Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1862. Mural, United States Capitol.

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Manifest Destiny

I. Introduction

John Louis O'Sullivan, a popular editor and columnist, articulated the long-standing American belief in the God-given mission of the United States to lead the world in the peaceful transition to democracy. In a little-read essay printed in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, O'Sullivan outlined the importance of annexing Texas to the United States:

> Why, were other reasoning wanting, in favor of now elevating this question of the reception of Texas into the Union, out of the lower region of our past party dissensions, up to its proper level of a high and broad nationality, it surely is to be found, found abundantly, in the manner in which other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves into it, between us and the proper parties to the case, in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and

> hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.[1]

O'Sullivan and many others viewed expansion as necessary to achieve America's destiny and to protect American interests. The quasi-religious call to spread democracy coupled with the reality of thousands of settlers pressing westward. Manifest destiny was grounded in the belief that a democratic, agrarian republic would save the world.

Although called into name in 1845, manifest destiny was a widely held but vaguely defined belief that dated back to the founding of the nation. First, many Americans believed that the strength of American values and institutions justified moral claims to hemispheric leadership. Second, the lands on the North American continent west of the Mississippi River (and later into the Caribbean) were destined for American-led political and agricultural improvement. Third, God and the Constitution ordained an irrepressible destiny to accomplish redemption and democratization throughout the world. All three of these claims pushed many Americans, whether they uttered the words *manifest destiny* or not, to actively seek the expansion of democracy. These beliefs and the resulting

John O'Sullivan, shown here in an 1874 *Harper's Weekly* sketch, coined the phrase *manifest destiny* in an 1845 newspaper article. Wikimedia.

actions were often disastrous to anyone in the way of American expansion. The new religion of American democracy spread on the feet and in the wagons of those who moved west, imbued with the hope that their success would be the nation's success.

The Young America movement, strongest among members of the Democratic Party but spanning the political spectrum, downplayed divisions over slavery and ethnicity by embracing national unity and emphasizing American exceptionalism, territorial expansion, democratic participation, and economic interdependence.[2] Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson captured the political outlook of this new generation in a speech he delivered in 1844 titled "The Young American":

> In every age of the world, there has been a leading nation, one of a more generous sentiment, whose eminent citizens were willing to stand for the interests of general justice and humanity, at the risk of being called, by the men of the moment, chimerical and fantastic. Which should be that nation but these States? Which should lead that movement, if not New England? Who should lead the leaders, but the Young American?[3]

However, many Americans, including Emerson, disapproved of aggressive expansion. For opponents of manifest destiny, the lofty rhetoric of the Young Americans was nothing other than a kind of imperialism that the American Revolution was supposed to have repudiated.[4] Many members of the Whig Party (and later the Republican Party) argued that the United States' mission was to lead by example, not by conquest. Abraham Lincoln summed up this criticism with a fair amount of sarcasm during a speech in 1859:

> He (the Young American) owns a large part of the world, by right of possessing it; and all the rest by right of wanting it, and intending to have it. . . . Young America had "a pleasing hope—a fond desire—a longing after" territory. He has a great passion—a perfect rage—for the "new"; particularly new men for office, and the new earth mentioned in the revelations, in which, being no more sea, there must be about three times as much land as in the present. He is a great friend of humanity; and his desire for land is not selfish, but merely an impulse to extend the area of freedom. He is very anxious to fight for the liberation of enslaved nations and colonies, provided, always, they have land. . . . As to those who have no land, and would be glad of help from any quarter, he considers they can afford to wait a few hundred years longer. In knowledge he is particularly rich. He knows all that can possibly be known; inclines to believe in spiritual trappings, and is the unquestioned inventor of "Manifest Destiny."[5]

Artistic propaganda like this promoted the national project of manifest destiny. Columbia, the female figure of America, leads Americans into the West and into the future by carrying the values of republicanism (as seen through her Roman garb) and progress (shown through the inclusion of technological innovations like the telegraph) and clearing native peoples and animals, seen being pushed into the darkness. John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872. Wikimedia.

