

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Manifest Destiny

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By the late 1830s the idea of a national destiny—a Manifest Destiny—had begun to take definitive shape as Americans North and South surged west, attracted by cheap lands, fertile soil, and a generally salubrious climate. As early as the Jefferson presidency the nation’s destiny had been rooted in expansion. During the national debate on the Louisiana Purchase treaty in 1803, John Quincy Adams asserted that the United States was “destined by God and nature to be coextensive with the North American continent and become the most populous and powerful people ever combined under one social compact . . . speaking one language, professing one general system of religious and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs.” From 1810 to 1860, Americans and European immigrants moved west steadily, as rates of population increase per decade in these years averaged 96 percent in the Old Northwest and 109 percent in the slaveholding Southwest. Put in reductive terms, the average population growth in the two sections doubled every ten years. Pushed onto the frontier by overcrowding and soil exhaustion in the East, immigrants were also pulled into the West by prospects of personal independence and upward mobility.<sup>1</sup>

By the 1840s Manifest Destiny had come to encompass a broad spectrum of expansionist rationalizations. Virtue, mission, geographic predestination, and national destiny were fused into a powerful, if often disingenuous argument for aggressive territorial expansion and commercial growth that undergirded and informed western migration. Between 1845 and 1848 a surge of territorial expansion took the nation to the Pacific Coast and made it a true continental republic. With the annexation of the Texas republic to the Union in 1845 and the Mexican Cession of 1848, the United States acquired more than one million square miles of land. The rhetoric of Manifest Destiny,

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<sup>1</sup> Adams quoted in Harlow G. Unger, *John Quincy Adams* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2012), 129; Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 4; Carville Earle and Changyong Cao, “Frontier Closure and the Involution of American Society, 1840-1890,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 13 (1993): 163-69; United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975), 1:22-37. Adams was one of the very few Federalists to support Thomas Jefferson’s acquisition of the Louisiana Territory. For more context on Adams see Bradford Perkins, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, vol. 1, *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4.

which had begun to take shape in the 1830s, became florid, exaggerated, and protean. The bacillus of national destiny began to infect the minds of otherwise rational people, producing in some hallucinations of empire. In 1839 John L. O’Sullivan bombastically proclaimed that “the far reaching, the boundless future will be an area of American greatness.” And in 1845 he declared flatly that the nation’s Manifest Destiny was “to overspread and 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.” In this O’Sullivan and other true believers in a destiny so manifest were sadly and tragically mistaken.<sup>2</sup>

### **A National Destiny Manifest**

Informed by a political culture whose purpose was to realize and extend the basic republican tenets of equality and liberty, enthusiasts of Manifest Destiny like O’Sullivan understood the political power of territorial aggrandizement. Expansion and western settlement promised the literal enlargement of freedom over space by the extension of American political institutions into the Southwest and to the Pacific Coast. They also promised to ensure personal freedom by meeting the territorial needs of a nation of autonomous, self-reliant yeoman who formed the core of the Democratic Party’s constituency. Finally, widespread and rapid territorial growth—the destiny of the nation—promised to ameliorate class divisions and promote equality by providing the means of upward mobility (which appealed especially to many Whigs) through enhanced commercial opportunities and newly opened lands.

Therefore, when John Tyler introduced the issue of territorial expansion into the national political dialogue in 1844 with Texas annexation, its appeal and force could not have been more significant. Democrats, most of whom favored annexation, believed that economic dependency increasingly jeopardized personal independence. Whigs, fearing the economic bondage of a widely dispersed population and the limiting conditions of a subsistence economy, opposed rapid expansion. Nonetheless and although Whig presidential nominee Henry Clay opposed Texas annexation, other party members at the grassroots level feared the worst. “On this Texas question there really seems to be in many minds a spirit of infatuation prevailing,” one Virginia Whig wrote. “They appear to think that honor, prosperity, happiness & even the very salvation of the United States depended on the immediate annexation of Texas.” When Clay was defeated most Whigs concluded that agitation for expansion “did more to defeat us than anything.” To the contrary, enthusiasts of Manifest Destiny saw annexation “as settling the question that the Anglo Saxon race . . . are destined to be finally united in one vast union.” Here in the Western Hemisphere, they concluded, “this wonderful race is to end in the establishment of the mightiest empire the world has seen.” The fruit of Manifest Destiny—the acquisition of Texas—was, simply put “the triumph of republican energy” and the

