

## Alternative Wests

### *Rethinking Manifest Destiny*

---

**ABSTRACT** The mid-nineteenth century territorial growth of the United States was complex and contradictory. Not only did Mexico, Britain, and Native Americans contest U.S. territorial objectives; so, too, did many within the United States and in some cases American western settlers themselves. The notion of manifest destiny reflects few of these complexities. The authors argue that manifest destiny was a partisan idea that emerged in a context of division and uncertainty intended to overawe opponents of expansion. Only in the early twentieth century, as the United States had consolidated its hold on the North American West and was extending its power into the Caribbean and Pacific, did historians begin to describe manifest destiny as something that it never was in the nineteenth century: a consensus. To a significant extent, historians continue to rely on the idea to explain U.S. expansion. The authors argue for returning a sense of context and contingency to the understanding of mid-nineteenth-century U.S. expansion. **KEYWORDS** Manifest Destiny, John L. O’Sullivan, James K. Polk, John Quincy Adams, borderlands, Mexico, Texas, California, Oregon

---

For students of nineteenth-century American history, few terms resonate as forcefully as “manifest destiny,” and few are as nebulous. For generations, American historians have invoked the phrase to explain the expansion of the United States from a moderately sized republic at the outset of the nineteenth century to a continental empire by the century’s end, though often without bothering to define the concept or to explain who adhered to the idea or how such adherence may have caused change. In 1965, for instance, the historian Samuel Eliot Morison wrote that by 1844, Americans harbored “a growing conviction of America’s ‘manifest destiny’ to expand west to the Pacific and south to at least the Rio Grande.” Even as he wrote these words, however, Morison seemed dissatisfied with using the amorphous concept of manifest destiny as an explanation for U.S. expansionism. “Nobody really knows why Americans vote the way they do, and often they don’t understand it themselves,” he wrote of the closely fought 1844 election that elevated the avowed expansionist James K. Polk to the presidency and brought on the

---

*Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 86, Number 1, pps. 4–17. ISSN 0030-8684, electronic ISSN 1533-8584 © 2017 by the Pacific Coast Branch, American Historical Association. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2017.86.1.4>.

annexation of Oregon and war with Mexico.<sup>1</sup> In the half-century since Morison, little has changed, as many historians have largely adhered to his interpretation of manifest destiny, as well as to his misgivings and caveats about the concept's shapelessness. In 2007, for example, Daniel Walker Howe echoed Morison's qualifications in his discussion of Polk's election, noting, "We too readily assume the inevitability of everything that happened." (Indeed, an unlikely number of factors aligned to first allow Polk to be elected and then to allow his expansionist gambits to succeed.) Yet for the title of his following chapter, which began with a multi-page description of the various adherents of manifest destiny, Howe borrowed the popular historian George Bancroft's inevitable-seeming phrase, "Westward the Star of Empire."<sup>2</sup>

Somewhere along the way, historians began to capitalize Manifest Destiny—a sure sign that the phrase had become, like the Great Awakening or the Progressive Era, a way to lend a sense of coherence to an untidy history.<sup>3</sup> Historians have used Manifest Destiny and its related concept, American expansion, to variously describe American ideology, federal policy, settler action, demographic dominance, and military conquest, or a combination of any or all of these phenomena.<sup>4</sup> Even historians who have pushed back against the expansionist narrative to reveal both the contested nature of U.S. expansion and the enduring power of native groups gesture to the predetermined nature of U.S. conquest. For example, Pekka Hämäläinen argued that the Comanche were "like the imperial Americans," inasmuch as both peoples possessed the "capacity to remake societies and reshape histories."<sup>5</sup> These treatments come to graphic life in the typical maps showing the territorial

1. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 557.

2. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought?: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 690, 701–8.

3. See Jon Butler, "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction," *Journal of American History* 69 (September 1982): 305–25; Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 113–32.

4. For example, for ideology, see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); for federal policy, see Thomas Leonard, *James K. Polk: A Clear and Unquestionable Destiny* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2001); for settler action, see Walter L. Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); for demographic dominance, see Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansionism* (New York: Vintage, 2008); for military conquest, see James McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846–1848* (New York: NYU Press, 1994).

5. Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 142.

growth of the United States included in most U.S. history textbooks.<sup>6</sup> Such maps generally depict formerly non-U.S. polities such as Texas and Florida shaded in bright colors and displaying their respective dates of U.S. annexation. The effect is to make U.S. expansion appear logical and preordained—particularly when the regions *not* acquired by the United States appear as contrasting or faded colors in the background.

Surprisingly, perhaps, given the frequency with which modern historians have cited the concept of manifest destiny and the importance they have attached to it, its origins were unknown for decades. It was not until the late 1920s that the University of Buffalo historian Julius Pratt identified a partisan Democrat and obscure newspaper editor, John L. O’Sullivan, as the pundit who had coined the term in 1845. Understood in its original context, O’Sullivan’s manifest destiny was not sweeping and all-inclusive but narrow and partisan. In mid-1845, at a time when the United States was awaiting a reply from the independent Republic of Texas to its offer of annexation, O’Sullivan wrote that it was “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” Despite his grandiose rhetoric, and although he predicted that increasing numbers of Anglo American settlers in California would eventually follow the example of Texas by revolting against Mexico and requesting annexation to the United States, O’Sullivan plainly feared that continuing divisions within the United States over the wisdom of the annexation of Texas might scuttle the project—in other words, America’s potential to overspread the continent was not providentially destined but rather quite uncertain. O’Sullivan’s sweeping hyperbole, with its declaration of the inevitability of U.S. dominance of much of North America, was a fustian effort to overawe Congressional Whigs’ resistance to annexation. “It is now time for the opposition to the Annexation of Texas to cease,” O’Sullivan wrote. “In regard to Texas, enough has now been given to party. It is time for the common duty of Patriotism to the Country to succeed.”<sup>7</sup>

6. See, for example, George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, “The Election of 1844,” in *America: A Narrative History*, 9th ed., vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 2013), 584; Eric Foner, “Continental Expansion through 1853,” in *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 2006), 416; Alan Brinkley, “American Expansion into the Southwest, 1845–1853,” in *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 340.

7. Julius W. Pratt, “The Origin of ‘Manifest Destiny,’” *American Historical Review* 32 (July 1927): 795–98; John L. O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” *Democratic Review* 17 (July–August 1845): 5–10. Congress passed a joint resolution for annexation in January and February 1845; the offer of annexation was signed by President John Tyler and sent to the Republic of Texas in early March;

Ten years before O’Sullivan wrote his editorial, Americans had faced another moment of uncertainty over Texas. By late 1835, “Texas Committees” had begun to be organized in many parts of the United States to support the nascent Texan rebellion against Mexico—the rebellion that led to the independence of Texas from Mexico and, ten years later, its absorption into the United States. On Christmas Day, 1835, John Quincy Adams took to the floor of the House of Representatives to denounce the effort to draw the United States into the Texas rebellion, a conflict he termed “a Mexican civil war.” As secretary of state during the administration of James Monroe, Adams had negotiated the 1819 treaty with Spain that had abandoned any U.S. claim to the province of Texas and set the southwestern boundary of the United States at the Sabine River. In 1835, he sought to remind his Congressional colleagues of U.S. weaknesses, arguing that to extend the boundary of the United States beyond the Sabine would be an untenable overreach. “Are you not large and unwieldy enough already?” he asked of proponents of American intervention in the conflict. “Is your southern and southwestern frontier not sufficiently extensive? Not sufficiently feeble? Not sufficiently defenceless?” To those who predicted a rapid U.S. triumph over Mexico, Adams warned that Mexico “has the more recent experience of war” and “the greatest number of veteran warriors.” He challenged the preparedness of the U.S. Army: “Is the success of your whole army, and all your veteran generals, and all your militia-calls, and all your mutinous volunteers against a miserable band of five or six hundred invisible Seminole Indians, in your late campaign, an earnest of the energy and vigor with which you are ready to carry on that far otherwise formidable and complicated war?” Not least of all, he warned that if Mexico were to carry the war into the United States, the invader would find numerous allies among natives and slaves, just as Great Britain had during the Revolution and the War of 1812.<sup>8</sup>

