis. From St. Louis they then carried the remainder of their findings back to the nation’s capital. In Washington, they were greeted as heroes and conquerors of the west. The findings and stories that the Lewis and Clark expedition brought back both fascinated the American people and inspired them to take hold of their Manifest Destiny and become the conquerors of the western territory. What Meriwether Lewis and William Clark accomplished on their expedition was more than just scientific findings,

knowledge of terrain, and information on peoples of the west, through this expedition, they became the forefathers of a great American westward movement that truly embodied the idea of manifest destiny (“ Lewis and Clark Expedition”).

The accomplishments and discoveries that Lewis and Clark brought back with them from their transcontinental expedition sparked an interest in the American people as to what laid beyond the Mississippi River. People began flocking to the western territories in hopes of amassing wealth and prosperity that the wide open plains and promising coastal lands had to offer. The main route taken by these adventurous people was the Oregon Trail. Starting in Independence Missouri and extending across the continent to the Columbia River in the Oregon Territory, the Oregon Trail was first used by westbound fur traders, but eventually evolved into the main artery for west bound citizens (“ Oregon Trail”).

The two thousand mile trek usually took no less than six months in covered wagons (the most common form of long-distance travel). The trip was so treacherous that it is estimated that one traveler died for every eighty yards of trail. To make matters worse, most everyone except the extremely old, extremely young, and crippled walked along the ox drawn carriages for the entire two thousand mile journey. The wagons themselves were usually four feet wide by ten feet high and were reserved for provisions, clothing, family heirlooms, and pieces of expensive family furniture or treasure that was almost always abandoned along the trail. The abandonment of such treasure was so commonplace that, along the trail, there was always pieces of luxury furniture or expensive pianos that undoubtedly slowed down the wagon they

had previously belonged to. These pieces of luxury were for the taking for anyone that could fit them in their wagon, but more often than not they were left to rot along the side of the trail. The trail was marked by the carcasses of dead animals, graves of dead humans, and debris from overloaded wagons. The vast immigration of American peoples across the Oregon trail to the Oregon territory in essence accomplished just what O'Sullivan wanted: an American Oregon (" Oregon Trail").

Myths about the Natives along the Oregon trail both intrigued and plagued the west-bound Americans. They heard of savages that would ravage wagon trains, but also of peaceful relations between the white settler and Natives beyond the Mississippi. Early on in the westward march of American settlers, peaceful relations seemed to be the status quo. Many natives aided the travelers in ways such as showing possible navigational routes of tricky waterways, pointing out the most efficient routes of travel, and even performing tasks for the white man such as cutting wood or carrying mail eastward. Most of the early relations between natives and American settlers relied on a rudimentary form of trade and barter. Goods such as moccasins, robes, horses, and food supplies were exchanged for small trinkets, weapons, ammunition, and other relevant items that the travelers carried along with them. Contrary to common-held belief, most of this early trade occurred in between Idaho and the coast of the Oregon territory, not along the great plains (" Oregon Trail").

As the immigration intensified, relations between the white man and the natives gradually declined to the level of military confrontation leading to the removal and near extinction of many peoples native to the western territory.

Fueled by a sense of entitlement aroused by the idea of Manifest Destiny, the immigrating Americans helped themselves and all but depleted almost all natural resources available along the trail that the natives had relied on for thousands of years. Examples of this overuse of natural resources include the depletion of American bison populations that once roamed as far as the eye could see, the spoiling of water sources, deforestation, and the depletion of grazing land for livestock. The gradual augmentation of tension between the Natives and immigrating citizens made for an ugly scene along the trail until the later transcontinental railroad was commissioned thus rendering the Oregon Trail obsolete (“ Oregon Trail”).

In 1492, when Christopher Columbus landed on the shores of the foreign land, which he mistakenly believed to be India, he immediately claimed that land for Queen Isabel and King Ferdinand of Spain. The problem with his claim was that Natives had already occupied this land for thousands of years. This immediate and utter disregard for the claims of the Natives became an integral part of the American Manifest Destiny and characterized the general attitude Americans embraced as they moved west into occupied land.