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<sup>2</sup> “The Great Nation of Futurity,” *The United States Democratic Review*, 6 (1839): 427; *New-York Morning News*, December 27, 1845.

“triumph of free minds.” The ascendancy of republican freedom seemed secure in a rising American empire.<sup>3</sup>

Taking measure of Congress’s action, on April 21, 1845, the London *Times* fretted that the recent annexation of Texas to the United States would lead assuredly to the eventual disruption of the Mexican confederacy. Once Texas was admitted to the Union, the *Times* predicted, “it would be found to embrace the distant objects of American ambition to the shores of the Pacific.” Annexation, the editor claimed, “is only the prelude to [the United States’] ulterior designs. The claim to the exclusive possession of the Oregon territory is another indication of the same policy.” The editor was right on both counts.<sup>4</sup>

War between the United States and Mexico had been brewing since Texas was annexed. Since it had never formally recognized Texas independence, the Mexican government broke off diplomatic relations in March 1845 in protest. President James K. Polk ordered troops to the Rio Grande. At the same time he pressured Mexico to cede Upper California and New Mexico to the United States in exchange for a settlement of the Texas boundary, relinquishing American fiscal claims against Mexico, and an appropriately large remuneration. Negotiations proved both irritating (at least to Polk and Congress) and fruitless. Following a border skirmish in late April 1846, Polk asked Congress to recognize that a state of war existed between the two countries. Both Houses overwhelmingly supported Polk’s request in May.

The rhetoric of redemption and mission that infused the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny reached its apogee and nadir during the Mexican-American War. Expansionists were convinced that the hostilities must be the outcome of profound forces. “The principles of free government are destined to progress and extend, and in due time they will be diffused all over Mexico,” a Democratic editor maintained. The *Democratic Review* asserted (one would say it hardly proved) that until Americans occupied the entire North American continent “the foundation of the future empire shall not have been laid.” Opponents of the conflict—Whigs for the most part—declared that the United States could not extend its laws over the inhabitants of Mexican provinces without denigrating the principle of freedom and self-government. Furthermore, believing that governments embodied the moral sense of the race, dissidents declared in Congress that “representatives of ignorance & barbarism”—these “mongrel races”—would hold in their power the American birthright of republican government. Whigs in Congress and elsewhere had their own ideas about the nation’s destiny, although it was no longer so manifest. Away with this cant about “divine mission” and “manifest destiny,” of warrants from the Most High “to civilize, and Christianize, and democratize our sister republics at the mouth of a cannon,” a New York antiwar dissident spat. “I turn from

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<sup>3</sup> William Payne to William C. Rives, May 3, 1844, Box 70, William Cabell Rives Papers, Library of Congress; H. M. Cunningham to Alexander Stephens, December 21, 1844, vol. 1, Alexander Stephens Papers, Library of Congress; Vicksburg (MS) *Sentinel*, March 11, 1845; New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, March 8, 1845.

<sup>4</sup> London *Times*, April 21, 1845, reprinted in *Niles National Register*, Vol. 68: May 31, 1845, 205.

Polk to Washington . . . [and] there I find patriotism surrounded, hallowed, adorned, by truth justice, humanity.”<sup>5</sup>

It was the introduction of the Wilmot Proviso in 1846 that initiated the transition of interparty debate over expansion to the sectionalized politics of slavery extension and problematized the essence of Manifest Destiny. The proviso, which would have prohibited the extension of slavery into any land acquired from Mexico, initiated an enduring battle between the North and South for control of the government and thus the ability to secure the fortunes of one or the other section in the commonly owned territories. Because expansion became associated with the spread of slavery or antislavery rather than of freedom, the nation was forced to address the problem of slavery’s relevance to its empire of republican liberty.