---

Texas voters formally accepted the offer in October; and Congress voted to annex Texas in December. For nineteenth-century Americans’ contradictory and sometimes confused ideas about divine providence and the destiny of the nation, see Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

8. Speech of John Quincy Adams, delivered in the House of Representatives of the United States, December 25th, 1835, in Benjamin Lundy, *The War in Texas; A Review of Facts and Circumstances, Showing that this Contest Is the Result of a Long Premeditated Crusade against the Government, Set on Foot by Slaveholders, Land Speculators, &c. with the View of Re-establishing, Extending, and Perpetuating the System of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Republic of Mexico* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1836), 4–9. For the British alliance with slaves and Indians, see Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772–1832* (New York: Norton, 2013).

It is tempting to pronounce O'Sullivan the true prophet of U.S. expansion and to dismiss Adams and his crabbed fears of Mexico, Indians, and slaves as the grumpy defeatism of exactly the sort of northeastern Whig O'Sullivan was trying to convince of America's manifest destiny. When war with Mexico came, it was relatively brief and one-sided, and not the formidable combination of "a Mexican, an Indian, and a negro war" that Adams had predicted. Numerous historians have succumbed to this teleological temptation—so much so that O'Sullivan enjoys a currency in modern U.S. history textbooks that eluded him in his lifetime. Indeed, by the time of his death in 1895, O'Sullivan had faded into irrelevance. He lost control of his journal, the *Democratic Review*, within a year of his manifest destiny editorial; he later became a filibusterer in Cuba, a propagandist for the Confederacy, and a spiritualist who claimed to communicate with the dead.<sup>9</sup> Because O'Sullivan's manifest destiny idea was proven correct, however, historians gradually took the concept out of its originally limited and quite partisan context and promoted it to a consensus among mid-nineteenth-century Americans.

Yet for all this it was Adams, with his concerns about the vulnerabilities of the border and the limits of U.S. power, who aptly characterized the way many Americans viewed the West in the first half of the nineteenth century. By the time of the administration of Andrew Jackson, Americans so outnumbered Indians east of the Mississippi that they were able to forcibly remove them to territories in the West. Yet for many observers, shifting natives to the West, largely beyond the reach of U.S. power, was a dangerous idea. A writer for the *Arkansas Gazette* warned in 1839 that "the policy of concentrating on our borders large bodies of armed and hostile Indians, smarting under a sense of recent injury, was generally supposed to be rather dangerous to the quiet of the frontier."<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere in the West, Americans conceded the power and autonomy of the natives. In 1832, Lieutenant James Allen wrote, with a grudging acknowledgment of the truth of the statement, that the Ojibwas on the border with Canada "feel inaccessible and secure from any power whatever, even that of the United States."<sup>11</sup> Allen and others in the Army and the War Department knew that the British in Canada

9. See Robert D. Sampson, *John L. O'Sullivan and His Times* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 2003).

10. *Arkansas Gazette*, December 11, 1839.

11. Journal of Lieutenant James Allen, July 17, 1832, in *Schoolcraft's Expedition to Lake Itasca: The Discovery of the Source of the Mississippi*, ed. Philip P. Mason (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1958), 259–60.

liberally supported the Ojibwas like other native groups; in the event of another war with Britain the Indians were likely to once again be British allies.<sup>12</sup> As for the mounted natives of the Great Plains such as the Comanche and the Lakota, the United States could not even begin to imagine challenging their control of the grasslands.<sup>13</sup> Even in more sparsely populated regions such as the Great Basin where the native presence was more understated, native power still overrode U.S. control until after the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the fear that an invasion by a foreign power on the southwestern border might spur a slave revolt was quite real; it was for this reason that colonizationists rejected the idea of sending free blacks to nearby Haiti in preference for faraway Liberia. “The island of Hayti would be a much more eligible situation,” one colonizationist wrote in 1822, “but some of our southern citizens object to that, because an army could be easily transported from there to our shores, whereby promoting insurrection amongst our slaves, they might do much mischief.”<sup>15</sup> In short, the United States maintained a relatively weak presence on its borders and had to contend with powerful, autonomous native groups, unpredictable settlers, internal dissent, and competing imperial powers.