In the early 1800s, the growing American population started creeping into the lower south. As they moved farther west, the white settlers came across an obstacle, the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations. The Indian nations were, as the settlers saw it, in the way of divine progress (Ball).

Americans believed that all native tribes were “ savage” bands of “ hunters” who did not fully utilize the land they occupied. Therefore, the removal of such tribes for the use of their fertile land was a justified action. The process of removal included much bribery and intimidation on the part of not only the American people, but also the government in Washington (Ball).

Originating in the late 18th century with George Washington, governmental removal of Natives permeated the presidencies of many men including Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and Andrew Jackson (Ball).

Andrew Jackson, a lifelong proponent of American expansion and the idea of American Exceptionalism, is perhaps the most notorious advocate of Indian removal during this era. In 1814, he led United States military forces successfully against the Creek Nation. In their defeat, the Creeks relinquished twenty two million acres to the American government. The United States garnered more native land in 1818 when Jackson and his troops invaded the Seminole land in present day Florida (“ Indian Removal”).

From 1814 to 1824, Jackson was instrumental in the negotiating of nine different treaties with southern Indian Nations which divested the Indian people of their eastern land claims in exchange for lands west of the Mississippi. The Indian nations agreed to these harsh treaties partly because they believed that if they conceded to the white man, then he would be more inclined to let them retain some of their original lands. Instead of satisfying the American desire for the natives’ land, the policies of appeasement that the natives employed only heightened American desires (“ Indian Removal”).

While some Indian nations attempted to deter the influx of Americans through violence, the Cherokee nation made an effort to adjust and assimilate to the new societal expectations of the white man. They adopted the practice of large scale farming and some even bought into the slave trade. The Cherokee Nation, through the direction of the American government and people, established schools, abandoned their nomadic ways in favor of the more “civil” towns and cities, and even attempted to assimilate into the American religions through churches and schools set up by missionaries. Despite all of their attempts to adjust and assimilate into American society, the Cherokee nation proved to be no match for the American expansionist spirit (Ball).

The vision that the American expansionists saw for their future was one of total American domination of continental America with no room for the Natives. So, a series of court decisions and legislative acts began the removal and almost elimination of native peoples in the eastern portion of America.

In 1823, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of Johnson vs. M’Intosh that Native Americans, as mere occupants of American land, did not have the legal right to own or sell any land. Furthermore, Chief Justice John Marshall stated his “discovery doctrine” that the Native Americans were a conquered people and to be classified only as occupants on American land. Marshall held that the American “right of discover” trumped the natives’ “right to occupancy”. This court ruling was instrumental in the removal of Indians from their homelands in order to make way for the expanding American population (“Indian Removal”).

Seven years after the Supreme court ruling that stated the dominance of Americans over the Natives in matters of land rights, Andrew Jackson, the famed advocate of Indian removal and now President, pushed through Congress the Indian Removal Act. This piece of legislation gave the President the authority to negotiate “ removal” treaties with all of the Indian tribes east of the Mississippi River. Under these agreements, each tribe would surrender its homeland in the east and relocate within a stated period of time to a territory west of that great waterway. The Senate passed the bill by a vote of 28 to 19, the House of Representatives by a vote of 102 to 97. Jackson then moved quickly to bring about a general removal of all of the eastern tribes, in the North and South alike (Garrison).

The Cherokee people, who had tried so earnestly to adapt themselves to the demanding societal expectations of the Americans, now were set to be relocated to the territory that occupies present day Oklahoma. The new land that they were set to move to soon became known as the Indian Territory. Beginning in May 1838, the United States Army oversaw the mass exodus of the Cherokee people from their native lands to the Oklahoma territory. The journey that they had to endure was so difficult and deadly that thousands perished along the way. The trail they followed became known as the Trail of Tears (Blackhawk).

American ideas of exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny provided both the impetus and the justification for the removal of Natives from the lands they had occupied for thousands of years. The Indian Removal Act is a prime example of how Americans truly believed they had a divine right to expand their institutions and values at any cost. As America successfully removed

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the Native people from the southeast, they continued to explore and expand westward. This expansion would cause the next great clash between Americans and the people who were perceived to be impeding the divine growth of America.