But Lincoln and other anti-expansionists would struggle to win popular opinion. The nation, fueled by the principles of manifest destiny, would continue westward. Along the way, Americans battled both native peoples and foreign nations, claiming territory to the very edges of the continent. But westward expansion did not come without a cost. It exacerbated the slavery question, pushed Americans toward civil war, and, ultimately, threatened the very mission of American democracy it was designed to aid.

II. Antebellum Western Migration and Indian Removal

After the War of 1812, Americans settled the Great Lakes region rapidly thanks in part to aggressive land sales by the federal government.[6] Mis-

souri's admission as a slave state presented the first major crisis over westward migration and American expansion in the antebellum period. Farther north, lead and iron ore mining spurred development in Wisconsin.[7] By the 1830s and 1840s, increasing numbers of German and Scandinavian immigrants joined easterners in settling the Upper Mississippi watershed.[8] Little settlement occurred west of Missouri as migrants viewed the Great Plains as a barrier to farming. Farther west, the Rocky Mountains loomed as undesirable to all but fur traders, and all American Indians west of the Mississippi appeared too powerful to allow for white expansion.

"Do not lounge in the cities!" commanded publisher Horace Greeley in 1841, "There is room and health in the country, away from the crowds of idlers and imbeciles. Go west, before you are fitted for no life but that of the factory."[9] The *New York Tribune* often argued that American exceptionalism required the United States to benevolently conquer the continent as the prime means of spreading American capitalism and American democracy. However, the vast West was not empty. American Indians controlled much of the land east of the Mississippi River and almost all of the West. Expansion hinged on a federal policy of Indian removal.

The harassment and dispossession of American Indians—whether driven by official U.S. government policy or the actions of individual Americans and their communities—depended on the belief in manifest destiny. Of course, a fair bit of racism was part of the equation as well. The political and legal processes of expansion always hinged on the belief that white Americans could best use new lands and opportunities. This belief rested on the idea that only Americans embodied the democratic ideals of yeoman agriculturalism extolled by Thomas Jefferson and expanded under Jacksonian democracy.

Florida was an early test case for the Americanization of new lands. The territory held strategic value for the young nation's growing economic and military interests in the Caribbean. The most important factors that led to the annexation of Florida included anxieties over runaway slaves, Spanish neglect of the region, and the desired defeat of Native American tribes who controlled large portions of lucrative farm territory.

During the early nineteenth century, Spain wanted to increase productivity in Florida and encouraged migration of mostly southern slave owners. By the second decade of the 1800s, Anglo settlers occupied plantations along the St. Johns River, from the border with Georgia

to Lake George a hundred miles upstream. Spain began to lose control as the area quickly became a haven for slave smugglers bringing illicit human cargo into the United States for lucrative sale to Georgia planters. Plantation owners grew apprehensive about the growing numbers of slaves running to the swamps and Indian-controlled areas of Florida. American slave owners pressured the U.S. government to confront the Spanish authorities. Southern slave owners refused to quietly accept the continued presence of armed black men in Florida. During the War of 1812, a ragtag assortment of Georgia slave owners joined by a plethora of armed opportunists raided Spanish and British-owned plantations along the St. Johns River. These private citizens received U.S. government help on July 27, 1816, when U.S. army regulars attacked the Negro Fort (established as an armed outpost during the war by the British and located about sixty miles south of the Georgia border). The raid killed 270 of the fort's inhabitants as a result of a direct hit on the fort's gunpowder stores. This conflict set the stage for General Andrew Jackson's invasion of Florida in 1817 and the beginning of the First Seminole War.[10]

Americans also held that Creek and Seminole Indians, occupying the area from the Apalachicola River to the wet prairies and hammock islands of central Florida, were dangers in their own right. These tribes, known to the Americans collectively as Seminoles, migrated into the region over the course of the eighteenth century and established settlements, tilled fields, and tended herds of cattle in the rich floodplains and grasslands that dominated the northern third of the Florida peninsula. Envious eyes looked upon these lands. After bitter conflict that often pitted Americans against a collection of Native Americans and former slaves, Spain eventually agreed to transfer the territory to the United States. The resulting Adams-Onís Treaty exchanged Florida for $5 million and other territorial concessions elsewhere.[11]