Indeed, before about 1885, U.S. history textbooks made little mention at all of western expansion. Authors were generally not shy about touting American greatness, but they preferred to celebrate the Revolution or American manufacturing. They treated western expansion not as providential destiny but as a matter of political contestation. In his 1856 text, *American History*, for instance, Marcius Willson described the Mexican-American War as “opposed as impolitic and unjust by one portion of the American people, and . . . cordially approved by the other.”<sup>16</sup> It was not until the end of the

12. See Lewis Cass to Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, April 7, 1822, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

13. See Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*; Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

14. Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

15. Benjamin Lundy, ed., *The Genius of Universal Emancipation, Containing Original Essays and Selections on the Subject of African Slavery* 1 (January 1822), iii.

16. Marcius Willson, *American History: Comprising historical sketches of the Indian tribes, a description of American antiquities, with an inquiry into their origin and the origin of the Indian tribes, history of the United States, with appendices showing its connection with European history, history, history of the present British provinces, history of Mexico, and history of Texas, brought down to the time of its admission into the American Union* (New York: Ivison & Phinney, 1856), 497. See also John A. Nietz, *Old Textbooks: Spelling, Grammar, Reading, Arithmetic, Geography, American*

nineteenth century, after the surprisingly rapid consolidation of large parts of western North America into the United States and at a time when the United States was asserting its power in the Caribbean, the Pacific, and elsewhere, that the hesitations and limitations of the antebellum period were forgotten and manifest destiny—particularly Polk’s acquisitions of Oregon, Texas, and much of northern Mexico—assumed its aura of inevitability. By 1927, when Julius Pratt tracked down the origins of the term “manifest destiny,” he could write, “One can hardly read a work on the history of the United States in the two decades before the Civil War without meeting the phrase.”<sup>17</sup> How did the results of 1846–48 truly seem, in retrospect, to be a manifest destiny? The commonplace assessment of the late 1840s as a period of remarkable U.S. successes fundamentally depends on the history of the 1860s. The U.S. triumphs of 1846–48 hardly solved or simplified the issue of sovereignty in the West, as the federal government claimed power but could not enforce it. Indeed, the West in the 1850s was more violent, more chaotic, and more uncertain than perhaps than any previous nineteenth-century decade.<sup>18</sup> The chaos only amplified the next decade: with the outbreak of the Civil War, U.S. sovereignty over the West collapsed entirely, its writ in the region now dependent on western Americans uncertain about the Union’s future.<sup>19</sup> All that changed with Union victory in 1865 and the nation’s subsequent transformation. The U.S. defeat of the Confederate rebellion presaged a vastly different national entity, one that could enforce its power in the West in the 1870s and 1880s in ways that could hardly be imagined in the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>20</sup> Without Union victory and the U.S.

---

*History, Civil Government, Physiology, Penmanship, Art, Music, as Taught in the Common Schools from Colonial Days to 1900* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1961), 260–63.

17. Pratt, “The Origin of ‘Manifest Destiny,’” 795.

18. On the disastrous 1850s, see Anne Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A New History of the North American West, 1800–1860* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 409–49.