As the issue would be played out in the context of the expansionist designs of the 1850s, it spoke to the present and future. Were the institutions of the West and future acquisitions to resemble those of the North or the South? Slavery, northerners believed, retarded the progress of the nation, degraded white workingmen and women, and contravened the fundamental republican principles of liberty and equality. Southerners—slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike—replied that slavery promoted both equality by meliorating class conflict and liberty by making exploitation and manipulation of white workers unnecessary. They, therefore, linked slavery restriction to their constituents’ and the nation’s future progress—or decline.

### **The Sectionalization of a Nation’s Destiny No Longer Manifest**

The origin and force of expansion had deep roots that stretched from Thomas Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” to the Jacksonian political system’s glorification of an empire premised on a providentially predestined Manifest Destiny. The break-up of that political system explains both the lack of consensus on national destiny and thus the absence of widespread territorial growth in the 1850s. That is, the free-soil conflict pitting one section against the other for the right to expand and control the government, disrupted the Jacksonian party system. When Manifest Destiny and its concomitant, expansion, became identified with sectional, not national, objectives during the Mexican-American War, the future of the nation became problematic and territorial aggrandizement ceased.

Once anxious to escape enslavement themselves and to unfetter individual potential, Americans felt their enthusiasm for further annexations cool after the Mexican Cession. In fact the sole expansionist achievement of the 1850s was modest. The dismal coda to the enormous territorial gains of the United States before the Civil War was the Gadsden Purchase. This acquisition, which secured a small swath of Mexican territory

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<sup>5</sup> *Nashville Union* quoted in John D. P. Fuller, *The Movement for the Acquisition of All Mexico, 1846-1848* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1936), 50; “NEW TERRITORY VERSUS NO TERRITORY,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 21 (1847): 291; *Cong. Globe*, 30<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess.(1847-8), Appendix, 300, 316, 217.

(which now comprises the southern portions of Arizona and New Mexico) was driven less by visions of empire than by a desire to acquire a good southern route for a railroad to the Pacific. It was so desolate that Kit Carson had reported that “a wolf could not make a living upon it.”<sup>6</sup>

As the sectional conflict escalated in the 1850s, especially after the Kansas Nebraska Act and the rise of the Republican Party out of the ashes of a now defunct Whig Party, expansion became associated with the spread of slavery or antislavery rather than of freedom. The question of Cuban annexation is instructive. The Ostend Manifesto, drafted by three American ministers—James Buchanan (England), John Y. Mason (France), and Pierre Soulé (Spain), proclaimed that “Cuba is as necessary to the North American republic as any of its present members, and that it belongs naturally to that great family of states of which the Union is the Providential Nursery.” The ministers urged that immediate steps be taken to purchase it as long as the price tag did not exceed \$120 million. But if Spain refused to sell, then “by every law, human and Divine we shall be justified in wresting from Spain if we possess the power.”<sup>7</sup>

Even before the Ostend report saw the light of day, anti-Nebraska men suspected that the South was planning “an unprovoked and unjustifiable war for the sole purpose of forming slave states out of Cuba.” And as John Dix later remembered, the conviction that “the protagonists of slavery meant either to rule the whole country or to break up the Union . . . was deepened by the proceedings of the notorious conference at Ostend.” The report and the agitation for Cuban annexation seemed to confirm and lay bare the existence of a sectional conspiracy to subvert republican government. The designs of the slave power, one Republican editor claimed, “involve the acquisition of Cuba by any means whatever, the annexation of Central America, the dismemberment of Mexico, the restoration of the American slave trade, and eventual appropriation of the valley of the Amazon.” The *Albany Evening Journal* put the issue succinctly: “annexation has never been a popular doctrine except when slavery was to be benefitted by it.” Manifest Destiny was now in eclipse.<sup>8</sup>

