

4.2 Manifest Destiny

As the United States approached the middle of the nineteenth century, many leaders and citizens believed it was God's sovereign will for the US to expand and possess territory all the way to the Pacific Ocean. They considered it the nation's sacred duty to conquer the West and labeled their ideology Manifest Destiny.

Texas: Independence and Annexation:

In 1821, Mexico gained independence from Spain. Along with its independence, Mexico also gained control of Texas, a region which included a large number of US settlers. In 1834, General Antonio Santa Anna assumed power over the Mexican government and tightened his control over Texas. In response, Texans under the leadership of Sam Houston launched a rebellion. On March 2, 1836, a convention of Texas delegates declared the territory to be an independent republic. Santa Anna answered with military force and, on March 6, a small group of Texans took their stand against the Mexican leader at an old mission called The Alamo. Despite the Texans' brave resistance, Santa Anna's forces were too strong. Every Texan who fought at the Alamo perished in the battle or was executed after his capture (among them, the famed Davey Crockett of Tennessee). After a series of battles, the Texans eventually defeated Santa Anna and took him hostage. In exchange for his freedom, the Mexican leader promised to recognize the Republic of Texas and withdraw his forces back below the Rio Grande. Wanting to become part of the United States, Texas asked to be annexed (made part of the US). President Andrew Jackson was in favor of annexing Texas, but he could not overcome northern opposition. Northerners knew that Texas would be admitted as a slave state. They also feared that, because of its large size, the area might be divided into several slave states, thereby giving slave states an advantage in Congress. Texas remained an independent nation until 1845.

The annexation of Texas was a critical issue in the election of 1844. If split, the Democratic Party and James K. Polk became the first "dark horse" (unexpected winner) presidential nominee in US history. Polk took a strong stand as the Democratic candidate, calling for the annexation of both Texas and Oregon (the Northwest Territory explored years before by Lewis and Clark). Polk ultimately defeated Whig candidate, Henry Clay, and won the presidency. (The Whigs and Democrats were the two dominant political parties at the time.) Inspired by Polk's victory, his predecessor, President John Tyler, called for a joint resolution of Congress prior to leaving office. At his urging, Congress passed a resolution admitting Texas to the Union as a slave state in 1845.

Oregon

With the question of Texas settled, Polk turned his attention to acquiring Oregon. In 1827, the US and Great Britain reaffirmed their agreement to occupy the Oregon territory jointly. Beginning in 1843, thousands of US settlers moved to Oregon seeking a better life. President Polk approached Britain, arguing that the US had rightful claim to the territory up to 54°40'N. Thus arose the slogan, "54-40, or fight!" Polk's aggressive tone irritated the British, but they were ready to give up Oregon because the territory was no longer profitable. Furthermore, the United States had become an important consumer of British goods, leading Britain to desire friendly terms with the US. The United States accepted a treaty declaring the 49th parallel as the official boundary and, in 1846, Oregon became a US territory.

War with Mexico and the Gadsden Purchase

Mexico was angry with the US for annexing Texas. However, this did not deter President Polk and leaders in Congress who believed in Manifest Destiny. In June 1845, Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to lead his troops to the Texas border. He also sent John Slidell to Mexico to settle the disputes over the US-Mexico border and negotiate for the purchase of California and New Mexico (the area between Texas and California). After the Mexican president refused to meet with Slidell, Polk ordered Taylor to move into the disputed territory between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers. In response, Mexican troops crossed the Rio Grande and attacked Taylor's forces. Immediately, Polk demanded that Congress declare war on Mexico, proclaiming that the Mexicans had "shed American blood on American soil." Though some representatives disagreed, Congress passed a declaration of war on May 13, 1846. The war was a series of US victories leading up to September 14, 1847, when General Winfield

Scott finally marched his troops into Mexico City and forced Mexico to surrender. After months of negotiations, the US and Mexico finally ended the war with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. The treaty required Mexico to surrender the New Mexico and California territories to the United States in exchange for financial compensation. However, in 1853, boundary disputes with Mexico still remained. President Franklin Pierce sent James Gadsden to settle the problem and to purchase land for a southern transcontinental railroad. The Gadsden Purchase gave the United States parts of present-day New Mexico and Arizona in exchange for \$10 million. The acquisition of these territories all but completed the continental expansion envisioned by those who believed in Manifest Destiny.

California

In 1848, settlers discovered gold just north of Sacramento, California. The following year, gold seekers came from all over the world as part of the California Gold Rush of 1849. These new arrivals came to be known as "49ers," and they served to rapidly increase California's population. This growth produced a need for stable government almost overnight. When the debate over slavery prevented Congress from organizing the territory, Californians took matters into their own hands by drafting and approving their own constitution. Finally, thanks to the Compromise of 1850, Congress admitted California as a free state on September 9, 1850.