19. See the essays in Andrew R. Graybill and Adam Arenson, ed., *Civil War Wests: Testing the Limits of the United States* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

20. For the post–Civil War West see Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Much of the assertion of U.S. power in the post–Civil War West was industrial: mining, railroads, logging, and telegraphs. For the nineteenth-century West as an industrial place, see Andrew C. Isenberg, *Mining California: An Ecological History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005); Isenberg, “Environment and the Nineteenth-Century West, or, Process Encounters Place”; and David Iglar, “Engineering the Elephant: Industrialism and the Environment in the Greater West,” in *A Companion to the American West*, ed. William Deverell (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), 77–111; Iglar, *Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Iglar, “The Industrial Far West: Region and Nation in the Late Nineteenth Century,”

transformation, the putative triumph of the late 1840s becomes (as John Quincy Adams had feared in his Christmas Day address in 1835) both a colossal overreach of U.S. power in the West, and a cataclysmic rupture of its unity in the East. Without Union victory in 1865, the United States looks much more like Mexico in the 1830s and 1840s: unstable in its central government and unable to govern its peripheral territories.<sup>21</sup>

To be clear, despite the limitations of U.S. power in the first half of the nineteenth century, many Americans still coveted western lands, and many believed that white Americans would eventually dominate the continent. However, the specifics of this belief were almost always vague and amorphous, and Americans disagreed on how, when, and in what form this dominance would occur. In many cases, they divorced the expansion of the United States as a polity from the expansion of Americans as a people. In 1812 Thomas Jefferson envisioned an “independent empire” arising in the American West, populated by “free and independent Americans, unconnected with us but by the ties of blood and interest.”<sup>22</sup> A little over a decade later, Thomas Hart Benton expressed his wish that the U.S. borders should stop at the Rocky Mountains. To him, as soon as the Americans in the West were “strong enough to take care of” themselves, they should separate from the United States “as the child separates from the parent at the age of manhood.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in 1845, Daniel Webster predicted that a “great Pacific Republic” would arise in Oregon.<sup>24</sup> Even those who tethered U.S. western conquest to American demographic predominance believed U.S. conquest lay in the not near but distant future. O’Sullivan himself was one such example. While he was clear on his stance regarding Texas annexation, he was vague about the destiny of the rest of the continent. Foreseeing California’s fate, O’Sullivan maintained its burgeoning Anglo American population would declare independence but would not necessarily attach itself

---

*Pacific Historical Review* 69 (May 2000): 159–92; William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991); Mark Wyman, *Hard Rock Epic: Western Miners and the Industrial Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

21. Indeed, Americans thought so themselves: Gregory Downs, “The Mexicanization of American Politics: The United States’ Transnational Path from Civil War to Stabilization,” *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 2 (April 2012), 387–409.

22. Thomas Jefferson to John Jacob Astor, May 24, 1812, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 11, *Correspondence and Papers 1808–1816* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2009).

23. Thomas Hart Benton, Speech in the Senate, March 1, 1825, *Register of Debates*, 18th Congress, 2nd Session, 712.

24. *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*, November 15, 1845.

to the Union until technology caught up with distance. He believed that Canada, too, would be annexed eventually. Notably, O'Sullivan predicted that this territorial growth would all be accomplished by the "fast hastening year of the Lord 1945!" For all of the seemingly prophetic power of manifest destiny, O'Sullivan was completely wrong about Canada, and off by ninety-seven years in regards to California.<sup>25</sup> O'Sullivan's predictions may have been stunningly incorrect, but they were typical of most mid-nineteenth-century Americans who lacked a coherent vision of what U.S. expansion would look like—if it happened at all. Canada, Oregon, Alta and Baja California, Texas, New Mexico, Cuba, and the Yucatán: all were possible . . . or none were possible.

With visions of the West more conflicting and ambiguous than historians have maintained, it is unsurprising that the on-the-ground reality of the region was much more complicated and contested—not just before and during the initial stages of Americans' entrance into the region, as many historians have argued, but also in the decades following substantial American settlement. On-the-ground facts disrupted abstract and overarching projections of U.S. ascendancy, making political formulations that seem merely temporary in hindsight assume the look of permanence at the time. Mid-century U.S. authorities anticipated that native peoples would remain powerful geopolitical players in the West for the foreseeable future, and the long-term solution to their presence was not removal but a chain of forts that would protect the western frontier.<sup>26</sup> Non-native polities also appeared enduring. In the mid-1820s, most Anglo Texans celebrated Mexican oversight, and in the early 1840s many anticipated the Republic of Texas would be not only permanent, but an expansionist polity in its own right. One observer predicted that, "Ere long, neither the Noces [*sic*] nor the Rio Grande will prove a sufficient boundary to the daring march of our sister Republic."<sup>27</sup> Until the mid-1830s, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) so dominated