After the purchase, planters from the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia entered Florida. However, the influx of settlers into the Florida territory was temporarily halted in the mid-1830s by the outbreak of the Second Seminole War (1835–1842). Free black men and women and escaped slaves also occupied the Seminole district, a situation that deeply troubled slave owners. Indeed, General Thomas Sidney Jesup, U.S. commander during the early stages of the Second Seminole War, labeled that conflict "a negro, not an Indian War," fearful as he was that if the revolt "was not speedily put down, the South will feel the effect of it on their

slave population before the end of the next season."[12] Florida became a state in 1845 and settlement expanded into the former Indian lands.

American action in Florida seized Indians' eastern lands, reduced lands available for runaway slaves, and killed entirely or removed Indian peoples farther west. This became the template for future action. Presidents, since at least Thomas Jefferson, had long discussed removal, but President Andrew Jackson took the most dramatic action. Jackson believed, "It [speedy removal] will place a dense and civilized population in large tracts of country now occupied by a few savage hunters."[13] Desires to remove American Indians from valuable farmland motivated state and federal governments to cease trying to assimilate Indians and instead plan for forced removal.

Congress passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, thereby granting the president authority to begin treaty negotiations that would give American Indians land in the West in exchange for their lands east of the Mississippi. Many advocates of removal, including President Jackson, paternalistically claimed that it would protect Indian communities from outside influences that jeopardized their chances of becoming "civilized" farmers. Jackson emphasized this paternalism—the belief that the government was acting in the best interest of Native peoples—in his 1830 State of the Union Address. "It [removal] will separate the Indians from immediate contact with settlements of whites . . . and perhaps cause them gradually, under the protection of the Government and through the influence of good counsels, to cast off their savage habits and become an interesting, civilized, and Christian community."[14]

The experience of the Cherokee was particularly brutal. Despite many tribal members adopting some Euro-American ways, including intensified agriculture, slave ownership, and Christianity, state and federal governments pressured the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Cherokee Nations to sign treaties and surrender land. Many of these tribal nations used the law in hopes of protecting their lands. Most notable among these efforts was the Cherokee Nation's attempt to sue the state of Georgia.

Beginning in 1826, Georgian officials asked the federal government to negotiate with the Cherokee to secure lucrative lands. The Adams administration resisted the state's request, but harassment from local settlers against the Cherokee forced the Adams and Jackson administrations to begin serious negotiations with the Cherokee. Georgia grew impatient with the process of negotiation and abolished existing state agreements with the Cherokee that had guaranteed rights of movement

and jurisdiction of tribal law. Andrew Jackson penned a letter soon after taking office that encouraged the Cherokee, among others, to voluntarily relocate to the West. The discovery of gold in Georgia in the fall of 1829 further antagonized the situation.

The Cherokee defended themselves against Georgia's laws by citing treaties signed with the United States that guaranteed the Cherokee Nation both their land and independence. The Cherokee appealed to the Supreme Court against Georgia to prevent dispossession. The Court, while sympathizing with the Cherokee's plight, ruled that it lacked jurisdiction to hear the case (*Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* [1831]). In an associated case, *Worcester* v. *Georgia* (1832), the Supreme Court ruled that Georgia laws did not apply within Cherokee territory.[15] Regardless of these rulings, the state government ignored the Supreme Court and did little to prevent conflict between settlers and the Cherokee.