By the late 1850s the sense of boundlessness that was so characteristic of the spirit of 1840s had been severely eroded—if not diminished altogether. A Republican editor reiterated his belief in the nation’s Manifest Destiny to develop a republican empire and to envelop the Western Hemisphere. But he cautioned that territorial expansion, if it came at all, had to be by means honest and fair. Moreover the new

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 20. In 1886 Charles Lummis wrote to the *Los Angeles Times* that southern Arizona was “crippled by topographical cussedness” and “utterly bare of anything upon which a white man could exist. *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Joanna Cotler Books, 1976), 190.

<sup>8</sup> *Albany Evening Journal*, May 24, 1854; Morgan Dix, ed., *Memoirs of John Adams Dix*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1883), 1: 319; *Journal of Commerce* (New York), April 17, 1855; *Albany Evening Journal*, December 30, 1854. See also John Higham, *From Boundlessness to Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture, 1848-1860* (Ann Arbor, MI: William L. Clements, 1969).

territory must be “either unoccupied, or peopled by a race who can fulfill the duties devolving upon citizens of a government like the United States.” There was among Republicans a growing conviction that the failure of American institutions to expand was due to moral retrogression. “We have no right to be powerful abroad,” an Illinois Republican wrote. Our diplomats are “not representatives of a free government, but the defenders of an Institution and of a policy which civilized Europe except Spain & Portugal abhor.” When in 1859 the Buchanan Administration and expansionist Democrats proposed a thirty million dollar appropriation to purchase Cuba, the New York *Tribune*’s reaction was characteristic and predictable. “No more Territory is not an inspiring cry,” one editor conceded, “but ‘No more Slave Territory!’ ‘Keep Slavery where it is!’ Let it add nothing,’ that is a phrase that has a clearer and truer ring.”<sup>9</sup>

Southerners could not fail to note that Republicans opposed expansion because it would expand slavery and that some northern Democrats favored it because it would damage or weaken the institution in the slave states. The early months of Buchanan’s administration had been so promising. “Towards the South manifest destiny points with the finger of fate,” a Virginia Democrat proclaimed. In late 1858, a sadder but wiser William Samford of Alabama remembered that Buchanan’s election had suggested “indefinite ideas of southern advantage.” Kansas, Cuba, even South America, he recollected, “all loomed up as inviting southern expansion, outlet & development. The dream has been sadly disappointed.” Some like Mississippi Representative Lucius Q. C. Lamar still supported expansion if the South’s right to extend her institutions was guaranteed by legislation. But even he had to admit that, so far, territorial acquisitions—the fruits of Manifest Destiny—“have been to the South like the fair famed fruit which grows upon the shores of the accursed sea—beautiful to the sight but dust and ashes to the lips.” Augustus Wright of Georgia, crediting Buchanan with far more political skill than he possessed, noted scornfully that the president held out “moonshine” in Kansas while obstructing southern interests in areas like “Central America which is literally ours.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1771 Timothy Dwight published the first of his many poems that presaged but captured the spirit of a national destiny which seemed manifest:

Hail land of light and glory! Thy power shall grow  
Far as the seas, which round thy regions flow  
Through earth’s wide realms thy glory shall extend  
And savage nations at thy scepter bend  
And the frozen shores thy sons shall sail  
Or stretch their canvas to the ASIAN gale

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<sup>9</sup> New York *Journal of Commerce*, February 27, 1857; John D. Andrews to Nathaniel P. Banks, July 7, 1859; Nathaniel P. Banks Papers, Illinois State Library, Springfield, IL, Box 1; New York *Daily Tribune*, May 4, 1859 (emphasis in original).