25. John L. O'Sullivan, "Annexation," *The United States Democratic Review* 7, no. 85 (June–July, 1845), 9–10.

26. Joel Poinsett to Andrew Jackson, Sept. 19, 1837, Poinsett Papers, 9–19, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; Francis Paul Prucha, *The Sword of the Republic: The United States Army on the Frontier, 1783–1846* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 339–60; Robert Wooster, *The American Military Frontiers: The United States Army in the West, 1783–1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 83, 90–95; Robert P. Wetteman, Jr., *Privilege vs. Equality: Civil-Military Relations in the Jacksonian Era, 1815–1845* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger Security International, 2009), 124–25; J. Fred Rippy, *Joel Poinsett: Versatile American* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1935), 190–91.

27. *New Orleans Bulletin*, as quoted in the *Macon Georgia Telegraph*, August 6, 1839.

the Oregon Country's fur trade that Americans were effectively shut out of the vast region entirely. To some Americans, there was little need to lament the HBC's power, for Oregon Country would only be useful as the "Botany Bay" of the United States, "a country to which to banish its rogues and scoundrels."<sup>28</sup> In terms of wielding effective power in the West, at times the United States was not just a secondary power, but hardly a presence at all.

How might a history that eschewed the teleology of manifest destiny and instead embraced the messy contingencies of the antebellum West look? Numerous historians have taken account of the contestations that surrounded western expansion. Some have done so by demonstrating that the Whig opposition to expansion was both coherent and influential. The historian Michael Morrison, for example, sees the Whig Party as fearful that the pell-mell expansion espoused by the Democrat James Polk would overstretch the nation. The Whigs, he argues, favored a gradual expansion that integrated new territories into the national economy.<sup>29</sup> Others have turned their attention to Americans living in newly acquired territories of the early national period. Examining Lower Louisiana after the Louisiana Purchase, Peter Kastor characterizes U.S. expansion in the region as conflicted and contradictory: Americans were acquisitive but keenly aware of the limited reach of the United States.<sup>30</sup> Surveying West Florida, Andrew McMichael reveals that Americans were quite content under Spanish rule for a significant period of time.<sup>31</sup> In the cases of both Lower Louisiana and West Florida, the supposedly easy incorporation of new territory was in fact messy and complicated.

28. *Louisville [Ky.] Journal*, as quoted in the *Daily National Intelligencer*, Feb. 6, 1844.

29. Michael A. Morrison, "Westward the Curse of Empire: Texas Annexation and the American Whig Party," *Journal of the Early Republic* 10 (Summer 1990): 221-49; Morrison, "New Territory versus No Territory: The Whig Party and the Politics of Western Expansion, 1846-1848," *Western Historical Quarterly* 23 (February 1992), 25-51. Even though they rarely focus on expansion as an issue, other historians of the Whigs have helped to resurrect the Whig program as principled and articulate, in contrast to older historiography portraying the Whig party as simply an anti-Jackson coalition. See, for example, Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

30. See Peter J. Kastor, *The Nation's Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Kastor, "'What Are the Advantages of Acquisition?': Inventing Expansion in the Early American Republic," *American Quarterly* 60 (December 2008), 1003-35.

31. Andrew McMichael, *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

A key to restoring a sense of context and contingency to the period before 1846 is to take seriously the work of borderlands historians and account for the influence of natives and other imperial powers in the North American West. The borderlands were places that encouraged cultural borrowing and interpenetration; there, indigenous groups could play off imperial competitors against each other.<sup>32</sup> As the essay by the historian Andrew Isenberg in this special issue demonstrates, the U.S. West before 1846 was an “experimental empire,” where the United States asserted but could not impose its sovereignty, conceding effective control of much of the region to imperial competitors or powerful native societies. U.S. weakness in the region encouraged experimentation and improvisation: the United States subsidized trade with natives and offered them the smallpox vaccine in an effort to win their goodwill and detach them from alliances with competing imperial powers. Similarly, many American missionaries and traders did not march into the West as harbingers of the coming American conquest but rather ingratiated themselves into the cultures of natives and Mexicans and sought their political protection.<sup>33</sup>