Jackson wanted a solution that might preserve peace and his reputation. He sent secretary of war Lewis Cass to offer title to western lands and the promise of tribal governance in exchange for relinquishing of the Cherokee's eastern lands. These negotiations opened a rift within the Cherokee Nation. Cherokee leader John Ridge believed removal was inevitable and pushed for a treaty that would give the best terms. Others, called nationalists and led by John Ross, refused to consider removal in negotiations. The Jackson administration refused any deal that fell short of large-scale removal of the Cherokee from Georgia, thereby fueling a devastating and violent intratribal battle between the two factions. Eventually tensions grew to the point that several treaty advocates were assassinated by members of the national faction.[16]

In 1835, a portion of the Cherokee Nation led by John Ridge, hoping to prevent further tribal bloodshed, signed the Treaty of New Echota. This treaty ceded lands in Georgia for $5 million and, the signatories hoped, limiting future conflicts between the Cherokee and white settlers. However, most of the tribe refused to adhere to the terms, viewing the treaty as illegitimately negotiated. In response, John Ross pointed out the U.S. government's hypocrisy. "You asked us to throw off the hunter and warrior state: We did so—you asked us to form a republican government: We did so. Adopting your own as our model. You asked us to cultivate the earth, and learn the mechanic arts. We did so. You asked us to learn to read. We did so. You asked us to cast away our idols and worship your god. We did so. Now you demand we cede to you our lands. That we will not do."[17]

President Martin van Buren, in 1838, decided to press the issue beyond negotiation and court rulings and used the New Echota Treaty provisions to order the army to forcibly remove those Cherokee not obeying the treaty's cession of territory. Harsh weather, poor planning, and difficult travel compounded the tragedy of what became known as the Trail of Tears. Sixteen thousand Cherokee embarked on the journey; only ten thousand completed it.[18] Not every instance was of removal was as treacherous or demographically disastrous as the Cherokee example, while, on the other hand, some tribes violently resisted removal. Regardless, over sixty thousand Indians were forced west prior to the Civil War.[19]

The allure of manifest destiny encouraged expansion regardless of terrain or locale, and Indian removal also took place, to a lesser degree, in northern lands. In the Old Northwest, Odawa and Ojibwe communities in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota resisted removal as many lived on land north of desirable farming land. Moreover, some Ojibwe and Odawa individuals purchased land independently. They formed successful alliances with missionaries to help advocate against removal, as well as with some traders and merchants who depended on trade with Native peoples. Yet Indian removal occurred in the North as well—the Black Hawk War in 1832, for instance, led to the removal of many Sauk to Kansas.[20]

Despite the disaster of removal, tribal nations slowly rebuilt their cultures and in some cases even achieved prosperity in Indian Territory. Tribal nations blended traditional cultural practices, including common land systems, with western practices including constitutional governments, common school systems, and creating an elite slaveholding class.

Some Indian groups remained too powerful to remove. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the Comanche rose to power in the Southern Plains region of what is now the southwestern United States. By quickly adapting to the horse culture first introduced by the Spanish, the Comanche transitioned from a foraging economy into a mixed hunting and pastoral society. After 1821, the new Mexican nation-state claimed the region as part of the northern Mexican frontier, but they had little control. Instead, the Comanche remained in power and controlled the economy of the Southern Plains. A flexible political structure allowed the Comanche to dominate other Indian groups as well as Mexican and American settlers.

In the 1830s, the Comanche launched raids into northern Mexico, ending what had been an unprofitable but peaceful diplomatic relationship

with Mexico. At the same time, they forged new trading relationships with Anglo-American traders in Texas. Throughout this period, the Comanche and several other independent Native groups, particularly the Kiowa, Apache, and Navajo, engaged in thousands of violent encounters with northern Mexicans. Collectively, these encounters comprised an ongoing war during the 1830s and 1840s as tribal nations vied for power and wealth. By the 1840s, Comanche power peaked with an empire that controlled a vast territory in the trans-Mississippi west known as Comancheria. By trading in Texas and raiding in northern Mexico, the Comanche controlled the flow of commodities, including captives, livestock, and trade goods. They practiced a fluid system of captivity and captive trading, rather than a rigid chattel system. The Comanche used captives for economic exploitation but also adopted captives into kinship networks. This allowed for the assimilation of diverse peoples in the region into the empire. The ongoing conflict in the region had sweeping consequences on both Mexican and American politics. The U.S.-Mexican War, beginning in 1846, can be seen as a culmination of this violence.[21]