<sup>10</sup> Richmond (VA) *Enquirer*, June 20, 1857; Samford to Clement Clay, October 20, 1858, Clement Claiborne Clay Papers, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC, Box 5 (emphasis in original); *Cong. Globe*, 35<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess. (1857-8), 279; Wright quoted in Robert E. May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 338.

And sixteen years later in support of the Constitution, James Madison would write in *Federalist* Number 10 that “to extend the sphere . . . you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.” Madison and Thomas Jefferson, among others, committed themselves to an empire of liberty premised on western expansion, commercial liberalism, and an open international commercial order. Although Madison’s *Federalist* Number 10 stressed the advantages of a widely dispersed population expanding over space, he and Jefferson also were convinced that commerce elevated the mind and promoted civilization and virtue. Although Americans’ access to foreign markets remained limited and problematic in the early republic, Jefferson’s purchase of Louisiana in 1803 only whetted the public’s taste for more land. First the Transcontinental Treaty (1819) secured East and West Florida and extended American interests to the Pacific Northwest. The Monroe Doctrine (1823) ensured hemispheric security and circumscribed Europe’s ability to hedge about an expansive American republic.<sup>11</sup>

Madison understood what enthusiasts of Manifest Destiny and, its concomitant, territorial expansion did not: liberty and equality are fundamentally antagonistic. Manifest Destiny as it took shape in the 1840s and early 1850s merged these republican principles into a powerful argument for territorial expansion that would reify and ensure both independence and personal liberation and growth. In 1844 Representative Shepard Cary articulated his constituents’ understanding of the nation’s destiny in religious and secular terms, which were also interchangeable and reinforcing. “Their doctrine was, that this continent was intended by Providence as a vast theatre on which to work out the grand experiment of Republican government, under the auspices of the Anglo-Saxon race. . . . let [the colonies of the Old World monarchies] be kept within the narrowest of limits. . . . Let all that remains be preserved for the growth and spread of the free principles of American democracy.” Yet by the 1850s, debate over the extension of slavery and the many and conflicted meanings of Manifest Destiny made salient the inherent tension between liberty and equality. Daniel Webster offered his take on a nation’s destiny, which by the late 1840s was no longer manifest at least to him and other opponents of the Mexican War. It was impudent, he argued, that the “poor worms of earth could pretend to understand and explain the purposes of the Deity.” As Americans

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<sup>11</sup> Perkins, *Creation of a Republican Empire*, 7; Jacob E. Cooke, ed. *The Federalist* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 64; Michael A. Morrison, “The Expansionist Impulse in Antebellum America,” in Joel Silbey, ed., *A Companion to the Antebellum Presidents, 1837-1861* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 43-64. In a stark departure from Dwight’s vision of the nation’s future, a delegate to the New Jersey Democratic State Convention in 1844, arguing in favor of the Democratic Party’s expansionist platform, exclaimed: “Land enough—land enough! Make way, I say, for the young American Buffalo—he has not yet got land enough; he wants more land as his cool shelter in summer—he wants more land for his beautiful pasture grounds. I tell you, we will give him Oregon for his summer shade, and the region of Texas as his winter pasture. (Applause.) Like all of his race, he wants salt, too. Well, he shall have the use of two oceans—the mighty Pacific and turbulent Atlantic shall be his. . . . He shall not stop his career until he slakes his thirst in the frozen ocean. (Cheers.)” Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study in Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore: AMS Press, 1935), 119.

lurched their way to a great Civil War and a very uncertain national destiny they consistently and persistently did just that. Indeed they still do. More is the pity.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny*, 111; *Cong. Globe*, 30<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess. (1847-8), 484. Anticipating Cary's melding of the divine with the secular, the *Democratic Review* averred in 1838, "The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles. . . . Its floor shall be a hemisphere—its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its congregation an Union of many Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions, calling, owning no man master, but governed by God's natural and moral law of equality, the law of brotherhood—of 'peace and good will amongst men'." Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny*, 107 (emphasis added).