

Chapter 8

America's Manifest Destiny

After the purchase of the Louisiana territory in 1803 and Florida in 1819, America seemed to have enough land to meet its needs of its expanding population for many generations. Indeed, to this day there are still vast stretches of uninhabited land both east of the Mississippi. However, by 1847 Americans had already settled in Texas and were in the process of occupying Utah and California, which belonged to Mexico, and Oregon, which was owned jointly with England. The justification for this rapid expansion was seen in the working of God's will. In the words of one Congressman, intent on acquiring Canada:

The waters of the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi interlock in a number of places, and the great Disposer of Human Events intended these two rivers should belong to the same people.⁴²

Some thirty years later another Congressman, with his eyes on Texas and Oregon, prophesied:

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. Like all of his race, he wants salt, too. Well, he shall have the use of two oceans – the mighty Pacific and the turbulent Atlantic shall be his. He shall not stop his career until he slake his thirst in the frozen ocean.⁴³

The acquisition of more territory, until the entire continent as far south as Panama belonged to the United States, seemed to be America's Manifest Destiny. The term meant expansion, ordained by God, over an area not clearly defined. Behind this view of manifest destiny one may see five different assumptions Americans were making about themselves to justify this expansion:

We have a special mission to spread American democracy and freedom over the entire continent.

America is closer to these relatively uninhabited lands than any other major country.

Americans made a far more productive use of the land than the people who originally lived on it.

Americans need these lands to feed a population that doubles every twenty-five years.

Americans have an obligation to civilize and uplift the primitive peoples who were on these lands.

Today, these arguments may seem illogical or merely self-serving. In the 1830's and 1840's they were widely accepted and served to fuel America's drive over the continent. Furthermore, these were no

⁴²Quoted in Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny* Quadrangle Books, Chicago 1963, p.53.

⁴³ Quoted in *ibid.* p. 119.

mere abstractions. They were backed by the willingness of brave pioneers to risk their lives by traveling thousands of miles to establish themselves in Oregon, California, Utah, and Texas.

America Moves West

Explorers and trappers seeking to profit from the fur trade first carved trails through the steep Western mountain passes to California and Utah. Later, these hardy men were followed by missionaries who sought to convert the Native Americans. Mrs. Marcus Whitman (wife of Reverend Marcus Whitman) was the first woman to travel the 2,000 mile Oregon trail from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon Country. On the heels of the missionaries came adventurous settlers. Seven years, after the Whitmans, in 1843, a party of 1,000 men, women, and children, in a caravan of one hundred and twenty covered wagons, made this dangerous trek. Their letters home, widely published in local newspapers and brought on the Oregon fever that inspired further settlement in this remote territory. In the 1840's some pioneers branched off the Oregon trail and migrated south to California.

In 1847, Brigham Young blazed a new route for his devout band of Mormon followers. Fleeing religious persecution in Missouri and Illinois, Young organized his Mormon bands into groups – some sent ahead to plant wheat along the trail; others followed to harvest it. Unable to afford covered wagons, some Mormons pushed wheelbarrows all the way to Utah. Overcoming incredible odds, these sturdy pioneers established their kingdom of Zion by irrigating the uninviting Utah desert by the Great Salt Lake.

Even as the first pioneers were settling in Utah, California, and Oregon, the independent Republic of Texas had already been established. This chapter tells the story of how Texas came to be settled, and why Americans who chose to make it their home, rebelled against the government of Mexico.

Manifest Destiny in Mexico

Imagine opening a newspaper some time in the mid 1820s and seeing an advertisement reading:

**177 ACRES OF RICH FARM LAND - 4,428 ACRES OF PRAIRIE PASTURE LAND. FREE!
COME SETTLE IN TEXAS-COAHUILA IN THE REPUBLIC OF MEXICO.**

This incredible offer of bountiful land was part of a venturesome policy of the Mexican government. In order to attract settlers to its vacant northern province, Mexico made numerous contracts with enterprising Americans. The Americans were authorized to distribute 4,500 acres of land to each family they could induce to settle in Texas-Coahuila. Emigrants were expected to be Roman Catholics (or at least to practice no other religion), to become citizens of Mexico, and to conduct all official business in Spanish.

Acting on a contract his father had negotiated with the Mexican government, Stephen Austin brought almost 300 families to Texas in 1823. Eventually, Austin attracted almost 1,100 families to his carefully planned and efficiently run colony. Other contractors were also successful in attracting Americans, and still other settlers simply wandered into Texas on their own to begin cultivating her fertile soil. By 1830 there were about 20,000 white Americans with 1,000 African slaves living in Texas-Coahuila.