According to the idea of Manifest Destiny, the land to the west of the Mississippi was divinely given American property. Believers of Manifest Destiny held no doubts as to the legitimacy of their claim to that land, but Mexico, who also claimed much of this manifested American land, disagreed vehemently. Before Mexico won its independence from Spain, American settlers and farmers were living in the northernmost province of Mexico, Texas. Once Mexico became its own republic, the American-Texans remained in this area, but refused to recognize the land as Mexican and refused to obey any Mexican law or authority. This refusal of authority led to constantly rising tensions between the Texans and the Mexican government. In 1835, the Texans revolted against the Mexican government and a year later they declared their independence as the Lone Star Republic. The Republic successfully lasted on its own for nine years, but growing urges from the Southern Expansionists and even President Polk himself persuaded Texas to formally join the United States. Mexico, infuriated by this complete disregard for their claimed authority, immediately severed diplomatic ties with Washington. Just after the annexation was a very critical time for the relations between the two countries because the matters at hand could have been solved peacefully had it not been for the overwhelming American desire for mass amounts of Mexican land in what the Americans believed to be the western part of their own country (Stout). The Americans held that

the southern boarder of their newly acquired state was the Rio Grande River. Mexico, however, contested that the Texas territory had never extended farther than the Nueces River. This discrepancy of land claims and also a growing American sentiment of Manifest Destiny led to what we now know as the Mexican-American war (Stout).

America, ready to acquire the Mexican territory that was their “divine right” to acquire, employed one last diplomatic option. They sent John Slidell to the Mexican capital of Mexico City with orders to attempt to buy the territory. Slidell offered the Mexicans twenty five millions dollars for the land in what is now present day California and New Mexico. Mexico at the time was engrossed in political turmoil and refused to hear Slidell’s proposal. Slidell was forced to return to Washington and upon arrival is rumored to have told President Polk that Mexico must be “chastised” (Stout). During all of this diplomatic talk, President Polk ordered American troops under the direction of General Zachary Taylor to the Nueces River. Taylor made sure that he stayed out of the disputed “no mans land” between the Nueces in the north and the Rio Grand in the south. On the morning of April 25th 1846, a small contingency of Mexican soldiers surprised and defeated a small American cavalry unit north of the Rio Grand. Since Americans claimed that all land north of the Rio Grand was theirs, this was an overt act of war and deserved an immediate response. From this attack, the phrase “American blood on American soil” was born. This small act of violence was all the Polk and the American people (especially southern expansionists) needed to justify a war with Mexico. The Mexican government and people were also eager for a fight. They were fed up with the ever encroaching American people and

wanted to take back what they perceived to be theirs. Moral righteousness on both sides fed fuel to the progressing conflict. Once war broke out, the Americans mounted one successful campaign after another and victory seemed all but guaranteed. Polk, eager to end the shooting, sent Nicholas Trist to Mexico city who arranged for an armistice with the Mexicans at a cost of ten thousand dollars. General Santa Ana, the dictator of Mexico, agreed but instead of calling off the fighting, used the money to further fund his army. President Polk, infuriated by this blatant double-crossing, immediately recalled Trist to Washington. Trist, holding on to the idea of peace between America and Mexico, disobeyed his orders and stayed in Mexico. Trist's stay in Mexico proved to be beneficial to America. While there he negotiated and drafted the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The terms of the treaty were heavily in the United States' favor. They confirmed the American claim to Texas and included massive amounts of land westward extending to the Pacific Ocean. In return, the Americans agreed to pay fifteen million dollars to the Mexican government (Bailey). The Mexican War and Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo gave the United States more than half a million acres of land. To the Americans, the victory and favorable treaty terms were just another example of how they were divinely favored. Although the Treaty yielded massive amounts of land to the American government and people, it also revived the sectional quarrels over slavery (Stout).

Slavery had been a part of American culture since the very beginning of the Colonial Era. As America manifested its destiny and expanded westward, the question of how slavery would expand was the source of much civil

disagreement and ultimately led to the bloodiest conflict America has ever seen.

The first American slaves were brought to the Jamestown Colony in 1619. At first, slaves were brought to America as indentured servants and to eventually become free, but a series of laws called the Slave Codes replaced indentured servitude with slavery and ensured the life-long bondage of slaves (Gunderson).