Such shifting of cultural and national identities was particularly common on the U.S.-Mexico border. Borderlands historians such as Andrés Reséndez, Eric Schlereth, and Sarah Rodriguez depict Texas and New Mexico before 1850 as places where both Americans and Mexicans wore their national identities lightly. In one of the essays in this special issue, Rodriguez argues that Moses Austin, Stephen Austin, and many of the settlers who followed them to their colony in Texas in the 1820s regarded Mexico’s form of republican government as superior to that of the United States.<sup>34</sup> As Reséndez shows,

32. See Gary Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650–1862* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Eric Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

33. Isenberg, “The Market Revolution in the Borderlands: George Champlin Sibley in Missouri and New Mexico, 1808–1826,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Fall 2001): 445–65; Isenberg, “‘To see inside of an Indian’: Missionaries and Dakotas in the Minnesota Borderlands,” in *Conversion: Old Worlds and New*, ed. Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 218–40; Isenberg, “Gambling on the Grassland: Kinship, Capital, and Ecology in Southern California,” in *Mining California: An Ecological History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 103–30. The term “experimental empire” is from Isenberg’s current manuscript project: *The Experimental Empire: Indians, Squatters, and Slaves in the North American Borderlands*.

34. Sarah Rodriguez, “‘Children of the Great Mexican Family’: American Immigration to Northern Mexico, 1810–1861,” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2015). Rodriguez solidifies

many of the settlers in Texas in the 1820s and 1830s were York Rite Masons—as were many of the Mexican officials who facilitated their land grants. To these men, their identities as Masons sometimes seemed more profound than their citizenships, which they cast on and shrugged off easily. The eventual integration of Mexico’s north into the United States, Reséndez argues, was driven not by national politics but by economics, as the region’s economy was drawn into the orbit of the United States.<sup>35</sup>

Given the relative parity of native and imperial powers in the North American West and the loose attachment many Americans in the borderlands felt toward the United States, the eventual shape of the U.S. West—including Texas south to the Rio Grande and the Pacific Coast from Puget Sound south the San Diego—was but one of many possibilities. Two decades ago, the geographer D.W. Meinig proposed two “might-have-beens”: a Greater United States that might have come to include Cuba, the Yucatan peninsula, and all of Mexico north of Tampico including Baja California; and a Lesser United States that expanded beyond the Louisiana Purchase only to include Oregon south of the Columbia River, with independent states of Texas, Deseret, and California on Mexico’s northern border.<sup>36</sup> While many historians have treated Meinig’s ideas as mere speculative counterfactuals, in essays in this special issue the historians Thomas Richards and Rachel St. John argue that such outcomes were as conceivable as the shape that the U.S. eventually assumed. The independence of Texas from both Mexico and the United States between 1836 and 1845 inspired what Richards calls “the Texas Moment,” in which other peoples in North America sought, like the Texans, to establish their own “breakaway republics.” Responding to the same power vacuum that allowed the Republic of Texas to emerge, and oftentimes inspired by Texas’s example, Cherokees, Mormons, Californios, and others frequently envisioned and at times acted out their own versions of Texan independence. All of these groups understood that, in

---

and vastly expands the initial findings of Andrew Cayton, “Continental Politics: Liberalism, Nationalism, and the Appeal of Texas in the 1820s,” in *Beyond the Founders*, ed. Jeffrey Pasley, Andrew Robertson, and David Waldstreicher (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

35. Andrés Reséndez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Eric R. Schlereth, “Privileges of Locomotion: Expatriation and the Politics of Southwestern Border Crossing,” *Journal of American History* 100 (March 2014): 995–1020.