Rebellion Against Mexico

It was not long before Mexico regretted her generous immigration policy. When President Jackson offered to buy parts of Texas, Mexico feared the United States was intent on obtaining all of Texas for herself. Meanwhile, settlers, long used to governing themselves, were becoming increasingly restless under the domination of a legislature controlled by Mexicans and asked that Texas become a separate state. This request was interpreted as the first sign that the unassimilated Americans wished to break away from Mexico. In 1830, Mexico responded by prohibiting further immigration from the United States, banning the importation of more slaves, and placing a high tariff on American imports. To enforce these laws, Mexico sent troops to Texas-Coahuila.

These measures only served to heighten tensions. They prompted several minor rebellions which failed to gain much support and were quickly suppressed. At the same time, internal political changes in Mexico created repercussions in the Texas colony. Santa Anna came to power in 1834 and immediately attempted to put Mexico under the control of a strong central government. To this end, he repudiated earlier promises and abolished the state legislatures, in effect placing Texas-Coahuila, and the other Mexican states, under the direct control of Mexico City. Texans petitioned for the restoration of their right to self-government and for repeal of the laws banning immigration and trade. Stephen Austin personally took these appeals to Mexico City. There he was arrested and charged with advising the Texans to form a state government without Mexican approval.

Texans then started to collect arms and ammunition to defend themselves from the Mexican government. In October, 1835, Mexican authorities in Gonzales, a small town in Texas, ordered the Americans to remove a cannon from the town square. Claiming that the weapon was needed for defense against Indians, Texans refused to surrender the gun. A skirmish began when the Mexicans attempted to remove the weapon by force.

This minor incident served as the Lexington of the Texas Revolution. It strengthened Santa Anna's resolve to crush the Texans and enforce Mexico's laws. In the spring of 1836, Santa Anna crossed the Rio Grande River with 4,000 soldiers. Organized resistance was offered at the Alamo, an old Spanish mission. Behind its thick walls, 187 Americans, including Jim Bowie and Davey Crockett, resolved to sell their lives dearly. The stronghold finally fell on March 6th, following a murderous thirteen day siege. It cost the lives of 1,544 Mexican soldiers. Their enraged comrades stormed the walls and savagely killed every person within the garrison.

Three weeks later, Santa Anna's soldiers butchered 400 Texans who had laid down their arms and surrendered at Goliad, another Spanish mission. News of the Alamo and Goliad inspired Texans to declare their independence from Mexico and to fight for it. A constitution was quickly drawn up and Sam Houston was elected governor. More importantly, he was appointed commander-in-chief of the Texan army.

The Battle and Treaty of San Jacinto

For six weeks, Houston's army retreated before Santa Anna's superior forces. The Texans in retreat were gathering new recruits, many from the United States, and welding them into an effective fighting unit. When Houston's army was finally ready, it fell upon Santa Anna's forces by the banks of the San Jacinto River, near the present day city of Houston. The Mexicans were caught unawares while pausing for their traditional noon day siesta. Not only did the Texans smash the entire Mexican army, but they captured its leader. Legend has it that Santa Anna, in slippers and robe, was not recognized by his captors until saluted by one of his soldiers. The unfortunate President was then quickly ushered before Houston,

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who used the opportunity to draft two treaties. One treaty called for Mexico to recognize Texan independence. The second made the Rio Grande River, not the Nueces as had previously been the case, the southern boundary of Texas. See map at the bottom of the page.

Santa Anna was released after signing both of these treaties. No sooner was he free, than he denounced them as illegal because they had been signed under duress. The Mexican Congress failed to ratify either treaty and refused to recognize the independence of Texas. However, Mexico made no serious attempts to recover the rebellious province; and in 1845 offered it diplomatic recognition as an independent country in exchange for a promise not to join the United States.

Texas, with a Rio Grande boundary and a constitution favoring slavery, quickly applied for admission into the Union. Knowing that admitting Texas would touch off a divisive debate over slavery, Presidents Jackson and Van Buren avoided the question of annexing Texas. Consequently, Texas remained an independent country for the next nine years, and still prides itself for having been the Lone Star Republic. When Texas was finally admitted in 1845, a war with Mexico followed. This story is told in the next chapter.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Did any of the assumptions Americans made about themselves (see page 38) justify expansion into territory claimed by Mexico, England, or the Native Americans? Why or why not?
2. Were Americans or Mexicans primarily responsible for events that that led to the Alamo?
3. Do you think that the Treaty of San Jacinto should be considered legally valid under international law? Why or why not?