As the colonies grew in population and began to establish their own specialized economies, slave labor became the most cost and time effective means of getting large amounts of work done (Gunderson).

The climactic differences between the north and the south fueled the development of decidedly different economies. While the soil in the north was infertile and ill-suited for large farming plantations, the mild climate and fertile soil of the Middle and Southern colonies promoted the growth of a plantation based economy (Bailey).

The Plantations in the Middle and Southern colonies harnessed massive amounts of land in order to plant and harvest cash crops such as tobacco, rice, and bread (" Regional Development of Colonies"). The middle colonies were commonly referred to as the bread colonies because they produced massive amounts of grain. The Southern Colonies were well-known for their rural, farm-dominated economies. The extremely fertile land was well suited for large-scale farming. This cash crop based economy gave rise to heavy reliance on slaves as the work force. Without slaves, the Southern economy would literally be decimated (Gunderson). This Southern reliance upon slave

labor caused many sectional clashes between the North and South until the American Civil War.

As America began to acquire more and more western territory and expand its state count, the issue of sectional difference was manifested in the form of balance of power. The South, fearful of a majority anti-slave Congress clashed with the North over how Slavery would develop into the new western territories.

In 1819, Missouri, part of the Louisiana Purchase, applied to Congress for statehood as a slave state. The fertile land of Missouri was ideal for the large-scale, slave based farming economy already present in the south. At the time, the balance of slave and free states in Congress was just right, and the admission of Missouri as a slave state would upset the balance. A very heated debate ensued in Congress that resulted in James Tallmadge proposing an amendment to the bill that stipulated that Missouri could be admitted as a slave state provided that no more slaves would be brought into the state and also that all children born to slave parents were to be free. The slave-minded Southerners were disgruntled by this proposal because they were bent on expanding the profitable practice of slave labor. The free-north dominated House of Representatives quickly passed the amended bill for admission, but it was shot down by the Senate. However, during the next congressional session, Maine applied for statehood as a free state. Missouri and Maine could both be admitted, and the balance of power would remain intact. With Maine's application for free statehood, the Missouri Compromise became feasible (Foley).

Henry Clay, a Congressman from Kentucky and gifted mediator, assumed a leading role in the formulation of the Missouri Compromise. Congress (amidst cries for abolition from the north) agreed to admit Missouri as a slave state, but also admitted Maine as a free state, so as to maintain the balance of power. Another stipulation of the Missouri Compromise was that all future slavery in the Louisiana Purchase was outlawed above the imaginary line created at 36 degrees longitude and 30 degrees latitude (Foley).

The politically-balanced terms of the compromise made it so neither the North nor the South could rightfully claim that they got the short end of the stick. So, in an immediate sense, the Missouri Compromise was extremely effective. Although effective in the short run, the Missouri Compromise achieved a peace that was somewhat superficial because it only delayed the inevitable sectional clash until a time when the North and the South would be further disparate not only in their economical stance on slavery, but also in their social and political fabric.

The history and progression of slavery in the western portion of the United States is characterized by compromises that pacify the growing sectional differences between the North and the South over the issue of human bondage.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo settled the Mexican-American War, but it also revived and added fuel to the fiery issue of the western progress of slavery. The main issue that arose out of the treaty was this: How would slavery expand into this newly acquired half million acres of land. At the time, the balance between North and South in Congress that was achieved

through the Missouri Compromise was still intact, but the land granted to the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo threatened to upset that balance. When California applied for statehood in 1849, both the North and the South feared deeply that California would tip the scales in favor of the other. Southern fears were so fervid that threats of secession if California were to be admitted as a free state were heard. After much deliberation and encouragement coming from both sides, the Compromise of 1850 was passed on the following terms: California would enter the Union as a free state, slave trade would be abolished in Washington D. C., Texas be paid ten million dollars for abandoning land claims in the New Mexico territory, a stricter fugitive slave law be enforced, and finally that Utah and New Mexico be open to popular sovereignty. The Compromise of 1850 pacified the desires of both the North and the South and was followed by what many consider to be a “second era of good feelings”. The disgruntling secession threats subsided, and the American people wholeheartedly hoped this time around that the compromise would be final (Dalzell). Much like the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850 was a superficial peace that only put off confrontation, only this time for a much shorter period of time.