In the Great Basin region, Mexican independence also escalated patterns of violence. This region, on the periphery of the Spanish empire,

Map of the Plains Indians, undated. Smithsonian Institution.

was nonetheless integrated in the vast commercial trading network of the West. Mexican officials and Anglo-American traders entered the region with their own imperial designs. New forms of violence spread into the homelands of the Paiute and Western Shoshone. Traders, settlers, and Mormon religious refugees, aided by U.S. officials and soldiers, committed daily acts of violence and laid the groundwork for violent conquest. This expansion of the American state into the Great Basin meant groups such as the Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe had to compete over land, resources, captives, and trade relations with Anglo-Americans. Eventually, white incursion and ongoing Indian wars resulted in traumatic dispossession of land and the struggle for subsistence.

The federal government attempted more than relocation of American Indians. Policies to "civilize" Indians coexisted along with forced removal and served an important "Americanizing" vision of expansion that brought an ever-increasing population under the American flag and sought to balance aggression with the uplift of paternal care. Thomas L. McKenney, superintendent of Indian trade from 1816 to 1822 and the Superintendent of Indian Affairs from 1824 to 1830, served as the main architect of the civilization policy. He asserted that American Indians were morally and intellectually equal to whites. He sought to establish a national Indian school system.

Congress rejected McKenney's plan but instead passed the Civilization Fund Act in 1819. This act offered $10,000 annually to be allocated toward societies that funded missionaries to establish schools among Indian tribes. However, providing schooling for American Indians under the auspices of the civilization program also allowed the federal government to justify taking more land. Treaties, such as the 1820 Treaty of Doak's Stand made with the Choctaw nation, often included land cessions as requirements for education provisions. Removal and Americanization reinforced Americans' sense of cultural dominance.[22]

After removal in the 1830s, the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw began to collaborate with missionaries to build school systems of their own. Leaders hoped education would help ensuing generations to protect political sovereignty. In 1841, the Cherokee Nation opened a public school system that within two years included eighteen schools. By 1852, the system expanded to twenty-one schools with a national enrollment of 1,100 pupils.[23] Many of the students educated in these tribally controlled schools later served their nations as teachers, lawyers, physicians, bureaucrats, and politicians.

III. Life and Culture in the West

The dream of creating a democratic utopia in the West ultimately rested on those who picked up their possessions and their families and moved west. Western settlers usually migrated as families and settled along navigable and potable rivers. Settlements often coalesced around local traditions, especially religion, carried from eastern settlements. These shared understandings encouraged a strong sense of cooperation among western settlers that forged communities on the frontier.

Before the Mexican War, the West for most Americans still referred to the fertile area between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River with a slight amount of overspill beyond its banks. With soil exhaustion and land competition increasing in the East, most early western migrants sought a greater measure of stability and self-sufficiency by engaging in small-scale farming. Boosters of these new agricultural areas along with the U.S. government encouraged perceptions of the West as a land of hard-built opportunity that promised personal and national bounty.

Women migrants bore the unique double burden of travel while also being expected to conform to restrictive gender norms. The key virtues of femininity, according to the "cult of true womanhood," included piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. The concept of "separate spheres" expected women to remain in the home. These values accompanied men and women as they traveled west to begin their new lives.

While many of these societal standards endured, there often existed an openness of frontier society that resulted in modestly more opportunities for women. Husbands needed partners in setting up a homestead and working in the field to provide food for the family. Suitable wives were often in short supply, enabling some to informally negotiate more power in their households.[24]

Americans debated the role of government in westward expansion. This debate centered on the proper role of the U.S. government in paying for the internal improvements that soon became necessary to encourage and support economic development. Some saw frontier development as a self-driven undertaking that necessitated private risk and investment devoid of government interference. Others saw the federal government's role as providing the infrastructural development needed to give migrants the push toward engagement with the larger national economy. In the end, federal aid proved essential for the conquest and settlement of the region.