36. D.W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, vol. 2, *Continental America, 1800–1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 214–17.

the West, national authority was weak and peripheral provinces were effectively autonomous, creating conditions that allowed for political experimentation and sovereignty.<sup>37</sup> While these conditions seemed to end with the United States' dramatic military and diplomatic triumphs of the late 1840s, visions of independence only went underground until the collapse of U.S. authority in the West during the Civil War allowed them to reemerge in force.

St. John has argued that American views of the North American continent were as diverse as Americans themselves. While O'Sullivan could use the logic of geography to serve his vision of a transcontinental United States, many other Americans employed geography to argue that it was a small republic that was truly destined. Rivers and seas could be barriers as much as thoroughfares, and mountains would remain as impassable obstacles rather than temporary hindrances. Moreover, as disunion loomed in the 1850s, secessionists used geography to maintain the logic of not one, but two U.S. republics on the continent. In the 1850s, many Americans, both in the South and the West, believed manifest disunion would and should triumph over manifest destiny.<sup>38</sup>

In short, weakness and division defined American expansion: the United States was weak relative to other powers in the region, the attachment of Americans to the U.S. state was so tenuous that many readily shucked off U.S. citizenship to become citizens of Mexico or contemplated setting up sovereign states, and the U.S. political union was frayed, with disagreements over western expansion a significant point of contention between political and regional rivals. When O'Sullivan coined the term "manifest destiny" in 1845 he hoped to replace these weaknesses with an illusion of strength. He meant manifest destiny not only as a description of the expansion of the U.S. nation but as an assertion of U.S. nationalism. His nationalist rhetoric resonated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when professional historians, who at the time saw it as their duty to study and justify nation-states, resurrected O'Sullivan's concept. We long ago scrapped other concepts of nationalist historians from that period, such as Frederick Jackson

37. Thomas Richards, Jr., "The Texas Moment: Breakaway Republics and Contested Sovereignty in North America, 1836–1846," (PhD diss., Temple University, 2016).

38. Rachel St. John, "The Unpredictable America of William Gwin: Expansion, Secession, and the Unstable Borders of Nineteenth-Century North America," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 6 (March 2016): 56–84. She develops this idea further in her current manuscript, *The Imagined States of America: The Unmanifest History of Nineteenth-Century North America*.

Turner's frontier thesis, or the Dunning School's embrace of racial segregation, both of which, like manifest destiny, papered over the complexities of the past and all its myriad contingencies with a sense of the inevitability of U.S. nationhood predicated on white dominance and Anglo American cultural hegemony.<sup>39</sup>

To be clear: just because Manifest Destiny rose to interpretive prominence in an age when nationalist and racist interpretations of the past held sway, current historians who invoke the concept do so in order to expose it as a hateful ideology of racial conquest. Yet in adhering to the idea, even to criticize it, historians paper over the messy contingencies of the mid-nineteenth century—as Morison admitted a half-century ago. The caveats of Morison and others notwithstanding, it is in many respects easy to understand why Manifest Destiny, as an organizing concept for historians, endures. As one of the few overarching interpretations remaining to explain U.S. history, Manifest Destiny provides a convenient way to both explain nineteenth-century U.S. expansion, and then—for most historians—quickly move past it. If we refuse to explain nineteenth-century U.S. expansion with this simple paradigm, we are left with a difficult task. Without this paradigm, we must explain the various strands of expansionism among thousands of Americans who lived in different regions and possessed different outlooks, as well as explain the remaining thousands who opposed expansion for a myriad of other reasons. We must differentiate between the policies and actions of the federal government, and the actions and goals of American settlers in a plethora of western regions. We must separate demographic growth from military conquest, and tease out where each overlapped with the other. We must understand that U.S. westward expansion was neither manifest, nor destiny, but a product of the contingencies of war, diplomacy, demography, economy, and culture—in other words, a product of history. ■

---

ANDREW C. ISENBERG is a professor of history at Temple University.

THOMAS RICHARDS, JR. is a visiting research associate at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies.

39. For the frontier thesis, see Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *American Historical Association Annual Report*, 1893: 199–227; William Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (April 1987), 157–76. For the Dunning School, see John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery, eds., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).