The arousal of sectional differences surfaced again just four short years later once again over the balance of power and also the locus of the eastern terminus of the transcontinental railroad.

The land that the United States received as a part of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was several thousand miles away from the nearest American city. Washington, fearing that its newly acquired prize might slip through its fingers, was determined to facilitate an efficient means of traveling to this

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new territory. After many ideas of cross-country travel were proposed and voted down, railroad promoters from both the north and the south proposed a transcontinental railroad. In addition to facilitating the population growth of the west, the railroad would open up the west and east to enormous economic opportunities. As the plan progressed, and an accurate cost was drawn up, it became apparent that only one of these railroads could feasibly be built. The impossibility of multiple railroads became a subject of much sectional debate and confrontation. The section that possessed such a jewel would be propelled far beyond the other in terms of economic opportunity and success. The southern states were rapidly falling behind in the economic race and were extremely eager to have this railroad end in their territory. In hopes of having their railroad, the South plotted out the most geographically ideal route through the South. Unfortunately for Southerners, a piece of the proposed Southern route still belonged to Mexico. So in 1854, on orders from Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, James Gadsden offered Mexico ten million dollars for this tract of land. Mexican Dictator, Santa Ana, helplessly in need of funds, accepted the proposed deal. The deal triggered an animated response from the Northerners. They strongly opposed paying for a small piece of land that would solely benefit the southern section of the United States. The Gadsden Purchase enabled the South to put the polishing touches on their case for having a southerly transcontinental railroad. The South now boasted a route that would venture over smaller mountains than their Northern counterpart and not have to travel through unorganized territory. The North could not pose such a compelling argument because there was no direct northern route to the Pacific Ocean that did not have to go through unorganized territory. Set back

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by the Gadsden Purchase, the Northerners quickly retorted that if traveling through unorganized territory was the problem, then Nebraska ought to be organized (Bailey).

This proposal of organization of the Nebraska Territory was abhorred by the Southerners who saw it as a death sentence to the already biased balance of power. The proposal was made by Stephan A. Douglas of Illinois, a long standing proponent of popular sovereignty, in the form of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Act called for the separation of the Nebraska territory into two separate sections: Kansas and Nebraska, and also that these two territories would be open to popular sovereignty in decisions regarding the legalization of slavery. The theory behind Douglas' proposal was that Kansas, due west of slave state Missouri, would become a slave state and that Nebraska, due west of free soil Iowa would become a free state. The Act blatantly ignored the Missouri Compromise which forbade any slavery in the Nebraska territory above the 36 degree 30 degree line. The passionate debate that entailed as a result of the proposal was so brutal that it nearly erupted into bloodshed. Although facing strong opposition from the Northerners who remained loyal to the Missouri Compromise terms, Douglas was able to push the bill through Congress and it was passed in 1854 (Dalzell).

The Northerners saw this act as an inexcusable injustice towards their cherished Missouri Compromise terms and were enraged when it passed in Congress. The Northern opponents of the act pleaded that any form of compromise with the South would now be vastly more difficult, and they feared with out compromise, conflict was inevitable (American Pageant). The <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-manifest-destiny-history-essay/>

Kansas-Nebraska act only further encouraged sectional differences which in turn accelerated the downward spiral towards civil war.

According to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the territories of Kansas and Nebraska were now open to popular sovereignty meaning that the general public would vote and decided the fate of slavery in their own territory. Both proslavery and abolitionist groups recognized the potential that popular sovereignty proposed. That was: If enough people could be present in Kansas during the voting that favored a certain side, it would be possible to swing the local votes towards that particular side, thereby swinging the national balance of power in their favor. The influx of radicals from both sections of the country created a time bomb that kept itching closer and closer to explosion. The time ran out in 1856 when a group of proslavery fanatics raided and set fire to an antislavery settlement. This small act of violence was the beginning of what would become the American Civil War. As the proslavery and abolitionists quarreled back and forth in Kansas, the rest of the