

Reasons for Manifest Destiny

“...is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.”

~ John O’Sullivan

In 1845, journalist John O’Sullivan wrote an essay urging the United States to annex the Republic of Texas and created a phrase that has become synonymous with American history, “Manifest Destiny”. O’Sullivan was a strong supporter of Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party, he believed that the United States had a purpose to spread the ideals and values of democracy across the continent of North America. In addition to this belief, there were several political, economic, and social factors that became the driving forces behind Manifest Destiny.

Many American officials were concerned over the British, Spanish, and later Mexican forces were present in the Continental United States following the War of 1812. If American did not expand in North America, then the British or the Spanish might increase their empires instead. American settlers and trappers in the Pacific Northwest were in competition with the British, while a strong Spanish and later Mexican presence in Texas was seen as a threat to U.S. interests in the South. Some Southern politicians encouraged expanding westward hoping that if Americans moved west, slavery would be expanded into new territories.

During the 1820s and 30s, American merchants had begun to trade with China. Chinese silk, jade, ivory, and tea were imported into American ports at a very high profit. Merchant houses of Philadelphia, Boston, Salem, and New York had become very wealthy over trade with China. In order to ensure that their investments would be secure, there was a call for the United States to establish trade outposts on the Pacific coast.

In the early 1800s, Americans began to establish fur trade outposts in the Pacific Northwest. John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company established forts along the Columbia River in the Oregon Territory. In fifteen years Astor's company had become a presence from the Pacific Ocean to the Great Plains. As trade increased, so did the revenue, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company earned \$60,000 a year between 1823 and 1827. By the mid 1820s, the American fur trade became an international venture with U.S. merchants selling furs and pelts to China, Russia, and Japan.

Between 1800 and 1840, the price of farmland had risen at a dramatic rate. Many farmers could no longer afford to own and operate their own farms. Land ownership was considered a major value to Americans, and many found themselves unable to afford the American dream. With the promise of cheaper land out West, thousands of Americans left their homes in the hopes of making a better life for themselves in a new territory. The Financial Panic of 1837 left hundreds of thousands of Americans in debt and further increased the westward migration.

The U.S. government encouraged Americans to settle the western portion of the continent by offering acres of land that was cheap and sometimes free. American settlers in the West would provide the nation with natural resources such as timber, silver, and gold that would help grow the U.S. economy. Western farms were seen as a solution to feed the growing U.S. population and ease the growing pains of Eastern cities and states.

Historians refer to the period following the War of 1812 as "The Era of Good Feelings". Just having defeated the British and enjoying economic prosperity prompted many Americans to feel a great sense of pride and optimism in their country. Spared the decades of war and unrest in Europe, Americans believed that they had a sense of purpose and were filled with pride for their republic.

This nationalism fueled many Americans to expand into the western territories and bring their values and beliefs with them into the west. Some American settlers believed that they were fulfilling a sense of purpose as they established new communities in the west. Christian missionaries began to travel to West to convert Native American tribes and to teach them how to assimilate to American culture.

Questions:

1. What were three economic reasons that fueled Manifest Destiny?
2. Why did John O'Sullivan want the United States to expand?
3. How did slavery fuel expansion?
4. What were two social reasons that encouraged Westward Expansion?
5. How did immigration encourage Americans to settle West?